



Lost Among the Baining: Adventure, Marriage, and Other Fieldwork

Gail Pool

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In the late sixties, Gail Pool and her husband set off for an adventure in New Guinea. He was a graduate student in anthropology; she was an aspiring writer. They prepared, as academics do, by reading, practicing with language tapes, consulting with the nearest thing to experts, and then, excited and optimistic, off they went. But all their research could not prepare them for the reality of life in the jungle. As they warded off gargantuan insects, slogged through seemingly endless mud, and turned on each other in fatigue and frustration, they struggled to somehow connect with their enigmatic hosts, the Baining—a people who showed no desire to be studied.

Sixteen months later they returned home. Despite months of trying, they had not been able to make sense of the Baining's culture. Worse yet, their lives no longer seemed to make sense. Pool put her journals away. Her husband abandoned the study of anthropology.

Decades later, Pool returned to her journals and found in her jumbled notes the understanding that had eluded her twenty-three-year-old self. Finally, she and her husband returned to New Guinea for a shorter visit and a warm reunion with the tribe that challenged them on so many levels and, Pool now realized, made their journey and lives deeper and richer.

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