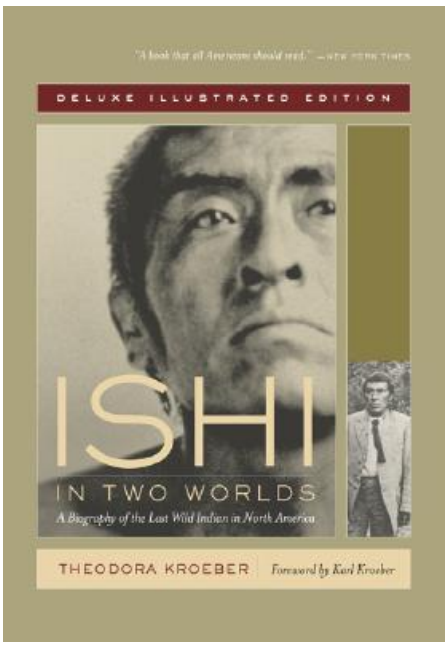

Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America

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The life story of Ishi, the last Yahi Indian, lone survivor of an exterminated tribe, is unique in the annals of North American anthropology. For more than forty years, Theodora Kroeber's biography has captivated readers. Now recent advances in technology make it possible to return to print the 1976 deluxe edition, filled with plates and historic photographs that enhance Ishi's story and bring it to life.

Ishi stumbled into the twentieth century on the morning of August 29, 1911, when, desperate with hunger and terrified of the white murderers of his family, he was found in the corral of a slaughter house near Oroville, California. Finally identified as a Yahi by an anthropologist, Ishi was brought to San Francisco by Professor T. T. Waterman and lived there the rest of his life under the care and protection of Alfred Kroeber and the staff of the University of California's Museum of Anthropology.

Karl Kroeber adds an informative tribute to the text, describing how the book came to be written and how Theodora Kroeber's approach to the project was a product of both her era and her special personal insight and empathy.

Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America Details

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From Reader Review Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America for online ebook

Ushan says

The Yana were an indigenous people of California whose tribal territory was the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada south of today's Redding and north of Yuba City. Before the mid-19th century they numbered 1500 to 3000 people. They had no agriculture; they gathered acorns and manzanita berries, harpooned salmon, hunted deer with bow and arrow, wove baskets from pine roots. Their language may have been an isolate, or a branch of the hypothetical Hokan language family made up of a few small Native American languages mostly from California. Linguists divide it into four dialects, about as far from each other as the Romance languages: northern, central, southern and southernmost; the southernmost dialect is also called Yahi. The word Yana means a person in Yana; Yahi is the southernmost pronunciation of the same word; as far as we can tell, the Yana had no specific word for themselves or their language.

Come the California Gold Rush and the stream of American pioneers. Hydraulic mining befouled the rivers and killed the fish. Settler cattle, sheep and pigs ate the acorns that Yana women would otherwise have gathered and ground into meal. The Yana robbed the farms and the ranches and killed the settlers. The settlers struck back, forming posses and killing many more Indians than the Indians had killed whites. One of the Indian fighters published his memoir in 1909, half a century after the fact, where he brags about massacring an unbelievably high number of Indians, as if his posse had AK-47s and not Civil War rifles. The U.S. Army captured other Indians and marched them to a reservation 130 miles distant; of the 461 Indians who left Chico, 277 arrived at the reservation, 2 were unaccounted for, 32 died on the march, and 150 were left sick along the route. By 1872 the genocide was complete, or so it seemed.

Yet some Yahi survived, as Kroeber puts it, the smallest free nation in the world, roaming the woods and hiding from the whites. Their numbers gradually dwindled, but they were there. In 1908 two surveyors suddenly stumbled upon an Indian fishing with a harpoon; the next morning surveyors came upon a tiny village; three people ran away, but one immobile old woman lay in a hut. The surveyors took everything in the hut, four people's means of livelihood, as souvenirs. Finally, in 1911 a starving Indian man who was about 50 showed up outside a slaughterhouse in Oroville, a town in the Sacramento Valley. He did not understand English, Spanish or the Native American languages of the valley. He was fed and taken to the town jail while the authorities debated, what to do with him. A linguist from the University of California read about the discovery in the papers and took the train to Oroville, taking word lists of two Yana dialects with him. Although the word lists did not match his native language perfectly, the Indian understood some of the words; he was definitely a Yana, the last of his tribe. Though some elderly speakers of Yana survived into the 1930s, and some people with partial Yana ancestry are alive even today, the man was the last Yana to live as a Yana.

