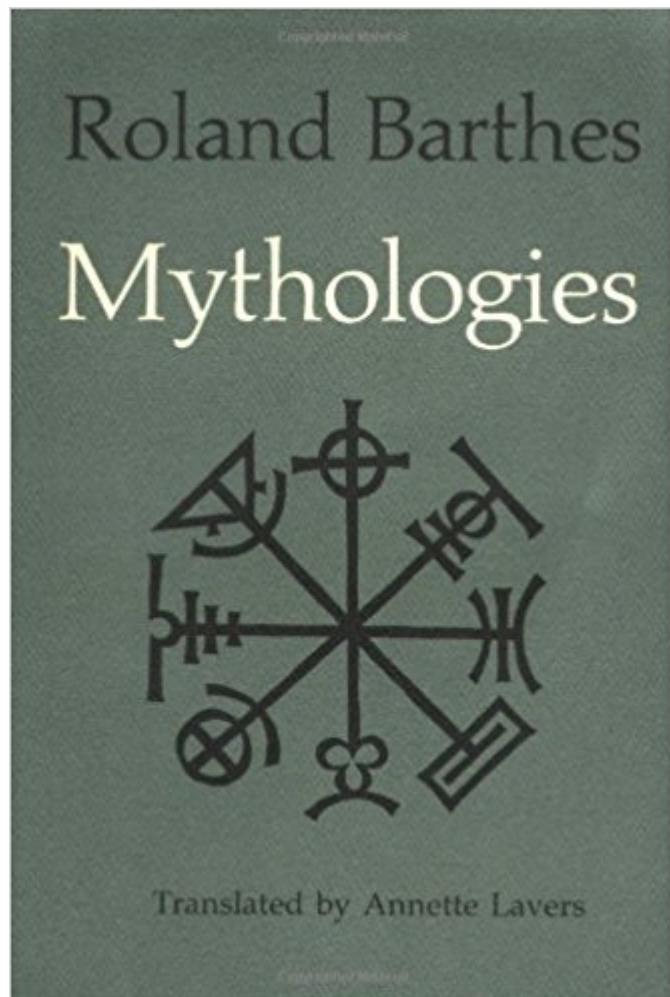


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# Mythologies



## **Synopsis**

"[Mythologies] illustrates the beautiful generosity of Barthes's progressive interest in the meaning (his word is signification) of practically everything around him, not only the books and paintings of high art, but also the slogans, trivia, toys, food, and popular rituals (cruises, striptease, eating, wrestling matches) of contemporary life . . . For Barthes, words and objects have in common the organized capacity to say something; at the same time, since they are signs, words and objects have the bad faith always to appear natural to their consumer, as if what they say is eternal, true, necessary, instead of arbitrary, made, contingent. Mythologies finds Barthes revealing the fashioned systems of ideas that make it possible, for example, for 'Einstein's brain' to stand for, be the myth of, 'a genius so lacking in magic that one speaks about his thought as a functional labor analogous to the mechanical making of sausages.' Each of the little essays in this book wrenches a definition out of a common but constructed object, making the object speak its hidden, but ever-so-present, reservoir of manufactured sense."--Edward W. Said

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Teacher, man of letters, moralist, philosopher of culture, connoisseur of strong ideas, protean autobiographer . . . of all the intellectual notables who have emerged since World War II in France, Roland Barthes is the one whose work I am most certain will endure (Susan Sontag)One of the great public teachers of our time, someone who thought out, argued for, and made available several steps in a penetrating reflection on language sign systems, texts --and what they have to

