BOOKS I HAVE READ: GOD IN THE RAINFOREST

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This may be the best book I'll read all year.
Category: Observations

This is an absolutely excellent book and anyone who is interested in the recent history of the evangelical mission movement should read it (see some thoughts here). God in the Rainforest: A Tale of Martyrdom and Redemption in Amazonian EcuadorÂ gives a warts and all overview of the story of mission to the Waorani (or Auca) in Ecuador. As the subtitle says, it tells a tale of martyrdom and redemption - but it may not be the tale that you are familiar with.

This is a substantial book; a medium form hardback of over 400 pages, with a significant number of endnotes and a comprehensive index. Currently, it will set you back about Â£25, but I assume that a paperback edition will be released soon. As the index and notes indicate, this book is essentially an academic one, written by a professional historian. However, this shouldn't discourage the average reader, the book is well written, flows well and tells a good story. The way in which the author's academic credentials are demonstrated lies in the exhaustive story that she tells; one that goes well beyond the standard missionary texts about the same subject. The book also handles criticism of the Waorani mission and of the agencies involved in an even-handed way.

Above everything else, God in the RainforestÂ seeks to tell the story of the Waorani from the standpoint of the people themselves, rather than explaining their lives through the eyes of others. They are presented as people with a complex and self-consistent society, in which violence is endemic. Far from being irrational savages, they come across as people like us, albeit living in a situation very unlike our own. The background of the story lies in the massive social changes that the Waorani lived through in the decades following their initial contact with missionaries in the 1950s. They faced massive pressures from contact with the West; oil exploration disrupted their home range, the government where ambivalent in support of Waorani rights, tourism brought dubious benefits while missionaries and anthropologists had different visions of the future for the Waorani - who faced all of this while being ravaged by contact diseases that they were ill prepared for.

Life in the rain forest is precarious and leaves little space for the development of permanent structures or enduring culture. As a result, the Waorani were entirely pragmatic in their response to outside influences. They adopted western dress and the use of firearms for hunting incredibly quickly - much to the frustration of the anthropologists and tourists.

At the heart of the story lies the interaction with evangelical missionaries (though the role of Jesuits cannot and should not be ignored). The missionaries are presented as rounded characters with a strength of character and purpose and their sacrificial commitment to the Waorani cannot be doubted. However, they also had some obvious flaws. The author does not hide away from some of the more difficult issues within the mission community and some of the real difficulties which occur when western missionaries interact with other cultures. This isn't the bit about missionary life that occurs in the magazines or in the usual hagiographic books - but it is reality. A key character in the book is DayumÃ¦, the first Wao to be converted. Her story has been told in books, on film and in a stage show - but we should be grateful to Long for telling the story of a woman caught between

different worlds and not quite fitting into any of them.

Perhaps the most sobering aspect of the book related to the development of the Wao church. An encounter with Christ massively changed the Waorani; Jesus gave them a reason to stop killing each other and a long-standing pattern of horrific violence was broken. You cannot read the story without being amazed and thankful for this amazing transformation. However, it is also clear that the church struggled to go beyond this. What does authentic Wao discipleship look like (apart from not killing people)? It is a reminder that it takes a long time - generations - to develop patterns of contextualised discipleship. It doesn't come instantly.

Make no mistake about it, this is not a comfortable read - for anyone. But reality is messy. There are plenty of sugar-coated missionary books out there if that is what you are after. However, if you want to get to grips with something that thoroughly unpicks one of the most iconic stories in modern mission culture then this book is indispensable.

Who should read this book? I think there are three categories of people who would benefit from reading it. Students and teachers of mission will obviously glean a lot, as will the inveterate readers of mission biographies. However, I'd really point this book at those who produce mission publicity; those shiney videos and stories that often seem too good to be true - this book demonstrates that they are!