The man was taken to the Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, then in San Francisco (now the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology in Berkeley), the American Indianist curator of which was Alfred Kroeber, the author's husband. He never told his Yahi name; in the white society he went by Ishi, the Yana word for man. Ishi worked at the museum as a janitor, a linguistic and folkloric informant, and a "living exhibit". He recorded Yahi tribal mythology and lore on wax cylinders; he taught the anthropologists how to make arrow points, bows and arrows, make fire with a drill. In 1914 he went back to his native land and showed them how to hunt deer with a deer-head decoy and rabbits by squeaking like a rabbit in distress. In 1916 he died of tuberculosis.

I read this book when I was about 19, 23 years ago. Either the next year or the year after that I took a History of California class in college where this book was required reading; we were shown a documentary on Ishi (no film footage of him survives, so it had photographs accompanied by narration). This summer I was motorcycling up California State Route 32, through the former Yana country (the hiding place of Ishi's band was dozens of miles south), and decided to re-read this book and read something newer on Ishi, which was *Ishi's Brain* by Orin Starn. The newer book corrects the older book's many mistakes, and says that the older book captured the spirit of its time, which is why it was a bestseller. In 1976 Kroeber's daughter Ursula Kroeber Le Guin published the novel *The Word for World is Forest*, which has Earthlings invade a forest planet and try stripping it of resources. The planet is inhabited by Stone Age humanoids, who rise and slaughter all Earthling women, an imagined genocide Le Guin seems to approve of, unlike the real-life genocide of the Yana, which her mother denounces. When the blockbuster movie "Avatar" came out, many reviewers were struck by its similarity to the obscure science fiction novel. There may not be many descendants of the Yana left, but there are many more whites feeling guilty for their historic ancestors' crimes.

J says

This biography lumbers along a bit (especially the foreword by the author's son, which I advise you to skip) but the story of Ishi is historically and anthropologically valuable because he had no contact with non-Natives until he was captured late in his life (1911), and was considered the last North American Indian to live free of white men's influence. Taken in by a professor at the University of California, he lived out his life at their Museum of Anthropology. Once he learned a little English, he could enlighten his new friends about his culture. He was quite a sensation at the time and his story is worth knowing.

David says

Every American should read this in order to have some small grasp on the genocide that happened in California and all over the rest of the country.

P.J. Sullivan says

Countless native Americans were hounded to death by settlers from back east, in the name of “Manifest Destiny.” This is the story of one who survived—barely. Ishi’s people were all dead, mostly from genocide, when he stumbled into the white man’s world in 1911, fearful and half dead from hunger and exhaustion. He knew no English, only Stone Age survival skills. He was enough of a novelty to find help and acceptance, becoming a kind of resident freak in an anthropology museum in San Francisco. "The Wild Man of Oroville," people called him. Naturally he was perplexed by the strange new world he found himself in, and some people treated him like a child, but you’ve got to admire him. He was a survivor, and his way of life, unlike ours, was sustainable. Did he have more to teach us than we to teach him? A sad tale that all Americans should read, because Ishi’s tragedy was repeated so many times in our history.

David B says

In 1911, Ishi, the last member of the Yahi people, emerged from the mountains, hungry and frightened. Taken into custody, he was passed into the care of anthropologist Alfred Kroeber and passed the rest of his days as peacefully as could probably be expected.

