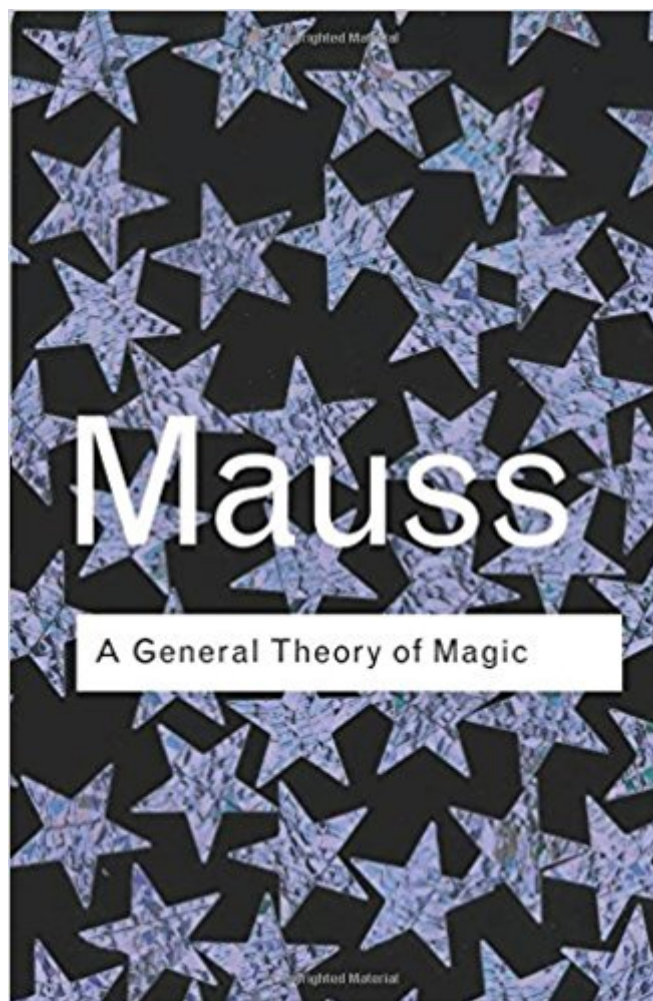


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A General Theory Of Magic (Routledge Classics) (Volume 37)



Synopsis

First written by Marcel Mauss and Henri Humbert in 1902, *A General Theory of Magic* gained a wide new readership when republished by Mauss in 1950. As a study of magic in 'primitive' societies and its survival today in our thoughts and social actions, it represents what Claude Lévi-Strauss called, in an introduction to that edition, the astonishing modernity of the mind of one of the century's greatest thinkers. The book offers a fascinating snapshot of magic throughout various cultures as well as deep sociological and religious insights still very much relevant today. At a period when art, magic and science appear to be crossing paths once again, *A General Theory of Magic* presents itself as a classic for our times.

Book Information

Series: Routledge Classics

Paperback: 192 pages

Publisher: Routledge; 2 edition (May 25, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0415253969

ISBN-13: 978-0415253963

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.4 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #269,563 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #530 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Occult & Paranormal > Magic Studies](#) #1032 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Anthropology > General](#) #1345 in [Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Anthropology](#)

Customer Reviews

'It is enough to recall that Mauss' influence is not limited to ethnographers, none of whom could claim to have escaped it, but extends also to linguists, psychologists, historians or religion and orientalist.' - Claude Lévi-Strauss

Text: English, French (translation) --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

cool stuff!

What kind of thing is magic, exactly? Or better, what makes magic the kind of thing it is, as distinct from, say, religion, science, art, or philosophy? This is the question that *A General Theory of Magic* aims to answer. Not a theory FOR magic, but a theory OF magic is set out here in this classic of anthropological research. From shape-shifting to spell-binding, incantation to malediction, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert scour the arcane terrain of magical practice to draw out its specificity amongst the far-flung field of cultural production. Setting themselves most distinctly against James Frazer's theory of magic as 'sympathetic action' (in which like causes produce like effects - as in: water magic producing rain, etc), 'A General Theory's' most immediate goal is in fact to show how magic cannot be understood in terms of any one of its disparate elements; not this or that magical principle defines magic, but rather its 'totality' as a phenomenon - one including magical actors, beliefs, rituals, objects, traditions and representations, all of which, only when taken together, properly delimit the field of magic. In a word: magic is a social phenomenon. A strange result! After all, isn't magic instead a furtive practice, one done in candle-lit cravens and in the shadows of society? True, say Mauss and Hubert, but close attention to the actual practice of magic nonetheless reveals its highly orchestrated and tightly regulated character: spells are formulas, indifferent to meaning ("abracadabra!") while magical objects simply 'play the part' in rites and rituals largely uncaring as to their specificity; in all things magic, it is in fact convention which rules its operation. Having established this already important result however, for Mauss and Hubert, the heart of magic lies deeper still - not just any social phenomenon, but one involving the exercise of 'magical causality': a type of causality running in 'parallel', as it were, with the everyday, pedestrian causes we are all familiar with. In turn, this magical causality is premised on a kind of force - familiar with every video game player - here dubbed 'mana'. Now, the ambiguities surrounding the invocation of 'mana' are multiple and well known, but they can be summed up by asking whether all of this is just to say that magic is... well, magical. So the success of 'A General Theory' isn't a given, but as far as starts go, it's a damn fine one.

This book, first published in 1902-1903, in co-authorship with H. Hubert, is one of the classics of Anthropology. Marcel Mauss, disciple and nephew of great French sociologist Emile Durkheim, strongly influenced generations of anthropologists, including Claude Lévi-Strauss. The book established a new pattern for understanding the magical and religious phenomena. Unfortunately, the two previous reviews seem to have been looking for something very different. It is not a how-to-do book, it is for people interested in the Social Sciences.

I first heard of Marcel Mauss while reading Daniel O'Keefe's **Stolen Lightning** and knew I wanted to learn more on Mauss, who is not that well known here in the United States. Mauss mentions sympathetic magic as being part of many cultures as does O'Keefe. Mauss might have been interested in Jung's concept of synchronicity as a form of sympathetic magic or even the concept of apophenia if he had lived when the word was created in the late 1950s. This book does not explain how magic works. Those looking for a how-to will be disappointed as another reviewer has pointed out.

After reading this book, I still haven't got a clue what magic is about. This one goes to the trash bin.

Seems to be excellent academic writing from someone who doesn't know about real magic.

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