



# The Cloud Forest: A Chronicle of the South American Wilderness

*Peter Matthiessen*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

# The Cloud Forest: A Chronicle of the South American Wilderness

*Peter Matthiessen*

**The Cloud Forest: A Chronicle of the South American Wilderness** Peter Matthiessen

**A classic work of nature and humanity, by renowned writer Peter Matthiessen (1927-2014), author of the National Book Award-winning *The Snow Leopard* and the new novel *In Paradise***

Peter Matthiessen crisscrossed 20,000 miles of the South American wilderness, from the Amazon rain forests to Machu Picchu, high in the Andes, down to Tierra del Fuego and back. He followed the trails of old explorers, encountered river bandits, wild tribesmen, and the evidence of ancient ruins, and discovered fossils in the depths of the Peruvian jungle. Filled with observations and descriptions of the people and the fading wildlife of this vast world to the south, *The Cloud Forest* is his incisive, wry report of his expedition into some of the last and most exotic wild terrains in the world.

For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

## The Cloud Forest: A Chronicle of the South American Wilderness Details

Date : Published January 6th 1987 by Penguin Classics (first published October 1961)

ISBN : 9780140255072

Author : Peter Matthiessen

Format : Paperback 288 pages

Genre : Travel, Nonfiction, Environment, Nature, Science, Natural History, Adventure, Cultural, Brazil, Autobiography, Memoir, Science Nature

 [Download The Cloud Forest: A Chronicle of the South American Wil ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Cloud Forest: A Chronicle of the South American W ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online The Cloud Forest: A Chronicle of the South American Wilderness  
Peter Matthiessen**

---

## **From Reader Review The Cloud Forest: A Chronicle of the South American Wilderness for online ebook**

### **James Biser says**

Matthiessen is a great writer, and this book follows him as he explores South America. It is excellent to hear his insights into the natural history of an amazing continent while it was being discovered during the early parts of the twentieth century. This book is excellent.

---

### **Wendelle So says**

the author's racism towards the South Americans, and his confident hubris grates after a while. He inherits the (now thankfully dead) great British tradition of writing about the habits of the natives, dismissing them as 'mindless' and 'slow', and never actually talking to them, bothering to learn their language, or interacting with them in a way that suggests an empathy accorded to fellow humans rather than species in a zoo. Though the descriptive writing is solid and worth the read, a lot of that credit is due to the innate beauty of the features of the Amazon forest.

---

### **Kim Hoag says**

I love travel books that explore not only cultures and biologies, but also use what is discovered to philosophize about the human condition. There are not a lot of authors that fit that bill and I had high hopes for Matthiessen, a wonderful writer. It was good: better than most, not as good as some. It was great with the former, revealing a culture and peeling back some of what has to be the most primal of forests, but not so open with the latter concept. It could be because of the exhausting and arduous nature of most of his journey. There was certainly much that I learned in seeing that part of the world through his eyes. I can handle myself well in the outdoors, but this was beyond my abilities...and almost beyond Matthiessen's. He was lucky a number of times. A fascinating read that was well worth it.

---

### **Guillaume says**

A somewhat interesting book from a historical perspective. However, there are many issues with the book. First, it's a journal about the author's travel through the South American region that contain Cloud Forests...it doesn't provide much in the way of providing information on that eco region as I was hoping. Furthermore, the author's view on the local population and native is problematic and racist. Finally, no background information is given to the places he's traveled which is not great if you are not familiar with the region or have traveled there yourself.

---

### **Lara says**

This was a very uneven read for me. The beginning is kind of beautiful, but then it drags on and on for quite awhile. And then it picks up again during the Mato Grosso chapter about halfway through and ends up actually being pretty entertaining, even though I felt like I didn't actually *like* Matthiessen all that much. I think the problem is that the first half of the book felt very aimless--he goes here and describes things, and then he goes there and describes things, and then he goes to this other place and describes things, and it's not really clear why he's there or what he's doing besides wandering around describing things. And it doesn't seem like he is even enjoying it all that much. But for the second half, Matthiessen is on a mission: a guy says he knows where there's a giant fossilized jawbone, and an expedition is formed to go and find it, even though mostly the guys that are going are skeptical that such a thing actually exists. Adventures ensue. This part is interesting and very funny at times, and they definitely have an eventful journey. But I think by the time I finally got to that part, my mind was already a little numb with all the wandering and describing things bits and so even though the end was pretty great, I'm not sure I can say that I really liked the book as a whole. If I ever reread it, I'll just start on chapter five or six and go from there, and I think I'll probably enjoy it much more.