Ishi is a cypher at the center of this excellent book. Author Theodora Kroeber presents a fascinating and well-written account of his life at the University of California, as well as a moving reconstruction of his final years with a dwindling band of fellow tribesmen, but she is unable to penetrate his point of view. This observation is not intended as a criticism of her or her book. Ishi was intensely private, and his feelings regarding his white caretakers/captors must have been very complicated. It also seems likely that he may have suffered from something akin to post-traumatic stress disorder. In addition, he was raised in a culture with values and assumptions very different from technological society and a magical view of the universe. It may have been impossible to know him. The men who formed the closest bonds with him would have known him best, but their relationships are not available to us. The human mystery known as Ishi is fascinating to contemplate and will no doubt make this a book that rewards further reading.

Roy Hessinger says

Very interesting story I had never heard about before.

The good:
The last free native American. The many anthropological things that made him and his people unique, in both America and the world. Not the least of which was their language. How he saw our society, one of his friends put it this way after his death "He looked upon us as sophisticated children-smart, but not wise." All fascinating reading.

The bad:
The author switches between writing his story and the story of his people to writing an academic paper (she was an academic so this may be natural). But the switching back and forth may be troubling to some readers.

Dan Beatty says

Ended very well. I learned more abt Indian folks more in the last 50 pages than the rest of the book. But an overall interesting saga.

Valerie says

As there are many editions of this work, I should start by saying that my copy is of the 9th (1967) printing of the 1st edition (c 1961). This is important, because it helps explain a lot of the terminology which seems offensive to later generations. Thus, for example, the word 'primitive' was still commonly used at the time, based on a then-waning idea that all cultures go through the same stages, and develop in the same ways.

'Primitive' didn't then have a pejorative meaning: it just meant more like the 'first' people, technologies, whatever; in what was believed to be a predictable sequence. The implication is that if the Yahi had been left alone, they would eventually have developed the same sort of cultures, technologies, etc that the 'modern' Californians had at the time of the book's writing.

Theodora Kroeber was versed enough in the changing tenets of anthropology to recognize this as a false frame. She undermines the terminology at every turn--but she USES the language of the past, largely (probably) because she didn't have the means to create a new language.

It's not an accident that the book is dedicated: "To my husband ALFRED LOUIS KROEBER 1876-1960". Theodora Kroeber got access to the documentation (including photographs and artifacts, but, alas!, missing copies of films taken at the time: several times the book pleads against hope that there might be a surviving copy in somebody's archives somewhere, because the University of California copies decayed before they could be transferred to less volatile media) explicitly BECAUSE she was the wife of A L Kroeber. There had been plans to write up the material into a traditional ethnography--but the people who had known Ishi didn't feel up to it after Ishi's death, and they didn't want to delegate it to strangers: so they left the work to Theodora Kroeber, who, though not technically an anthropologist, was familiar enough with the language and mindset of contemporary ethnology to be able to forge a semi-popular version. She submitted everything she wrote to the primaries (at least, the ones that still survived) for criticism and revision, and received their qualified approval. That is, they accepted that it was probably the best that could be done, given that the main informant was now deceased.

Even if he'd survived, I don't know if he would have been comfortable with a female interviewer. The descriptions of his behavior in 'civilized' San Francisco in the period from 1911 to his death in early 1916 indicate that while he would talk politely to women, he never felt comfortable enough with them to discuss frankly quite a few of the questions an ethnographer or biographer would have felt necessary to ask. This may be because of his upbringing (for most of his life the only women he had everyday experience with would have been sexually and probably socially taboo to him). It may have been because of Yahi traditions, which he must have learned in fragmented but still fairly detailed forms (people who had only a few companions would almost certainly have spent a lot of time gossiping and romancing). It's apparent from the fact that the Yahi had a specialized men's vocabulary (since women and children of both sexes would have always been the majority, the ROOT forms would have been the ones used by the women: the truncated forms would have been contractions, developed to mark out speech by men), that men lived most of their lives apart from women and children--when there were enough people to maintain that sort of segregation. Or Ishi's reticence with women might have been at least partly because his life was (as he construed it) doomed to be a life of celibacy: and this would have been extremely difficult for even a self-controlled man like Ishi to sustain if he had everyday contact with women.

