



# The Collectors of Lost Souls: Turning Kuru Scientists into Whitemen

By Warwick Anderson

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This riveting account of medical detective work traces the story of kuru, a fatal brain disease, and the pioneering scientists who spent decades searching for its cause.

When whites first encountered the Fore people in the isolated highlands of colonial New Guinea during the 1940s and 1950s, they found a people in the grip of a bizarre epidemic. Women and children succumbed to muscle weakness, uncontrollable tremors, and lack of coordination, until death inevitably supervened. Facing extinction, the Fore attributed their unique and terrifying affliction to a particularly malign form of sorcery.

*The Collectors of Lost Souls* tells the story of the resilience of the Fore through this devastating plague, their transformation into modern people, and their compelling attraction for a throng of eccentric and adventurous scientists and anthropologists.

Battling competing scientists and the colonial authorities, the brilliant and troubled American doctor D. Carleton Gajdusek determined that the cause of kuru was a new and mysterious agent of infection, which he called a slow virus (now called prions). Anthropologists and epidemiologists soon realized that the Fore practice of eating their loved ones after death had spread the slow virus. Though the Fore were never convinced, Gajdusek received the Nobel Prize for his discovery.

The study of kuru opened up a completely new field of medical investigation, challenging our understanding of the causes of disease. But *The Collectors of Lost Souls* is far more than a tantalizing case study of scientific research in the twentieth century. It is a story of how a previously isolated people made contact with the world by engaging with its science, rendering the boundary between primitive and modern completely permeable. It tells us about the complex and often baffling interactions of researchers and their erstwhile subjects on the colonial frontier, tracing their ambivalent exchanges, passionate engagements, confused estimates of value, and moral ambiguities. Above all, it reveals the

"primitive" foundations of modern science.

This astonishing story links first-contact encounters in New Guinea with laboratory experiments in Bethesda, Maryland; sorcery with science; cannibalism with compassion; and slow viruses with infectious proteins, reshaping our understanding of what it means to do science.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

[A] magisterial account... Anderson's compelling study captures the texture of 20th-century medical fieldwork and provides insight into the social dynamics and ethical realities of globalized science and medicine. *The Collector of Lost Souls* persuades us that these things really happened and shows us why they matter.

(M. Susan Lindee *Science*)

For a lay reader it is an extraordinarily rich story about how, in the 20th century, the idea of otherness changed so profoundly. Too fast, in some instances, for researchers to catch up and understand that it was no longer acceptable to see the world?and its people?as an open adventure park for scientific exploration.

(*The Australian*)

This is not a textbook; the scientific, sociological or administrative accounts are readily available elsewhere. It is a saga of proportions seen before in tales such as Jonah and the Whale, or the magical mystery of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Yet the kuru story is true and this book about it demands to be read from the beginning to the end.

(*Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*)

Distinguished by captivating storytelling and a historiographically rigorous account of the events. *Lost Souls* is not only enjoyable for any interested layman, but it also provides a thoroughly researched account of a remarkable scientific adventure that spans four decades.

(*Nature Neuroscience*)

Anderson has masterfully captured the complex, exotic and often extraordinary nature of this inquiry and the idiosyncrasies of a key scientist... This is a significant book.

(Annette Beasley *Oceania*)

Warwick Anderson in *The Collectors of Lost Souls* offers his readers a profound and historically-nuanced account of kuru as a force in shaping modernity.

(*Historical Records of Australian Science*)

This magisterial work?part history of medicine, part anthropology, and part biography of a protagonist whose scientific and personal adventures rival those of the roguish and tragic characters in Twain, Melville,

and Conrad?is also a moral fable about the scientists and the New Guinea Highlanders who contributed to the research that provided a global understanding of human and animal pathology.

(Shirley Lindenbaum, Graduate Center, City University of New York)

This is a book of insights into individuals and research. And what individuals and research they are! The individuals are petty, noble, and brilliant; they soar and fall and secure two Nobel Prizes. The research reveals a new class of disease and illuminates questions at the very basis of biology?how things replicate. And the Fore of Papua New Guinea, who suffered first and most, remain on the margins of the world's economy?and consciousness.

