

American Trickster: The Hidden Lives of Carlos Castaneda

Ru Marshall

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Ru Marshall's investigative literary biography *American Trickster* illuminates author Carlos Castaneda's life and the controversy over the truthfulness of his books.

Castaneda published a series of popular books from the late 1960s through the 1990s. His first book, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, gave him influence within literary culture. That book describes an enlightenment path that Castaneda allegedly took under the tutelage of a peyote-chewing shaman, Don Juan. Castaneda presented his books as nonfiction, but scholars later agreed that they were a patchwork of constructed narratives and borrowed ideas. This book looks back on his life in extensive detail, including his childhood in Peru, his migration to the US, and his manipulative relationships, especially with women.

Arguing that Castaneda's fabrications can be traced back to early life experiences that he sought to hide, the book analyzes his intellectual history and behavioral psychology at length. These details build a sense of empathy for Castaneda, though the book stops short of justifying his later machinations. The influence of his books aside, his personal life captured attention most, from his surrogate siring of a son to the women he deceived and the cult following he created.

The chapters are organized around time-based themes. Archival records wend into the book's erudite, often breezy prose, which sets Castaneda's story in the context of cultural and political forces, including a drug-fueled counterculture and cults of personality. How Carlos Castaneda fooled so many people with the audacity of his lies, the outsized influence it gave him in the broader culture, and the costs to many who fell prey to his deceptions are all handled in a deft manner.

American Trickster is the persuasive biography of an archetypal confidence man—a quintessential American tale.

BRIAN D. HENDERSON (May / June 2026)

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