As with many things about Ishi, it's hard to tell, because we don't have enough information. If Ishi had lived longer, it MIGHT have been possible to obtain a fuller understanding not so much what his own life was like (his own life, as he must have learned very early, was a doomed fragment of what had once been a healthy and (sometimes) even thriving culture), but rather of what he had been taught his ancestors' lives were like.

The truth is that Ishi was NEVER 'in two worlds'. If Northern Alta California's native inhabitants had really been in a different world, they wouldn't have ended up inundated and destroyed by people who swarmed to the area, primarily in search of gold. They were living in the SAME world the invaders were living in. They hadn't been truly insulated from the European 'colonizers' since the mid 18th century at the latest. The fact, for example, that even the relatively isolated Yahi had adopted some Spanish loan-words even BEFORE 1849 is a good indication that there was already pressure on peoples even far outside the zone of

Spanish/Mexican 'rule' of Alta California.

This is one area where a map (or perhaps a series of maps) would be useful. There's very little doubt that refugees from the Spanish takeover would have moved north to escape from the rulers, missionaries, etc. They couldn't move west, because the Spanish tended to move north along the Pacific Coast. Few of them could move east, into the high desert, which was already populated very nearly as much as possible. And to the south were areas ALREADY under the sway of the Spanish.

So they would have moved north, spreading disease as they went, and bringing overcrowding, new customs, new languages, etc.

It's simply not plausible that the highly sophisticated peoples of Northern Alta California were not extensively (too often, deleteriously) impacted. The legends and family stories of the Yahi were probably replete with reports of the changes.

In such situations, it's likely that reactions varied. Some peoples would have absorbed changes rapidly, until within a generation they would have had very little in common with their ancestral ways. Others (including, probably, the Yahi) would have resisted changes as well as they could. Thus although Ishi used some of the artifacts of the outlanders (note, for example, that Ishi's flintknapping tools incorporated metal points. This may have been a modification adopted while he was working in the museum, but it's unlikely that he stuck solely to the older deer antlers even in the 'wild'), he tended to stick with older customary tools as much as possible.

In fact, the conservatism may have become even more hidebound than the ways of their ancestors. The Yahi were NOT 'Stone Age' peoples. They were not 'living fossils', somehow miraculously preserved, like an ant in amber. Nor were they time travelers from a time when EVERYBODY was 'Stone Age'. If they had been contacted and interacted with gradually, over centuries, they would likely have adopted some things, adapted others, and rejected others, as they decided on the relative value of continuity and novelty.

But it would have been on a case-by-case basis. Because the strangers came rapidly, however, bringing (too often) death and devastation, and because the invaders had the most commerce with the settled agriculturalists (and/or converted people who had been part time horticulturists/pastoralists and part time hunter/gatherers INTO agriculturalists), the culturally cohesive thing to do was to adopt a considerably more extreme conservatism than their ancestors, and reject the new technologies, customs, languages, etc root and branch.

There is, unfortunately, no index in this book. There is an annotated bibliography, along with illustrations, etc. But this makes it harder to get to more detailed information which isn't immediately recalled. One would like to know more about customs of adoption among the Yahi, for example. Many Native American tribes, bands, etc had a fairly open system of adoption, whereby captives, refugees, or other incomers could be incorporated into local groups, minimizing disruption. But even if such a system had existed among the Yahi, it's probable that the acceleration of the arrival of strangers (which happened several times) would have overloaded such a system. This did happen in other places.

One thing that is practiced too much in this book is the justification of bad behavior. For example, the story of a starving man (who hadn't apparently starved long enough to lose his hunger) who admits to lusting after human flesh to eat is the story of an insane man. However people try to rationalize it, the man is mad: witness the fact that he passes by several perfectly good sources of food to continue to stalk the human he's set his mind on.

Other examples abound. The attitude of the prospectors is simply unjustifiable. I don't care HOW hard a time they had getting to Alta California: treating people as irreconcilable enemies, to be shot on sight with no compunction, is unacceptable. And the 'settlers' who abetted this sort of attitude were equally culpable.