(Hank Nelson, Australian National University)

Anderson brings historical and anthropological sensibilities to the story of kuru while teasing out the moral and market economies that figured in untangling the causes of the disease. The principal characters come to life?both the scientists, especially Carleton Gajdusek, who won a Nobel Prize, and the native Fore, who merit the standing of collaborators. A compelling and fascinating book.

(Daniel J. Kevles, Yale University)

This fine book collects all sorts of interlocked souls?including those of anthropologists, science and medicine studies scholars, epidemiologists, postcolonial thinkers, Pacific Island peoples and nations, mystery buffs, and just plain readers who love a beautifully written, deeply felt book. Anderson brings together a lifetime of study of the history of tropical medicine to track the story of kuru and its many actors. In a voice at once deeply personal and vulnerable as well as rich with decades of research and reflection, Anderson tells the reader about differently situated Fore people in Highland Papua New Guinea, obstreperous and heterodox foreign scientists and adventurers who fit nowhere and travel everywhere, and molecules and tissues that won't stably declare their identity and so lock down the identities of those who live and die within their fierce material grip. I read from cover to cover in one long gulp and wish the same satisfying draft on my colleagues and friends.

(Donna Haraway, author of *When Species Meet*)

Anderson's book is a valuable and sometimes provocative contribution to the study of science and medicine in colonial and post-colonial contexts. He shows how the relationships between scientific researchers and their 'tribal' research subjects have changed in the past 50 years. Modern bioethics has constructed welcome limits to research activities in this regard, but these limits are often defined purely from the perspective of the western world. Anderson gives an eloquent voice to other concepts and shows that truly global bioethics still face many challenges.

(*Bulletin of the World Health Organization*)

Especially valuable to the field for what it demonstrates about the possibility of writing a compelling narrative about postcolonial and postmodern complexity in a way that is both straightforward and engaging. It should be read as a venerable model for how to bring the insights of science studies to a broader audience.

(*East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*)

A strikingly original and exciting work, imaginatively conceived, meticulously researched, and powerfully argued. It deserves to be widely read.

(Dane Kennedy *Social History of Medicine*)

An outstanding book that is must reading for anyone interested in the history of medical science. It will help place in perspective the broad influence, the triumph, and the ultimate tragedy of the life of Nobel Laureate D. Carleton Gajdusek.

(*Journal of Child Neurology*)

This book is a fascinating read of interest to all historians and (hopefully) scientists, and draws on Anderson's wide ranging interests in the practice of medicine in a colonial context.

(Jasmina Brankovich *Health and History*)

Very much about possession, *The Collectors of Lost Souls* should be possessed by everyone and its powers to possess let loose. This is the witchcraft of history at its best.

(Roger Cooter *Isis*)

Heavily inflected by anthropological method and narrative style, Anderson's account of Gajdusek's career is captivating. This master historian of medicine has taken his expertise into the field with great success.

(*Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences*)

Essential reading for those concerned with science studies and biomedical ethics.

(*Annals of Science*)

Who should read *Collectors*? Many. Transactions and translations; issues of obligation and engagement; of power, respect and autonomy arise regularly and in many contexts, not only in development settings. Undergraduate students will be struck by the dependence of the high-tech of contemporary science on fragile personal relationships. Apprentice historians can learn much from Anderson's narration of a story where the voices are many and the issues grave. Especially in relation to Gajdusek, I find his stance exemplary. He is chronicler, not biographer; he avoids the temptation to interpret, speak for, reduce to, explain away; he accords Gajdusek both the majesty of his achievement and the dignity of his tragedy.

(*British Journal for the History of Science*)

Anderson has created that rare thing: an academic page turner.

(Alice Street *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*)

Anderson has written an admirably readable book that weaves together bio-prospecting, cannibalism, colonialism, and globalization and remarkably manages to put the complexity of human relationships at the very center of the story.

(Pauline Kusiak *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: and International Journal*)

An excellent, even superb, volume, which combines great scholarly vigor with a well-told story on a fascinating and important topic. A highly 'teachable' book, it will also be of interest to anyone studying the Pacific who is interested in learning more about kuru and/or the history of medicine.

