Thirty years ago the University of California Press published an unusual manuscript by an anthropology student named Carlos Castaneda. The Teachings of Don Juan initiated a generation of seekers dissatisfied with the limitations of the Western worldview. Castaneda's now classic book remains controversial for the alternative way of seeing that it presents and the revolution in cognition it demands.

In a series of fascinating dialogues, Castaneda sets forth his partial initiation with don Juan Matus, a Yaqui Indian shaman from the state of Sonora, Mexico. He describes don Juan's perception and mastery of the non-ordinary reality and how peyote along with other plants sacred to the Mexican Indians were used as gateways to the mysteries of dread, clarity, and power. The Teachings of Don Juan is the story of a remarkable journey that has left an indelible impression on the life of more than a million readers around the world.

For me there is only the traveling on paths that have heart, on any path that may have heart. There I travel, and the only worthwhile challenge is to traverse its full length. And there I travel, looking, looking breathlessly. -- Don Juan

Carlos Castaneda, under the tutelage of don Juan, takes us through the moment of twilight, through the crack in the universe between daylight and dark into a world not merely other than our own, but of an entirely different order of reality. -- Walter Goldschmidt, from the Foreword
My Personal Review:
The Teachings of Don Juan is the first in a series of about 15 books by Carlos Castaneda describing the authors experiences with Yaqui Indian shamanism in Northern Mexico. As a studier of religion for many years (although not as knowledgeable as some scholars) I find these books to be utterly unique in their scope and subject matter. They are not like other New Age books. The journey that Castaneda takes his readers is mind-boggling, and his experiences are simply beyond what most people have even remotely encountered.

Castaneda first met Don Juan in the early 60s, before the hippy movement, before psychodelic drugs became popular. He was studying anthropology in Los Angeles, and Don Juan served as a field source for some fading knowledge of tribal and shamanistic rituals in Northern Mexico. Castaneda was specifically interested in peyote, a plant that gives its users hallucinations and mixes the senses in strange ways, and which LSD was meant to be a chemical reproduction of. Castaneda's first book presents a very detailed scholastic interpretation of his experiences. All books after the first simply focus on Castaneda's experiences with Don Juan.

Castaneda's drug experiences are different from other accounts I have read, because they are intimately tied with the Yaqui philosophy and mythology. The drugs only serve as a means to an end, not as the end in themselves. The first 2 books in the series describe Castaneda's drug experiences with Don Juan, but from the 3rd book on, the drugs disappear forever and Carlos experiences are actually more fantastic, more amazing, more unbelievable as he slowly becomes a practicing sorcerer, traveling to alternate dimensions and battling other sorcerors. Many of the books seem to reach a definitive conclusion, only to have Castaneda's perceived understanding of Don Juan's teachings completely destroyed in the next volume. Again these experiences do not in any way compare to magic and sorcery you might find in pagan, christian, or celtic mythology, nor does the world-philosophy of Don Juan resemble in any way the wholistic ideals of Eastern religions like Hinduism or Buddhism. How can you describe things most people have never seen before? Castaneda does a good job, considering the fantastic nature of some of his journeys. However, while the visions and magical feats are mesmerizing to read, I often found that Don Juan gave his most profound knowledge while simply talking to Castaneda.

Do to its subject matter, most Christians will find these books offensive, but I promise you that nothing in any of these volumes will turn you onto the path of Satan :) There is a certain participation required from the reader - Castaneda repeatedly affirms that everything he has ever written is absolutely true, but intelligent readers will be constantly wondering if such fantastic things could possibly exist. By turning off this little nagging naysayer in my own head and allowing myself to simply sink into the mood of the work and believe, I found that I was better able to intuitively understand the very abstract concepts that overwhelm you. However, because these accounts are SO unbelievable, SO fantastic, SO unlike our everyday life here in the US, I found that I never confused my world
with Castaneda. Its like reading a book about walking on the Moon - you can understand and appreciate what it must have been like, but you dont start wearing a spacesuit to work!

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