Nor are revenge killings justifiable. The siege mentality which traditionally isolated groups like the Yahi adopted was a foolish reasoning. Rejecting people as beyond the reach of appeal is suicidal. Attempts to negotiate should have started at ONCE, and the fact that the immediate invaders proved implacable should have resulted in attempts to find people further afield who would ally with the 'natives' (note that the root of this word is, simply, 'born': the people who were born in a place) to rein in the atrocious behavior of the prospectors; and later, the ranchers and farmers. There's no guarantee this would have worked, of course. But the certainty that what WAS tried failed is unavoidable.

One cause for miscalculation may have been a simple misunderstanding of relative numbers. The Yana territories (the Yahi were a subgroup of the Yana) were along the Sacramento River (there is at least ONE map). They were, that is, barely far enough north that they were fit for human habitation: with care (anyplace south of San Francisco on the Pacific Coast of North America is not fit for human habitation. There's not enough water until far down into Mexico. This basic fact is too often ignored by planners--but people who had lived in the area for a long time usually knew it, and arranged their customs, technology, etc accordingly).

So the Yahi would probably not have had a realistic concept of the numbers of people in the outside world. Ishi's horror at seeing the sheer numbers of San Franciscans at the beach implies that this is true. Granted, Ishi had lived a long time among very few people. But even the more populous Yahi of his grandparents' days probably had little concept of how very MANY people were coming--and how many more might come behind them. If they set their goal at keeping strangers out, by violence if necessary, they had no chance of success. There was a need to negotiate from the start. But it's easy to come to such conclusions in retrospect, and it's likely that, given the attitudes of the time, the negotiations would have failed to do more than buy time; if that.

A few minor (and not so minor) points. (1) A L Kroeber is little remembered in these days. He died in 1960, so, outside anthropological circles, his work is little known. The fact, for example, that he was a student of Franz Boas, was something that even I, who have studied anthropology and cataloged anthropology books, had to look up to confirm. Most people, if they've heard of him at all, know of him only that he was Ursula K LeGuin's father. So it would be useful for the bibliography to reference some monographs by him for those who are interested in more background. There are a few articles cited, but I've SEEN monographs by him. I gather he was predominantly a linguistic anthropologist: but he probably wasn't completely specialized; as witness the fact that he and several others took Ishi back to his home territory to witness Ishi's techniques in action. (2) There's evidence that some of Ishi's reticence about discussing certain techniques is gender-bound. If one of the women who had been his companions had survived, she might have been more forthcoming (though probably only to a woman). For example, though Ishi probably knew how to make the wicker stewpots of his people (they were baskets, coated with tar, into which food, water, and hot rocks were put), he doesn't seem to have made many of them. And while he made cord, he seems to have found this simplest of technologies (knot tying is a skilled art. Making cord is so easy that novices can do it within minutes of their first lesson) tedious and unpleasant, although he didn't grudge spending hours knapping flint, obsidian, and other stone for tools. This may be because he considered it 'women's work'. (3) 'Ishi' is not a name. The Yahi considered a name a very private possession, to be shared only with intimate family and friends. It's possible that Ishi did share his given name with his scientific friends: but they would have accepted the name as confidential. The nickname 'Ishi' simply means 'man' in Yahi, and was assigned to him (with his consent) simply to have something to call him by. (4) Ishi was, of course, known to be immunologically naive. He had

had very little contact with outsiders until quite late in his life (he was probably over 50 by the time he came to San Francisco, though estimates vary). So one of the things he SHOULD have received as part of routine medical treatment was immunizations. It might not have kept him alive much longer, if he weren't kept in perpetual quarantine (which he would have hated), because what he died of was tuberculosis, which had no vaccine at the time (the first vaccine was licensed in 1990), and not even many successful treatments at the time. But it might've, and it was probably worth the risk--if he agreed. There's some evidence that he wouldn't have agreed, though, since his medical theories didn't really leave much room for immunization. And finally, (5) Theodora Kroeber (the mother of Ursula K LeGuin, by the way) makes no secret of the fact that she never met Ishi. She did read transcripts of interviews with him. She saw photographs, autographs, and (possibly) the lost movies. She read ethnographic notes. She read history books. She listened to Ishi's voice on tape. But she never met him, because she didn't meet A L Kroeber until after Ishi died. So when she theorizes about what he thought about things, it's best to take it with a grain of salt. The best extrapolation in the world won't replace one in-depth interview.