(*Bulletin of the Pacific Circle*)

Far from offering a rational, detached, absolute way of approaching the world of objects and people, in Anderson's treatment science?and particularly scientific exchange?is as shot through with venality, avarice, outsized appetites and complicated entanglements as other human interactions. In his meticulous and multi-layered study, Anderson does an excellent job of negotiating the thin line between titillating details and scholarly analysis

(*IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*)

How kuru came to the attention of Western scientists is the story that Warwick Anderson's stunning *The Collectors of Lost Souls: Turning Kuru Scientists into Whitemen*. Anderson's book, which deliberately forces readers to reimagine the meaning of scientific discovery, colonialism, and sorcery, situates its global narrative around sources found in archives in Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the United States and further develops it through oral histories delivered by scientists, anthropologists, and the Fore people.

(*Journal of the History of the Neurosciences*)

In his riveting description of the exchanges and misunderstandings that constituted the search for kuru, Anderson has created that rare thing: an academic page-turner.

(Alice Street *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Inst.*)

An exemplary account of the discovery of the causes of a disease...a work of great theoretical insight.

(Ivan Crozier *Journal of the History of Medicine*)

This is a big story with sex, cannibalism, revolutionary scientific discoveries of unknown infectious proteins and some of the world's most headline-catching diseases -- kuru, scrapie, CJD and BSE. The larger-than-life central character of this exotic soap opera, Nobel Prize winner Carleton Gajdusek, died in December last year [2010].

(David Turnbull *Arena Magazine 100*)

This marvelous book deliberately forces us to re-imagine the meaning of sojourn, scientific discovery, colonialism, and sorcery, while at the same time providing us with an account of the discovery of Kuru, a lethal neurological disease, and the science that ultimately determined its etiology.

(Stephen T. Capser *The Neuro Times*)

This book is great fun to read, is worth exploring for its footnotes as well, and ends with an enigmatic literary twist that is aesthetically pleasing but also worth an anthropological recontextualizing.

(Michael M.J. Fischer *East Asian Science, Technology, and Society: An International Journal*)

#### About the Author

For almost twenty years **Warwick Anderson**, medical doctor and historian of science, has been studying kuru, those who were infected by the disease, and the scientists who identified and investigated it. He is the author of *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* and *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health, and Racial Destiny in Australia*.

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By Warwick Anderson

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The longevity of the kuru story, and the twists and turns it has taken through epidemiology, virology, medical anthropology, colonial history and the politics and ethics of the intercultural, has been remarkable. In recognition of this Oceania asked four reviewers, who are themselves experts in the field, namely Annette Beasley, Katherine Lepani, Shirley Lindenbaum and Ceridwen Spark, to review Warwick Anderson's recently published book on the topic--The Collectors of Lost Souls. Warwick was then asked to respond. The project was made doubly timely by the news of the death late last year of Carleton Gajdusek, a...

#### Users Review

**From reader reviews:**

**Adam Nelson:**

The book The Collectors of Lost Souls: Turning Kuru Scientists into Whitemen can give more knowledge and information about everything you want. Why then must we leave a good thing like a book The Collectors of Lost Souls: Turning Kuru Scientists into Whitemen? Some of you have a different opinion about book. But one aim in which book can give many data for us. It is absolutely proper. Right now, try to closer with the book. Knowledge or details that you take for that, you are able to give for each other; you could share all of these. Book The Collectors of Lost Souls: Turning Kuru Scientists into Whitemen has simple shape nevertheless, you know: it has great and massive function for you. You can look the enormous world by available and read a guide. So it is very wonderful.

**Carmen Fields:**

People live in this new moment of lifestyle always try and and must have the spare time or they will get great deal of stress from both daily life and work. So , when we ask do people have spare time, we will say absolutely of course. People is human not really a robot. Then we question again, what kind of activity do you possess when the spare time coming to a person of course your answer will certainly unlimited right. Then do you ever try this one, reading books. It can be your alternative inside spending your spare time, typically the book you have read is The Collectors of Lost Souls: Turning Kuru Scientists into Whitemen.

**Maria Scully:**

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**Carol McElroy:**

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