---

### **Jim says**

The Cloud Forest: A Chronicle of the South American Wilderness is actually two books: The first part is a rather slipshod diary of a trip encompassing parts of Brazil, Peru, Chile, and Argentina in a diary format. It almost seems as if the destinations are selected haphazardly. The second part makes up for it. It consists of a mostly failed expedition down the Urubamba and Ucayali Rivers to find (1) the jungle ruins of Picha and (2) a strange fossil mandible found near the Mapuya River.

Peter Matthiessen and his partner Andres Porras Caceres contact one Cesar Cruz to join them, but he never shows up with the promised equipment at the rendezvous. Instead, Peter and Andres are forced to make their own way down the treacherous Urubamba, especially the rapids at the Pongo de Mainique. Eventually, they meet up with Cruz, who apparently was hoping the expedition would never show up. They never make it to the ruins at Picha, which are in the territory of a very violent Machiguenga tribe; but they do get the mandible. But instead of Matthiessen flying it to the U.S. with much acclaim, it winds up in a lawsuit between Cruz and the man on whose property it originally lay.

If you should read this book, I suggest you concentrate on the long sixth chapter, "Beyond Black Drunken River," which deals with the Urubamba/Ucayali expedition.

---

### **StephenRussell says**

I don't remember the exact date.

---

### **Ryan says**

This is really just a diary of the author's wanderings in Brazil, Peru and a little bit of Argentina. The bulk of the content covered his decent down the Urubamba river in the Peruvian Amazon from the cloud forest to the

lowland jungle in search of a rumored fossil. While some of his observations were astute and can even be sublime in the evocation of the atmospheric jungle, there was too much of the mundane such as his interactions with fellow travelers who were more often than not mere caricatures of the stereotypical macho, violent and lazy Latinos and native Indians.

---

### **Cheryl says**

The Snow Leopard is one of the powerful books I have ever read, and I keep thinking I will find something meaningful in his other work. I imagine there are these books he wrote before his interest in Buddhism and his opening into mysticism, but this is the 2nd or 3rd book I have read and disliked immensely. There were a few times I imagined myself on a boat drifting down the Amazon, and around every corner, discovering some new bird or tree. But his absolute racism and disregard for the indigenous peoples he encountered is unforgivable. Over and over he writes of their ignorance and stupidity, and judges them in Western terms that are biased and inaccurate and hateful.

I can't quote his horrible words, and yet, there is such promise of a better man he may become and how he sometimes gets it right when he observes: "In New England one walks quite gradually into a wood, but not so in the jungle. One steps through the wall of the tropic forest, as Alice stepped through the looking glass; a few steps, and the wall closes behind. The first impression is of the dark, soft atmosphere which might be described as "hanging" for in the great tangle of leaves and fronds and boles it is difficult to perceive any one plant as a unit; there are only these hanging shapes draped by lianas in the heavy air, as if they had lost contact with the earth. And this feeling is increased by the character of the earth itself, which is quite unlike the thrifty woodland floor at home; here the tree boles erupt out of heaped-up masses of decay, as if the ground might be almost any distance beneath. The trees themselves are so tumultuous and strange that one sees them as a totality, a cumulative effect, scarcely noticing details...and it is true that the jungle seems strangely silent, even when the air is full of sound; the sounds are like sounds from another sphere of consciousness, from a dream, and then suddenly they burst singly on the ear."

---

### **Jeffrey E says**

An exciting journey down the world's greatest river. Matthiessen is the best kind of storyteller: flawlessly incorporating the people, the places, and the history of the South American wilderness (with a healthy dose of the flora and fauna of the region). Why 4 of 5? I think the early chapters, detailing his journey to the continent, could have been abbreviated greatly. Otherwise, excellent.

---

### **Laurie says**

Sometimes I like to judge a book by its cover & I've wanted to read this book for years due to the evocative title & that gorgeous blue butterfly. This book is full of lyrical descriptions and I felt I was transported directly to the jungle, insects and all. Now that I've finished this, I only want more! More South America, Indian tribes, nature in general, travelogues from decades ago, and more Matthiessen.

