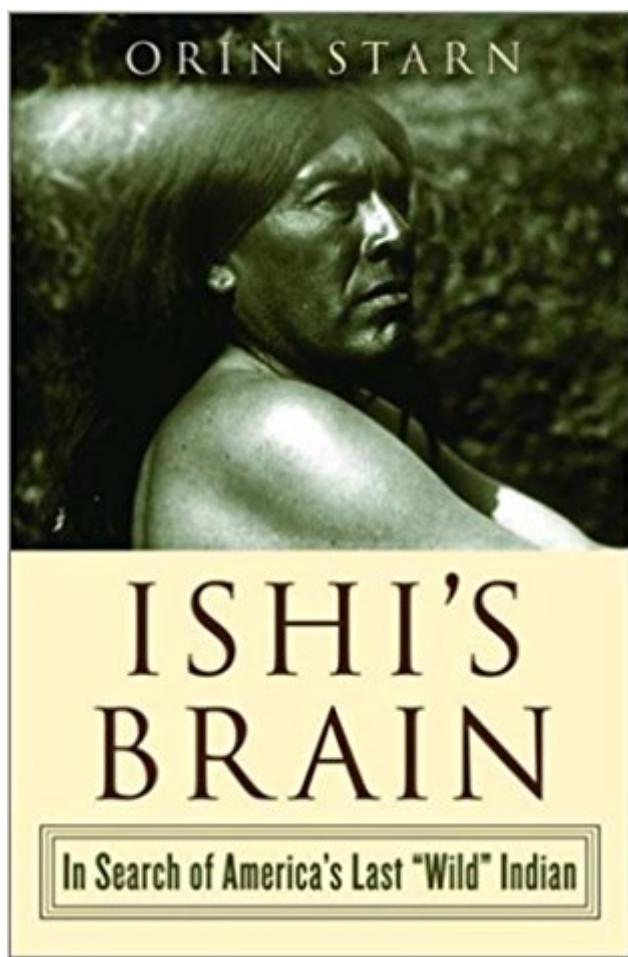


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# Ishi's Brain: In Search Of America's Last "Wild" Indian



## **Synopsis**

A chronicle of the search for the truth about the life and death of a legendary Native American. Captured in the hills of northern California in 1911, Ishi, the last stone-age Indian in North America, was brought to San Francisco by the famous anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, and became a living museum display until his death five years later. Ishi's Brain is a first-person account by anthropologist Orin Starn, who sought to unravel the mystery of Ishi's true nature and to locate his brain in the archives of the Smithsonian museum in the hope of finally repatriating Ishi's remains. The trail to Ishi's brain leads Starn through the painful history of the extermination of the Indians, the strange and sometimes scandalous history of anthropology, and the changing, mixed-up world of Native California today. This absorbing new portrait of Ishi, wild man of Deer Creek, museum curiosity, and last of his tribe, will appeal to anyone interested in Native America, a story of science and scandal, and the life and legend of California's most famous Indian. 15 illustrations.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Touted in his day as "the last wild Indian," Ishi, of the Northern Californian Yahi people, survived by adapting to a life housed within a San Francisco anthropological museum, where spectators paid to see him make arrowheads, until he died in 1916. Under 1990s repatriation laws, a group of Maidu Indians from the Sierra Nevada region sought to reclaim Ishi's ashes, buried in a San Francisco cemetery, but a rumor persisted that Ishi's brain had been removed during autopsy, pickled, and was still hidden somewhere. Duke University anthropologist Starn searched for the brain and here offers an unlikely narrative, informative and politicized, with easy-to-read, much-needed thumbnail