Michael Lawrie says

This is probably, for so many reasons, the most heartbreaking book I've read in a long time.

It was recommended to me by a psychiatric patient and I've a lot to say about the metaphors involved in that - but at another, more appropriate, time.

It is one thing to know what early American "settlers" did to the Indians they encountered and I do my best not to judge their actions as "right" or "wrong" as it seems true that invading species killing off native species is a Darwinian fact for all life forms.

It is quite another, however, to read about one man's struggle against the horrors inflicted upon him and his loved ones and his willingness to finally and gently embrace what was forced upon him. I don't know many people with that kind of grace or strength.

I only wish that, as conscious beings, we held ourselves then and now to a higher standard than simple Darwinian evolution. What we did to this man and his people we have done countless times in the past, continue to do today and if we don't mature, will do in the future until, at last, it is also done to us.

Melissa says

fascinating story

Prima Seadiva says

Revisited as an audiobook. Reader ok. 2.5 stars
I and a friend read this when it was first published (1961). We were hair hoppin' high school sophomores soon to be rebellious art school hippies. At the time in urban Baltimore, pretty much the only knowledge of

Indian culture was as depicted in t.v.,movies and comics. It was quite eye opening to us.
The book has not aged all that well. I found the writing a bit ponderous especially the interminable introduction. The point of view, progressive for the timeline of Ishi's life and the time the book was written, is dated. That's perhaps a good thing as it demonstrates that some positive change to our cultural POV. Still worth the read.
The author was Ursula LeGuin's mother and perhaps you can see some influence to LeGuin's choice in writing subjects.

Paige says

Although after some discussion with a friend, I am finally able to see how this book perpetuates racism. The book unfortunately supports the idea that native cultures and therefore (conveniently for the powers that be) native rights should be contained far away from contemporary concerns in a regrettable past, creating a reservation in time as well as space. It is a sentimental portrayal of a person at a juncture in history when a candid portrayal is saturated with unfortunate Eurocentric biases. As soon as I had the discussion With my friend I found multiple examples of how objectionable and objectivizing many of the writer's statements are.

I say that I "finally" am able to see this, because my initial more naive response to the book was that it was a fascinating biography, told affectionately and with an attempt to view the historical context humanely and from several different perspectives. And I might add with a true sense of awe at the mystery that an individual personality always represents.

I feel like a kid whose candy has been taken away. I use that comparison advisedly, because I do feel that my sense of deprivation is trivial compared to the issues of racism my friend brought to my attention. I can only hope that through more thought and discussion I can synthesize these conflicting apprehensions.

Ursula K. Leguin is the daughter of Theodora Kroeber. Another aspect of the book that I enjoyed was the way that this writer's style resonates with Ursula LeGuin's speculative fiction writing. LeGuin is a favorite of mine and for that reason alone, I have a favorable bias toward Kroeber. Perhaps the ideas explored in this book are more appropriate to fiction. Some ideas are best considered as thought experiments that don't involve flesh and blood human beings.

Nicole says

The story of Ishi and his people is tragic and Theodora Kroeber captures Ishi's history compassionately for humanity. Kroeber also wrote a young adult book about Ishi, *Ishi Last of His Tribe* which I enjoyed slightly more than this adult version, although both are excellent histories of Ishi. There are some beautiful pictures of Ishi, included, and I love to examine old photos. A few of the hand drawn illustrations, however, are odd, with the Native Americans looking almost cartoonish. In one illustration, on page 32, a Native American baby looks like a a clown.