Having said that, the book did drag in places for me, especially in the beginning. The second half, "Beyond Black Drunken River", felt like a different book. The story really came alive & the navigation of the Pongo

de Mainique is worth a little slogging in the first bit. Exhilarating, terrifying, and very Thurber-esque, the last leg of the journey had it all!

---

### **Fiona says**

This is the story of the author's travel to South America between November 1959 until May 1960. He visits Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, and Tierra del Fuego (both Argentina and Chile). The travel intrigued me which is why I wanted to read this book. However, I have mixed emotions about.

I almost put this book aside a few times because it was slow reading (for me). The reason is that the book has no maps (except for 2 hand drawn maps relating to his Peruvian expedition). I constantly had to search for maps showing the rivers & towns he mentioned. I was lost without the maps. Also, I am no birder. I don't care whether a bird is yellow-billed or red-billed although this was important to the author. A general description of the birds and fauna would have sufficed. Also, he wrote mostly condescendingly of the indigenous people.

He did call the Quechas Indians "stupid" and "ignorant" and he called an Indian tribe in Bolivia "savages". Of "Spanish American girls", he said "most of them, unfortunately, (were) afflicted (sic) with traditional ignorance and passivity of demeanor except for Brazilians". I'm sure there must be a better way to describe the Indians & Spanish Americans without the condescension. He also doesn't think highly of western religion. The missionaries were friendly to him and helped him in his travels but he blames the churches for ruining the traditional life of the Indigenous people.

The latter half of the book was about his expedition from Cuzco down the Urubamba River to find an ancient bone fossil and a ruin that no white man has ever seen. I enjoyed this part because I have visited Cuzco and Macchu Picchu and have seen the Urubamba River. Also, he was a bit like Indiana Jones. He traversed down the Ponga de Mainique, which is 2 miles of white water rapids and whirlpools, during the rainy season. He stayed at local haciendas (merely huts) and was almost in a knife fight. What excitement! This part of the book was definitely a page turner. It would have been nice if there were pictures of the Ponga, though.

If you have ever read and enjoyed John Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, then you will also enjoy this book.

---

### **Lucia says**

Peter Matthiessen, for all his talk about being a liberal, is a total racist regarding the indigenous peoples of South America. One could dismiss it as a product of the relatively poor social dialog around racism in 1961 (when the book was written), but his level of elitism goes beyond lack of modern PC. Regardless, this is a well written and insightful travel narrative. I especially admire his attention to the native plants and animals of the lands he ventures through. There is a great river rafting sequence too.

---

## Ben Batchelder says

The Cloud Forest is a classic of its genre, perhaps undeservedly so.

A young Peter Matthiessen, after a few books of fiction, his first divorce, and one wildlife book, sets sail from New York on a cargo ship M.S. Venimos bound for the Amazon. For a travel book which revels in specificity and attains to verisimilitude, the very first sentence startles: “November 20: A pale November sky, like a sky on the moon.”

Granted, the trip takes place in 1960, before we knew what the crystalline, profoundly black moon sky actually looks like, but why start a non-fiction work with an image of fantasy? Is he implying his “Chronicle of the South American Wilderness” is of a place so other-worldly as to be, almost, unknowable?

Yet the hint of moon-travel may be more apt than intended for, frankly, Matthiessen spends the first half of the book in a linguistic space suit, isolated from the elements and with few human interactions. Despite Brazil’s dominance of both the Amazon and the South American landmass, Matthiessen admits only half way through the book that his Portuguese is nil with this jokey justification: “Brazil is the only country in South America which uses Portuguese, and if one’s Spanish is precarious, as mine is, one should not risk losing it altogether by attempting to speak Portuguese as well.” [Mar. 12, p. 143 in my 1987 Penguin Travel Library edition]

OK, but why is the book’s first, and very slow, half nearly bereft of human description (not to mention de minimis interaction) and, instead, with page after page of bird sightings? I had to wonder if Matthiessen simply digs birds more than people.