histories of the Indian Wars. (As Starn notes, California Gold Rush atrocities against Native Americans are so recent that people remember them firsthand from their grandparents.) One of Starn's main accusations is that the widow of the important, early anthropologist Alfred Kroeber first made Ishi's story famous through "writerly liberties" as well as "careless research and made-up dramatic effects." Starn himself makes his own feelings and impressions central to the story, allowing himself to tell us, for example, that he "fell asleep at midnight with the motel swimming pool's blue floodlights glowing through the curtains like the beams of an alien spaceship." His search takes him from the University of Berkeley to the Cornucopia Restaurant in Oroville, Calif., to the Repatriation Office and "wet collection" in the Smithsonian Museum of National History, to an Ancestral Gathering at Mount Lassen National Park, to "Grizzly Bear's Hiding Place." For some readers, Starn-as-protagonist will ground this intellectual mystery, while others will find him distracting. But on the whole, the book satisfies as a quick review of sordid chapters in the nation's history, and a genuinely compelling investigation of how one culture's attempt to dominate another can take bizarre, persistent forms. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Anthropology professor Starn relates his and others' relentless pursuit of the story of Ishi, the last "wild" Indian found in northern California in 1911. Ishi was brought by the renowned anthropologist Alfred Kroeber to live in a San Francisco museum, where he died in 1916 from tuberculosis. His remains were cremated, with the exception of his brain, whose location remains a mystery until the author and several concerned Native American activists begin to investigate. Their goal is to repatriate Ishi's remains and bury them near his tribal homeland near Mt. Lassen. In the fall of 2000, their goal becomes a reality, but only after they succeed, first, in locating Ishi's brain in the Smithsonian, and, second, in following the convoluted paths of his possible ancestry. Starn embellishes his chronicle with a thumbnail sketch of twentieth-century American anthropological studies, and woven throughout his account are tidbits of recent Native American history, including the inception of the American Indian Movement and the boon of casino profits, which help put the Ishi saga in its historical and political context. Deborah DonovanCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

"Ishi" was by historical consensus the "last wild Indian" -- the last Native American in the United States living "traditionally" outside a reservation and the direct constraints of Anglo/American society or government. Ishi was found, about the age of 50, in a desperate and destitute condition near

Oroville, California in 1911. The anthropology department at U.C. Berkeley, headed by a noted anthropologist, Alfred Kroeber, took responsibility for Ishi's welfare and care. Although he was "exhibited" on Sundays at a museum in San Francisco, it appears that Ishi was relatively content during his final few years in that city, before dying of tuberculosis in 1916. The story of Ishi has been published several times before, most notably by Kroeber's wife Theodora. The pretext for this book was the "repatriation" of Ishi's brain from the Smithsonian, where it had been sent shortly after his funeral and cremation, and after an autopsy had been performed on Ishi (against Kroeber's wishes) and the brain removed and preserved (almost certainly also contrary to Kroeber's wishes). The author Starn was the one who found and brought to light the correspondence documenting the transmittal of the brain to the Smithsonian, where it then had been stored, almost completely ignored and forgotten, for more than eighty years. In addition to telling the story of Ishi and how he discovered that Ishi's brain had been shipped to the Smithsonian, Starn also chronicles the efforts and political machinations surrounding the return of the brain to Native Americans, as well as the difficult decision as to who the proper recipients should be. In the course of the book there is much of interest about American Indians (especially those in California) and their callous mistreatment by the practitioners and beneficiaries of Manifest Destiny. There also is much of interest about some of the contemporary problems confronting the "new" American Indians, many of whom are now engaged (some unhappily) in squabbles over authenticity and the right to participate in the economic and commercial trappings that now inure to being an American Indian, or at least a member of a recognized tribe. To Starn's credit, the Indians are not idealized or romanticized. ISHI'S BRAIN is no politically correct screed. It reflects a conscientious effort, difficult as it may be, to be historically objective and accurate. It also reflects admirable sensitivity to and understanding of the circumstances impinging on the lives and actions of the various people Starn encountered in following the story of Ishi's brain. Turning to the negatives: ISHI'S BRAIN contains far too much that is personal to Starn. The writing tends to be verbose, sometimes seemingly the product of considerations of style rather than content. There also is unnecessary repetition. Finally, too many pages are devoted to the goings on after the Smithsonian made its decision to repatriate Ishi's brain to the Indians of the Redding Rancheria and the Pit River Tribe. For the last third or quarter of the book I truly was ready and eager for it finally to come to an end.

I long ago learned Ishi's method of chipping arrowheads. This wonderful book completes my library on the last of the Yahi Indians, and it's a really good read!

What a great read I read it in one week. Recommend it to anyone interested in science history

Needed for class and was cheapest great book either way.

Wait til you find out how the author came up with this title. The life of the Yahi known as Ishi is fascinating to me. This is an interesting account of controversy over what happened to part of his remains.

This is great follow-up after reading 'Ishi In Two Worlds' by Theodora Kroeber. Very necessary for CA native history after whitewashing of Kroeber's book.

This book is so interesting. Living in the bay area i had no idea about Ishi's story. Everyone should read this!

read this book for my history 450 class. it's pretty good and a good read to pass the time with

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