The Yahi language utilizes a duality of speech between the women and men, which is fascinating. Women and girls speak only their dialect, although they know and understand the men's dialect. Boys and men speak the men's dialect, but use the women's dialect when speaking to women and children.

This book, more so than the YA version, truly shows the maltreatment of Native Americans, who were completely outnumbered and at the mercy of the white men. I've never read anther account which so clearly portrays this injustice. Too often, Native Americans are blamed for the fighting and for the white man's fears, all the easier to justify their forced displacement to reservations.

In this remote and seemingly safe spot were gathered more than thirty Yahi including young children and babies, well supplied with food, even to fresh and dried meat. They were helpless against the four armed men who forthwith killed them all. Norman Kingsley, as he explained afterwards, changed guns during the slaughter, exchanging his .56 caliber Spencer rifle for a .38-caliber Smith and Wesson revolver, because the rifle "tore them up so bad," particularly the babies. There is today a Kingsley Cave, only about two trail miles from Wild Horse Corral. This is presumably the cave of the last massacre. 84

Also interesting to note, none of the Yahi Indians scalped; however, the whites routinely scalped the Yahi's they slaughtered and wore their scalps with pride. Amazing to note, also, that even after enduring the slaughter of his people, to the point where Ishi was the last survivor, he was not bitter, but remained a loving, gentle soul, until the end.

J M Falciani says

From an anthropological view this is an important document of a culture which would have otherwise been known only through artifacts and for me personally this idea changed the way that I look at artifacts in a museum or read about indigenous cultures in a book.
As an American this book touched me because it is quintessentially about us as a country and our story. Ishi represents that change of culture we all made but even more so because he never changed place only cultures. The "old country" is still the same place for him as where he "emigrated" to.

Faye says

What an amazing man Ishi was. His entire people, the Yahi of California, were wiped out by white settlers in the late 1800s - for no justifiable reason, I might add - and after years of living in hiding with just 3 or 4 other people, the others' deaths/disappearances had left him all alone. In profound loneliness and despair, he stumbled into white man territory, fully expecting to be killed or worse. Instead he was taken in by kindhearted scholars who showed him respect and love, and who wanted to learn whatever he was willing to teach them about his long-dead people. Ishi showed them the same respect, love, and willingness to learn in return, and his cheerful disposition and childlike wonder at everyday things the white man took for granted inspired a generation. Inspired me, too, 100 years later.

That a man could go through so much and not have a trace of anger or distrust in his heart is just about as inspiring as you can get. I'll say it again - what an amazing man! He left a lot of brokenhearted friends behind when he died, much too soon, the last of his kind in more ways than one.

His close friend, Dr. Saxton Pope, wrote this when Ishi died - *"And so, stoic and unafraid, departed the last wild Indian of America. He closes a chapter in history. He looked upon us as sophisticated children - smart, but not wise. We knew many things, and much that is false. He knew nature, which is always true. His were the qualities of character that last forever. He was kind; he had courage and self-restraint, and though all*

had been taken from him, there was no bitterness in his heart. His soul was that of a child, his mind that of a philosopher."

Not many books can be so tragic and yet so hopeful at the same time. The description in this book of the long-dead Yahi culture is so vivid and beautiful that it really brings it home to you what the world lost because of the recklessness and greed of the gold rush settlers. They wiped out a beautiful cuture that was completely in-tune with nature simply because they'd found lumps of shiny metal in nearby rivers and streams. But Ishi himself didn't get angry about it or demand to be reimbursed for what he'd lost. He accepted that that phase of his journey was over, and he moved on to enjoy the next phase. What a lesson we all can learn from him.

Amy says

Ishi, the last "wild" Yahi Indian, stumbles into the modern world of post-Gold-Rush California after 12 years of hiding with the remnant of his people. He fully expects to be killed, but he is desperate and tired of running ... alone. Luckily, he's adopted by 2 men who are interested in linguistics, native Americans, and who work for a university museum. Ishi goes to live in the museum and stays there for about 5 years before he dies of tuberculosis.