Indeed, for his first ecstatic walk into the rainforest near Manaus, he is joined “at the last moment by my fellow passenger, that redoubtable maiden, Miss X.” Yet, due to “the little shrieks and cries uttered by my companion,” the author is not pleased with her company and “affected a sort of trance, not wholly false, and with a rapt expression disregarded her; and after a time, infected by the atmosphere despite herself, she became silent.” [Dec. 23, p. 39]

Had we previously learned something, anything about Miss X (other than being a “redoubtable maiden”), the author’s freezing her out may have been understandable, even amusing. Instead, a certain coldness settles over the book, like the sky on the moon.

Granted, Matthiessen is a self-styled “naturalist-explorer,” and like the Earth Firsters these doom-ridden days, seems to prefer Humans Second. But his mild misanthropy becomes more pernicious in the book’s later contacts with Indians, underlining the defect of character. More on that later.

The good news is that the book’s grinding first half – in which he makes it up the Amazon as far as Pucallpa in Peru, flies over the Andes where he does the touristy sites, then buses or flies down to Tierra del Fuego; and a return trip (after a Manhattan rest?) in which he alights in Mato Grosso, Brazil, before flying to Bolivia – comes to an end. An interlude chapter named “Notes on the Cities” is in fact where the book came alive for me, for Matthiessen finally lets down his guard and revels in all sorts of amusing prejudices, including about the continent’s Mussolini architecture (“the heavy hand of dictators”), the superficiality of Carnival (“like Rio itself, [...] colorful and flimsy and very good fun for a very few days”), and the newly built Brasília, “less inspired than pretentious, a brave new city cunningly disguised as a World’s Fair.” [pp. 115-117]

As you can see, he writes reasonably well (the book was his first serialized in *The New Yorker*; though the number of verb-less sentences, such as the book's first, irked me) and with a certain humor, but the superficiality of his first impressions begins to weigh. Why bother? He alludes to his sponsors expecting him the next month to fly out of Buenos Aires to Africa, without ever explaining why or who they are. Indeed, he never bothers to say why he is visiting South America in the first place.

As befalls many a writer whose intelligence and self-regard are elevated, Matthiessen suffers greatly, even amusingly, from general-itis. This allows him to say "in South America radios are always played for all they're worth, and at full volume" [Apr. 11, p. 167] and other mirthless generalizations. He is a grumpy flyer – which doesn't keep him from three full pages of aerial observations from a plane in a particularly lethargic part – and raises his discomfort to a philosophical rant on the entire culture: "One becomes stolid and resigned as any dray horse, aware that an infusion of logic, honesty, and efficiency into this world would create a chaos impossible to imagine." [Mar. 15, p.148] His frustrations overflowing, I had to laugh at that!

Luckily – and I should say immensely so for him – Matthiessen meets a few interesting characters at a bar in Pucallpa who tell him about a monster fossilized jaw deep in the rainforest only waiting for a willing and monied Gringo to mount an expedition to bring it out. Despite his skepticism ("Jungle legends are, in the main, absurd"), Matthiessen falls for it and re-arranges his plans – thankfully, for without it, I doubt the book would have been published.

He persuades the brother of a friend in Lima to join him on the jaunt, a jungle explorer and ex-Governor, no less, of an interior state. And without Andrés – to whom the book is dedicated – there would not have been a book, for Andrés does all the talking (and translating to English) and, at one jungle juncture, saves the author from certain death after he insults a brigand by calling him "shameless."

But the author is very shy about revealing the mechanics of his journey. Only towards the book's end, when Andrés is flying out, does he admit how heavily he depended on him for translations, saying "...I scarcely spoke. Come to think of it, I've hardly put a hundred words together since we left Machu Picchu, nearly three weeks ago." The problem with this confession is that it comes after nearly a hundred pages of dialogue transcribed as if the author was both hearing and speaking directly.

Such cracks in the verisimilitude, starting with that opening moon-sky image, detract. The author organizes his work in travel journal style, a fine tradition dating back to 2nd century Greece, but the heavy weight of verbatim quotes from myriad books, and other scholarly diversions, makes one doubt he carried an entire library with him. So the dating of entries just doesn't ring true and all those verb-less sentences – as though rushed and never re-written – appear as contrivances.

