



## **Obituary: Carlos Castaneda**

*David Jones*

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Carlos Castaneda, who died in April 1998, lived a modest, successful and secretive life. His books, especially *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge* which was published in 1968 and *A Separate Reality: Further conversations with Don Juan*, which appeared three years later, were translated into many languages and read enthusiastically on every continent. He rarely appeared in public and did nothing to dispel mysteries surrounding his age, name, family, nationality, date and place of birth (he was born in

1925, or possibly 1935, in Peru or Brazil). His death, probably from liver cancer, was only announced publicly two months after he had been cremated, and his personal artefacts were destroyed by a small group of close friends. He was married and leaves a son.

In the 1960s Carlos Castaneda did a PhD at UCLA in California. He was interested, like Hamer and other scholars, in the medicinal use of plants by Amerindians. The emergence of a distinct Youth Culture in the 1960s, with money to spend, and

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influenced by a new type of popular musician typified by Mick Jagger, led to the recreational use of drugs other than the socially acceptable substances of alcohol, tobacco, caffeine and chocolate. Castaneda, like Stan Grof and in this country Frank Lake, saw the transformational possibilities of mind-altering drugs. Castaneda was clear that using drugs simply to have sensations is destructive. Their use should be part of a disciplined search for liberation from the everyday conditioning which determines our normal, necessary but constricting 'reality'. Aldous Huxley's earlier works, based on mescaline or LSD, *The Doors of Perception* and *The Gates to Heaven and Hell*, which were popular among intellectuals in the 1950s, have a very similar message. And the Buddhists aim at the same thing without any drugs at all.

Castaneda met a Yaqui shaman, Don Juan Matus, at a bus station on the Arizona-Mexico border who spoke to him of the hallucinogenic and mind-altering effects of plants and their use in shamanistic ceremonies and healing. Castaneda describes his apprenticeship with Don Juan who taught him that approach to life, including drugs, which had largely disappeared as a result of centuries of use, abuse and near-genocide of Amerindians by the Spanish, French and ultimately Anglo-Saxon, mainly British, Americans. (An

accurate and unsentimental account of that harrowing story is given in James Wilson's book *The Earth Shall Weep*, published this year by Picador).

Carlos Castaneda tells of his own development as a shaman in some dozen books. He describes meeting demons and other impressive and terrifying creatures, of flying and changing his corporeal being. His style, that of an eager but ignorant apprentice being put right and initiated by the counter-cultural (counter to Western culture, that is) Don Juan, caught one of the strands of humanistic energy that swept the affluent world in the 1960s and 1970s.

Critics say Carlos Castaneda ignored the canons of anthropological research, his secretiveness preventing others from verifying the evidence. They say that Castaneda's books come from his imaginative use of anthropological literature and owe almost nothing to his own research. But, in a parallel process, the critics themselves lack verifiable evidence that Castaneda was a fraud, a mere spinner of entertaining fictions. Nobody denies that he engaged with a widespread craving for a framework of reality which is different from the unsustainable, fragmented, material-based, endlessly consuming, sensation-seeking and, paradoxically (given the age at which his followers were influenced by him), youth-idealising culture which now grips the world.

