

Mother of the World

Margaret Mead



Imagine this: You are a twenty-four-year-old woman traveling nine thousand miles to American Samoa all by yourself to study Samoan culture. It is the 1920s, and most people are shocked at the idea of a young woman taking such a trip.

Your name is Margaret Mead, and the trip to Samoa to study Polynesian culture is just the first of many trips you will take to study various cultures around the world. You are a pioneer in your field, and you become the most famous anthropologist in the world.

Margaret was born December 16, 1901, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the oldest of five children. Her father was a professor in the Wharton School of Finance and Com-

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"Never doubt that a group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world."

—Margaret Mead
(1901–1978)



They Stood Alone!

merce, her mother was a sociologist and an early advocate of women's rights, and her paternal grandmother was a pioneer in child psychology.

For the first few years of her life, she was taught at home by her paternal grandmother, Martha Ramsey, a pioneer in child psychology.

Her grandmother had attended college when fewer than 2 percent of Americans did so, and Margaret once said that her grandmother was one of the most important influences in her life.

Grandma Mead didn't think children should have to sit still for more than an hour, and she disapproved of their having to memorize lists of facts. Instead, she sent Margaret outdoors to bring her examples of the plants she had described in their lesson.

Margaret's mother, Emily Fogg Mead, was a sociologist and was also an important influence. Her mother encouraged her to become her own person and reminded her that you had to work hard to turn a gift into an accomplishment.

It was Grandma Mead, however, who first encouraged Margaret to think like an anthropologist. She told her to take notes on the behavior of her two younger sisters, Elizabeth and Priscilla.

Margaret jotted down many of the things her sisters said and did. She didn't know it then, but she had already begun her life as an anthropologist—someone who studies the physical, social, and cultural lives of human beings.

The family moved a great deal, and by the time Margaret was a teenager, the Mead family had lived in sixty different houses.

Being able to feel at home quickly in a new place was a skill that would prove to be a great advantage in later years as she traveled for her work.

She graduated Phi Beta Kappa, an academic honor society from Barnard College in 1923 with a major in psychology. It was at Barnard that she confirmed her interest in anthropology.

After completing her coursework for her doctorate in anthropology at Columbia University, Margaret traveled nine thousand miles to American Samoa, an island east of Australia in the South Seas, to do her first fieldwork, focusing on adolescent girls.

Back then most people were shocked by the idea of a twenty-four-year-old woman taking such a trip, but her family was proud of her.

She arrived at Pago Pago in the fall of 1925. Once there, she tried to blend in with native life while at the same time recording her observations.

She learned the native language (one of seven she eventually mastered) and lived in a Samoan household along with the girls. She found that young Samoan girls experience none of the tensions American and European adolescents suffer from and wrote about the kinds of social arrangements that made this easy transition to adulthood possible.

She spent almost a year in a village on the island of Tau studying the lives of young girls between the ages of twelve and nineteen. She concluded that culture influences personality more than genetics. This and her other findings became the subject of her best-selling book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, which has been translated into many languages and went on to become the best-selling anthropology book of all time.

Her book presented to the public for the first time the idea that developmental stages could be shaped by cultural demands and expectations which meant that adolescent stages and problems would be different in different cultures.

Her next venture was her trip to New Guinea where she

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studied sex roles in culture. She studied the play and imaginations of younger children and the way these children were shaped by adult society. She wanted to learn about children through their drawings, so she took along a thousand sheets of paper which were used in the first month. By the time she left New Guinea, she had almost thirty-five thousand drawings.

She intended to disprove the current theory that the masculine and feminine roles were innate and unchangeable and again concluded that cultural influences were more important than genetic influences.

In Bali she pioneered the use of still photographs (taking more than thirty thousand photographs of the Balinese) and motion picture film for anthropological research.

In each new place she tried to learn the language and understand the culture of the people she was studying. By doing this, she was developing a method of inquiry using observations, interviews, and photographs that other anthropologists could use.

She continued her pioneering anthropological work for the next several decades and wrote more books describing what she had seen and learned.

As time passed, she made fewer field trips to countries where there was no running water or electricity and spent more time teaching anthropology at Columbia University. In 1969 *Time* magazine named her Mother of the World.

A prolific writer, she wrote or co-authored forty-four books and more than one thousand articles that all contributed to the better understanding of people around the world.

She was passionate about what she believed the Western world could learn from developing societies, and in 1944 she established the Institute for Intercultural Studies (now closed as of December 31, 2009).

She had come a long way from the little girl who made observations about her sisters. Her insights into the human family and its relationship to the world encouraged people to focus on the similarities they shared rather than the differences that divided them.

She was the first anthropologist to look at human development from a cross-cultural perspective and had demonstrated that gender roles differed from one society to another and depended at least as much (if not more) on culture as on biology. Through her best-selling books she brought anthropology to ordinary people for the first time.

She hoped that one day people might bring up children who could be at home anywhere in the world—in any kind of house, eating any kind of food, and learning new languages as needed.

She took a particular interest in world hunger and helped establish UNESCO (the United Nations agency committed to establishing world peace through cultural exchange).

She died on November 15, 1978, at age seventy-six from pancreatic cancer, the same cancer that had killed her brother.

When she died, she was the most famous anthropologist in the world and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously in 1979, America's highest civilian honor.

She believed that cultural patterns of racism, warfare, and environmental exploitation were learned and that, therefore, it was possible for members of a society to work together to change things for the better.

Not only was she a renowned anthropologist, but she was also a strong proponent of women's rights and set a colorful example for future generations of women to follow.

In his book *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*, Australian professor

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Derek Freeman was deeply critical of Margret's research,³⁶ but subsequent reevaluations by other researchers have confirmed most of her findings.

Regardless of the controversy, however, there is still no doubt that she was a major anthropological influence on the twentieth century.