Once you doubt an author's voice, it is hard to recover. I am not one to project contemporary sensibilities onto times over a half century old, but Matthiessen's attitude towards Indians as less than fully human seems revealing. One of his most faithful paddlers, "with his Indian face of stone," is likened to the fossil jaw for "Alejandro was suddenly a monolith into which, at odd moments of the day, life might be breathed and wooden, implacable motions instigated by the simple insertion of a banana." [Apr. 27, p. 244] On the earthen floor of an Indian hut, a series of items and "babies comprise the greater part of an organized litter" [Mato Grosso, p. 131].

Matthiessen reaches for an epiphany at book's end when, after hurting the boy's feelings, he realizes that Alejandro, along with Andrés and himself, deserves part of the credit for the paleontological discovery.

"And I kept thinking how very much how we had taken this slow, shambling boy for granted, as a kind of



ungainly presence, as faceless and heavy and patient as one of the big duffels – this is the way such peons are treated here, and, having always had liberal pretensions, I disliked very much how easily I had fallen into this custom and become hardened to it.” [May 6, p. 265]

Although no human is beyond repentance, even here we hear the author’s justifications, and I, for one, feel more sorry for him than for “our good and faithful Alejandro” who is “off to Lima ... to match his wits with his loud vivo compatriots of the streets. I’ll remember him with fondness, and wish him well.” [May 6, p. 288]

These are the journey’s last words. I can only say I feel the same about the author.

---

## **Nathan says**

Enjoyable in places but fairly uneven on the whole. I was also distracted by Matthiessen's admitted, though only occasional, hypocritical forays (more of a personal gripe on my part, perhaps, than anything else). Example: he decries in one moment how the constant groan of his group's outboard motor along various waterways in the Amazon basin diminishes his appreciation of the tranquil "jungle" setting. The next moment he willingly disrupts such tranquility himself by throwing in with his company's amused and entirely purposeless use of rifle fire, volleying rounds into the hides of hapless caimans left to sink to the murky river depths (mind you, without any intention of retrieving meat for the privileged gringo's expedition). This isn't Hemingway or Theodore Roosevelt, but Mr. Snow Leopard, the champion and master of elegy for the dwindling wild, and - believe it or not - an actual Zen master. Matthiessen acknowledges his hypocrisy in this regard, having just criticized his (non-indigenous) Peruvian companions for the senselessness of this practice, before taking it up himself and admitting boredom and apparent envy as the cause. He seems regretful of the decision to casually mow down these non-disruptive reptiles but later in the book records repeating this "sport" again. This from the author of *Wildlife in America*, a measured lament recounting the demise of North American fauna, largely from the "hook and bullet," and a seminal work in American conservationism that predates Rachel Carson by some years. In some sense his participation is a candid admission and highlights the shortcomings in his own attempt to reconcile man's impact on remaining wilderness areas when confronted with external (social) pressures and internal impulse. The excitement of the moment prevails over the better judgement of the individual. One person or a small group hunting down individual animals is obviously inconsequential to species survival, but our cumulative interactions with wildlife in this way underlies the reasons for their threatened survival (the destruction of habitat being the chief risk and an extension of the above attitude). And it didn't end with turning only caimans into Swiss cheese. Near the end of the book, after bemoaning the fact that the only land mammal he'd seen for months of the journey was a prosaic rat species, his group finally comes upon some capybaras along the river; care to take a guess at their (and his) collective response? Note: the few native "Indian" guides along with them are actually never permitted themselves to ever hold weapons and are generally treated (to use Matthiessen's words) as "peons."

These episodes are only a minor note in the overall book, which does include nice testimony of his sense of wonder when reaching the kinds of sights that drew him to explore the wilds of South America in the first place. Such moments seem too few and are overwhelmed by the book's concluding section, which is devoted to the search for a large fossil mandible bone of unknown origin, deep in the jungle, that few locals believe exists, save one ardent discoverer who will lead them to it. He centers the dialogue of this several day "hunt"

along treacherous waters more around the ensuing inter-company drama and growing annoyances that emerges within the group, rather than imparting the richness of sights they no doubt encountered. Again, an honest account of his travels and not some romanticized retelling is admirable on his part. This isn't the Jungle Book, and despite my lengthy complaints above, Matthiessen is not some trophy hunter out for blood, but a complex central narrator far from home, who doesn't hide his somewhat irritable side under the conditions. Complex characters- the underpinning of a good prose story, some would say. In that sense, maybe it wasn't so far off the mark.

---