I found the narrative to be extremely interesting as it began by expounding upon the history of the wiping out of the area's "wild" native Americans. I found it quite shocking that most of this started with horrible men who liked to kill the natives for sport and fun. The author cites the writings of these men and their description of their slaughters for sport. Of course, this caused the natives (who had lost family members) to seek revenge on area settlers who sought revenge on the natives who sought revenge on the ... well, you get the picture.

Ishi is painted as a kind, observant man with a childlike awe of the new world around him. I wish the videos taken of him had survived, but I feel like I got to know what was possible to know of him through the biographer's writings. One idea that he voiced that will stick with me, though, is that modern man may have much knowledge, but he lacks wisdom. The white man looked at him and saw someone technologically and culturally from the stone age, but he looked at the white man and saw someone technologically and culturally unwise.

Definitely an interesting book, well worth the read just for the history and the ideas contained within.

Robert Ortiz says

It is a sad story about the last Yana Indian, literally the of his tribe. His family and other tribal members were hunted and killed little by little, usually by private citizens. The author, married to Ishi's protector and friend gives a first hand account of his final years when he lived in San Francisco

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Margaret says

A hard book to read, from the first half of the book detailing the steamrollering of European invasion killing

off all of Ishi's kin, to his death from tuberculosis after less than 5 years.
In between, this sympathetic account details Ishi's grace, generosity, intelligence, and humor, his making the best of a terrible situation and finding a home among those whose kind had killed all his tribe.

Andrea says

Interesting to view this bio through the gauze of 3 periods over the last hundred years – or at least try. Here goes:
1915 (Ishi's death): a biography of a non-fighting, non-Chief, non-Plains Indian whose only claim to fame is being the last of his tribe? Maybe some sensationalist magazine articles and a few scholarly anthropological papers, but that's it.
1961 (publication of Theodora Kroeber's "Ishi" bio) : The time is perfect; not only is this bio long overdue, it is also perfectly in tune with the emerging native awareness and ethnic pride movements. A beacon of empathetic integrity in a scholarly package.
2013: The book is having trouble getting through contemporary radar screening for political incorrectness and racial/ethnic/cultural condescension, notably in part 2, detailing Ishi's life as assistant janitor and resident anthropological specimen at the museum headed by Professor A.L. Kroeber (1876-1960; the author's late husband and to whom the book is dedicated).

So, taking the time frame into mind and without discounting the whole book, I'd say this merits about 3 stars. The first half, detailing the history of the Yahi within the larger context of their Yana appurtenance, is well-documented and sound. Part two, dealing with Ishi's 4 scant years in the civilized world, is (necessarily since she never actually met the man) sketchier; more anecdotal and speculative than biographical. The author fills in the blanks as best she can, attributing thoughts and feelings to Ishi that may or may not make contemporary readers cringe:
On his janitorial duties:
He was most grateful for the work, having observed that everyone in the white world had a regular job for which they received a regular wage. And he was pleased to have the "mahnee", which permitted him to pay for his own food and whatever else he wanted, instead of having it given to him. He was a proud person, to whom economic independence meant a great deal.
And how about this one:
Ishi was not given to volunteering criticism of the white man's ways. But he was observant and analytic, and, when pressed, would pass a judgement somewhat as follows. He approved of the "conveniences" and variety of the white man's world –neither Ishi no an people who have lived a life of hardship or deprivation underrate an amelioration of those severities, or scope for some comforts and even some luxuries? He considered the white man to be fortunate, inventive, and very, very, clever; but child-like and lacking in a desirable reserve, and in a true understanding of Nature – her mystic face; her terrible and her benign power. Hmmm. "something like" is about right. Put the words in his mouth and add a lump of *Noble Savage* sentiment at the end. Well, this was 1961...

Sarah Ravely says

This was fantastically good. Drawing on source material from the late 1800s to 1910s, and written in the late 1950s, it could easily have fallen into the tropes of its day. However, the language used is surprisingly modern in tone (the title being drawn from a source quote), and Ishi is neither glorified nor stigmatized. The author manages to write about him objectively without making him an object of study. I highly recommend it.