tell us about the concept of being human. (Peter Brooks)This new edition brings into English for the first time all of the essays in the groundbreaking *Mythologies* by French semiotician and critic Barthes, translated by the redoubtable Howard (Flowers of Evil), and joins them with Lavers's earlier translation of Barthes's accompanying analytical essay, "Myth Today." Barthes examined mass culture, its ads and hidden or disguised messages, its icons and politics, its desperate speed in the mid-1950s. With several exceptions, these *pensées* are in delectable, bite-sized pieces. Though very much of their time, these essays tell us a lot about how we might intellectually navigate our own century. When the specifics are unfamiliar to a non-French reader, unobtrusive and cogent notes identify the individuals and issues. By framing the mythic in the quotidian, Barthes examines everything from detergent ("dirt is a sickly little enemy which flees from good clean linens at the first sign of Omo's judgment") to professional wrestling ("Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle"), Garbo's face ("virtually sexless, without being at all 'dubious'"), Billy Graham, the Tour de France, a French striptease, plastics, and onward. With so much new material now included, this volume is not an unabridged reissue so much as a celebration anew. (Publishers Weekly)An abridged English translation of *Mythologies* (1957), one of Barthes's most famous books, has been available since 1972, but it omitted 25 of the original essays, included here. Overall, Barthes (1915-80) argues in these diverse pieces, both the newly available and the others, that many customs accepted as a matter of course are in fact narratives that disclose their meaning under close analysis. He considers, among other subjects, professional wrestling, maintaining that each gesture has its place in a story. Likewise, why do astrology columns offer advice on particular subjects (this is one of the newly available essays)? What is the significance of Greta Garbo's face? The book has a political dimension; one of Barthes's principal targets is the petit-bourgeois movement of Pierre Poujade. Many essays concentrate on aspects of French life in the 1950s. Aside from these, the book includes a long theoretical section, still in the original English translation by Annette Lavers, in which Barthes explains his approach to myth, stressing the affinities of myth and language. **VERDICT** Barthes was one of the major French critics of the 20th century, and this fuller translation will be of interest to English-speaking students of French and comparative literature as well as to cultural anthropologists. (Library Journal)A new edition of landmark work. As this new translation and expansion of a seminal work by the French semiotician and philosopher demonstrates, Barthes remains ahead of his time, and our time, more than 30 years after his death. His impact extends well beyond those who actually read his work (as the pivotal role his ideas hold in the latest Jeffrey Eugenides novel, *The Marriage Plot*, makes plain). His third book, published in 1957, provides a key to that influence, though early translations included around half or less of the 53 essays here (one of

them, "Astrology," receiving its first English translation for American publication). The book has two parts. The first comprises the short essays, translated by Richard Howard, that show the philosopher-critic illuminating the mythic in everyday manifestations of culture ranging from striptease to pro wrestling to red wine to children's toys ("usually toys of imitation, meant to make child users, not creative children"). Where those pieces can occasionally read like journalism (on a very high intellectual level), the second part, "Myth Today," which retains the 1972 translation, provides the philosophical underpinnings of meaning as a social construct and myth as man-made, fluid rather than fixed ("there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely"). For Barthes, so much of what is accepted as reality is simply perception, shaped and even distorted by the social constructs of language, myth and meaning. Amid the high-powered theorizing, some of his pronouncements require no academic explanation: "If God is really speaking through Dr. [Billy] Graham's mouth, it must be acknowledged that God is quite stupid: the Message stuns us by its platitude, its childishness." It's remarkable that essays written more than a half-century ago, on another continent, should seem not merely pertinent but prescient in regard to the course of contemporary American culture. (Kirkus Reviews)

Text: English, French (translation) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is a very thoughtful and philosophical book that explores the ways we construct modern myths in today's society. I referenced this book for my Master's thesis and honestly, it made me fall in love with Barthes and his approach to visual semiotics. He demonstrates the way socially constructed ideas can be normalized in the media, elevating them into unquestioned, everyday assumptions we make about the world. While Barthes wrote this book in the 1950s, the messages apply even more today. In our post-truth society, it's easier now more than ever to buy into fake or misleading information; satire and conspiracy can so easily spread virally via social media, even fooling journalists who should be more discerning about the information they share. Reading this book enlightens the reader to processes that continue to take place, helping reveal the need for personal critical thinking skills in a time when false information seems to largely go unchecked and is so easily accepted as true. With Barthes' help, we can challenge culture and the mythologies it tends to create.

The 1990Â¢Â™s American teen in me was more than slightly confused a few essays into Roland

Barthes' *Mythologies*. I was even more so confused after googling "Elle France" and finding out my connection was indeed accurate, and that the "Elle" that Barthes continuously refers back to, is indeed the French counterpart to the American Elle magazine. The image of Barthes sitting in study reading a woman's fashion and lifestyle magazine full of articles on "how to dress for your body type" or "101 ways to please your man" popped into my head a few times. Chuckles aside, I admit that I had to remind myself that it was 1957 more than a few times. Oddly enough, though Barthes undoubtedly had no idea what the connotation of Elle would become, its current meaning and presence in *Mythologies* is one that adds to some of the myths. *Mythologies* as a whole is based on society. There are stories, facts, and metaphors that cross generations, burying themselves as validation as myths. Barthes draws a great deal of his reactions from Elle, and those reactions live in a patriarchal universe. This is not so much a critique of Barthes and his view on society, as it is an observation on society and reality. Thematically men are at the top of society, children strive to grow into men, and women are allowed freedoms, but at the end of the day, their position is to bear children and care for the home. Reminder: It's 1957. The first essay I read from *Mythologies* was "Novels and Children". A feminist would have a field day with this essay (you've read it, so you know why). Personally, I wanted to pat the women mentioned in Elle on the back and congratulate them for writing their books while caring for their children, husbands and home. I'm there right now: terrible twos, a colicky newborn, endless laundry, cooking, dishes and writing and school. Here's the thing- 1957 or 2016, it doesn't matter, the struggle for women to balance work and home is still essentially the same. I say essentially because society has changed to where it is not dictated, but for those who believe in the system, we live in the myth. Our husbands provide and we in turn bear children and take care of the home, often becoming superwomen for achieving careers and success as well. There is more equality today, but the bare system is still present. This system moves down to the children as well. In "Toys", Barthes repeatedly defines his explanation as specifically relating solely to French toys. As I read "Toys" though, I can't help but look around my living room and connect the dots. My living room has a little tykes grill, kitchen set, trucks, trucks, more trucks, and the plastic version of every tool you can possibly imagine and blocks. Again, a theme that crosses time. Sixty years and a continent later, home life has not changed that much. We are undoubtedly, as Barthes connects, creating the future... We present our children with miniature objects of adulthood and they take from it, what they will become... and admittedly, I'm rethinking some of my choices in toys now. While some of Barthes' myths are

