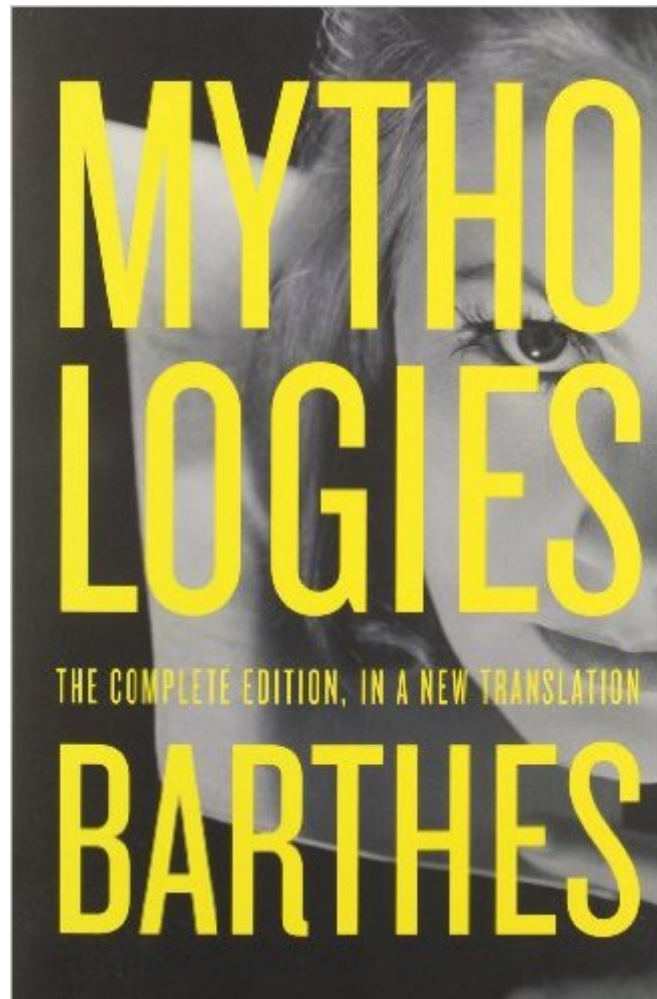


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# Mythologies: The Complete Edition, In A New Translation



## Synopsis

"No denunciation without its proper instrument of close analysis," Roland Barthes wrote in his preface to *Mythologies*. There is no more proper instrument of analysis of our contemporary myths than this book— one of the most significant works in French theory, and one that has transformed the way readers and philosophers view the world around them. Our age is a triumph of codification. We own devices that bring the world to the command of our fingertips. We have access to boundless information and prodigious quantities of stuff. We decide to like or not, to believe or not, to buy or not. We pick and choose. We think we are free. Yet all around us, in pop culture, politics, mainstream media, and advertising, there are codes and symbols that govern our choices. They are the fabrications of consumer society. They express myths of success, well-being, or happiness. As Barthes sees it, these myths must be carefully deciphered, and debunked. What Barthes discerned in mass media, the fashion of plastic, and the politics of postcolonial France applies with equal force to today's social networks, the iPhone, and the images of 9/11. This new edition of *Mythologies*, complete and beautifully rendered by the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, critic, and translator Richard Howard, is a consecration of Barthes's classic—a lesson in clairvoyance that is more relevant now than ever.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In *Mythologies*, Barthes offers a series of snapshots with titles such as "Plastic," "Striptease," "Toys," "The World of Wrestling," and "Operation Margarine." His aim is to reveal the ideological

abuse hidden in these myths, which are manufactured to read as reality. Though complex, Barthes' essays are accessible, charming, and funny. I have taught *Mythologies* to first-year college students, because it does not require its reader to have read volumes of theory to engage in Barthes' clever reflections. My favorite essay might be "Toys," which demystifies modern (1954-56) French toys as designed to produce consumers ("users") rather than creators. "Toys" exemplifies how, 50 years later, Barthes' myths are still alive and worth reading.

As scholars of folklore and mythology were looking at their own past as well as currently to explore the narratives of the past and of "primitive" peoples, Roland Barthes was looking at the world around him in France in the 1950s to the early 1970s. Why are human beings drawn to folktales, fairy tales, mythic figures? Barthes discovers that this draw surrounds us everyday, used both commercially and unconsciously from the personas of professional wrestlers (who resemble those seen on American television today) to our discussions of public figures. Mythology, Barthes argues, is a vital and living part of our society but it is also one used without real understanding because it is so deeply ingrained in the human mind and heart. The essays are light so that the non-specialist can enjoy but deep enough that the scholar can see and understand the theory underneath.

When I finished this latest re-read of *Mythologies* I was initially struck by how funny it was. This was something of a big realization for me, stemming from a memory of burning brain cells with a furrowed brow, trying to understand what he was saying and being almost afraid to enjoy it. So there's one of the consolations for growing older for you-- I'm getting confident enough to really enjoy Barthes. I'm not saying that I fully understand him yet. I'm not sure that I ever will. I think that "Myth Today" (the book's final and most central essay) still remains fairly firmly out of reach. But it's true that each time I re-read Barthes, I get something more out of it-- I manage to scale heights that I didn't think I would ever get to the last time around. Isn't it the mark of a brilliant book that it grows with you? Particularly recommended this time are the essays "Soap Powders and Detergents" and "Operation Margarine".

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*.

I was assigned this text as the final leg of a Greek and Roman Mythology course. Having no idea what to expect, I easily read through the collection of short essays and was thoroughly entertained. Even in translation, Barthes is graceful, lighthearted, and humorous in telling of the modern myths surrounding him in 1950s France. A very well-educated philologist, lexicologist, and sociologist, it wasn't until after writing the short essays here compiled that he rigorously developed his semiological/structuralist theories. Those with knowledge of structural linguistics and semiology and those without such a background alike will certainly enjoy every essay of this brief collection. Furthermore, the longer essay, "Myth Today," which follows the shorter essays published originally in the 50s is replete with extremely interesting, albeit dense, critical theory. While someone with little knowledge of structural linguistics or semiology will have some difficulty with this final essay, it is certainly worth the struggle.

I'm French, and I read it in French. This book is an absolute must for any who wants to understand our Society. Although it's been written 45 years ago, it's more than ever actual, just like if that guy, as a clairvoyant, had been able to decode our present society (and all its incredible deviant face) half a century before. I must say I'll never see the world and medias like before again. More than a book, this is an enthralling weapon against mass passivity.

This thin book is a collection of Roland Barthes' short pieces on culture. The style of much of the book is journalistic and easy-to-read. In this book, Barthes tries to uncover the mythmaking latent in advertising, films, media articles, exhibitions etc. The selection spans across diverse subjects to explain why and how Romans are defined as Romans in films (with a fringe cut as a standardized technique), mythmaking inherent in celebration of the mystique of Greta Garbo's face, the use of language to dominate and condemn the illiterate, the rhetoric of advertising margarine, the meaning and rhetoric of plastic, striptease and wrestling as spectacles etc. At the end of the book, Barthes explains his concept and theory of myth as a sign that has become a signifier for another signified. This portion is of special relevance to those wanting to be initiated into semiology.

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