relatable across times and nations, not all are. Barthes know this and points it out in "Striptease" and "Wine and Milk." Some nations have common thought and systems within themselves. The French are different than Americans in not only some of their customs, but also their behavior. *Mythologies* explores the social power (or restraint or common behavior) that is present in French society. What is powerful is that things that would breakdown an individual in another society has no effect or power over the Frenchmen. A naked woman does not cause men or women in France to blush (so much as the act of stripping down would), just as wine does not cause them to become drunk (in so much as they do not purposefully overdrink). There is restraint in society, the French have control over their actions and the portrayal of themselves. In both myths it is the act of doing something that is meaningful and not the conclusion of that act. The veil in society is broken down in "Ornamental Cookery." This essay also brings us full circle back to *Elle*, which still has me seeing Barthes red cheeked (though this essay makes it easier to remember its 1957), "Ornamental Cookery" was a validation of sorts for me.

Barthes addresses *Elle* as a bit lackluster in terms of credible sources, but nevertheless, there is no doubt that the magazine in all of its 1957 glory is a reflection on society. However, the reflection on society is more connotation than denotation. "Ornamental Cookery" in its plainest version is descriptive of food recipes popular in the 1950's. These recipes often called for dishes to be smothered in sauces, decorated, and glazed in a manner so that one cannot really tell from the surface what is underneath. "Ornamental Cookery" is a metaphorical essay that brings us back once more to the overall discussion on society, where individuals can cover themselves to appear appealing. This phenomenon is yet another idea that crosses time. The idea that people are never truly what they appear to be, and can hide their true identity. Mythologically, it reads almost as a warning, as much as it might appear to be advice. I think we are meant to see ourselves in *Mythologies*. Perhaps not each and every essay is conclusive with a reader's life, but I could not help but find similarities with most of the essays that I read. While society will change with time, with location, with governing, the basic structure will remain. That is the mythology of the society.

It is a pleasure to read Barthes' carefully crafted prose. Every semester, I assign my undergraduates a few of the short essays in this groundbreaking book for close reading. I happen to like "Plastic," "Operation Margarine," and "The Writer on Holiday" best but they are each fascinating little peeks into a then-new form of criticism. At first pass, they may seem mere musings on popular culture but so much more bubbles beneath that initial layer. By the time students have read the

longer "Myth Today," we are ready for any of dozens of conversation threads thinking critically about culture emerging around us.

Roland Barthes' *MYTHOLOGIES* is central to a reader trying to understand the philosophy of everyday life and the problem of signification in our society. Barthes draws from the inexhaustible source of mythology and the ancient meanings of myth, and demystifies whatever he touches. Barthes as a cultural critic creates something new out of the stories about familiar objects and icons, such as Greta Garbo's face, toys, soap powder or Citroën. The book (2012) is a new translation of the 1957 work and it completes the previously untranslated essays to fifty-four, as in the original. The book shows that Barthes' work has stood the test of time very well. And though his comments hardly shock any longer, his thinking is as lucid as it must have been to the first readers when the essays were published in *Lettres Nouvelles*.

This is not a novel and therefore I challenge 's forcing the reviewer into novelistic descriptions e.g., How would you describe the characters, etc. *Mythologies* is a critique of French social systems and larger interpretations. The categories *proposes* should be dropped and replaced by questions more appropriate for a book on linguistics and social critique.

Good, thought-provoking book. I know nothing about French culture from the time this book was read, but so much of it still made perfect sense. I guess western "middle class" culture hasn't changed much.

Barthes shows brilliantly how semiotics can be applied sociologically as well as in an analysis of advertising and the media. He was so far ahead of everyone by writing this book in the 1950's. It still seems modern and insightful today.

Amazing author. This book opened my mind to a new style of writing, while drastically improving my own. Very sophisticated.

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