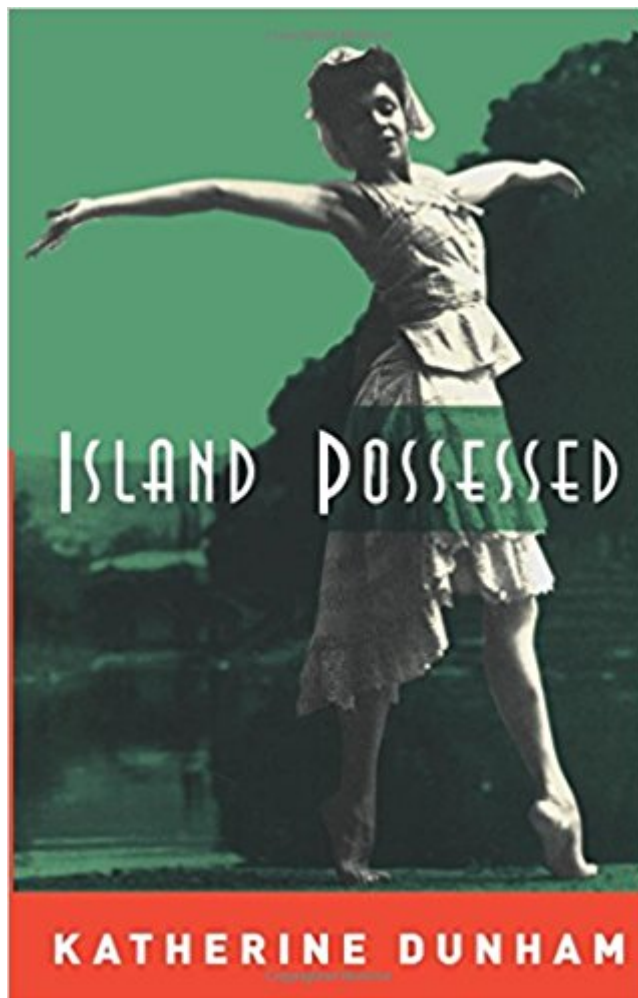


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# Island Possessed



## Synopsis

Just as surely as Haiti is "possessed" by the gods and spirits of vaudun (voodoo), the island "possessed" Katherine Dunham when she first went there in 1936 to study dance and ritual. In this book, Dunham reveals how her anthropological research, her work in dance, and her fascination for the people and cults of Haiti worked their spell, catapulting her into experiences that she was often lucky to survive. Here Dunham tells how the island came to be possessed by the demons of voodoo and other cults imported from various parts of Africa, as well as by the deep class divisions, particularly between blacks and mulattos, and the political hatred still very much in evidence today. Full of the flare and suspense of immersion in a strange and enchanting culture, *Island Possessed* is also a pioneering work in the anthropology of dance and a fascinating document on Haitian politics and voodoo.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Mention Haiti, and images of poor and battered refugees risking their lives attempting to reach America, or a barren Caribbean island prone to military coups and hideous zombies, come to mind. But when anthropologist-choreographer Katherine Dunham first traveled to Haiti in 1936 to study the country's dance traditions, she fell in love with the people and their culture. *Island Possessed*, originally published in 1969, captures Dunham's experiences of the island's intricate voodoo religious dances and customs; the friction between the black peasants and the mulatto elites; and the brutal dictatorships that have plagued the nation. Of her three-day initiation into the voodoo

religion as a "bride" to the Haitian serpent god Damballah, she writes, "My feeling was closer to belonging to something all-encompassing than I have ever known since." Called by the Haitian people "Mama Katherine," Dunham has contributed a humane and comprehensive overview of the world's first black republic. --Eugene Holley Jr.

Katherine Dunham began her love affair with Haiti during her first visit in 1936 as a graduate researcher in dance and anthropology. *Island Possessed* reconnects her with this love, bringing to life personal sketches of political figures, market women, peasants, children, even gods. Dunham tells how the island came to be possessed by the demons of voodoo and other cults imported from various parts of Africa, as well as by the deep class divisions and the political hatred still very much in evidence today.

A quite detailed account of life in Haiti from the late 1930's through to the late 60's seen through the eyes of a foreigner as well as very detailed account of initiation into voodoo. The book finishes during the era of Papa Doc so it provides an insight in to Haiti over 50 years ago . The author kept an open mind on all issues, whether politics, voodoo, Haitian history and slavery and the book is refreshingly free of opinions and judgement. It is very well written and it is obvious that Dunham liked Haiti , obviously so much so that she bought a property there.I enjoyed it thoroughly and recommend it to anyone who has an interest in Haiti and enjoys reading a well written book. One further note, when reading the part of the book devoted to voodoo you will need to constantly use the glossary for an explanation of the language used.

As I read different books about the history of Haiti, I came upon *Island Possessed*, an interesting book written by a very interesting and unique woman, Katherine Dunham. The book is primarily about her first visit to the island in 1936 as part of her anthropology study into the dance of the people of the African Diaspora. Soon, she becomes initiated into Voodoo and gives a compelling account of her initiation ceremony.Prior to reading this book, I knew very little of the author. I found her to be someone of enormous courage as someone who was willing to travel alone in some very poor countries in pursuit of her research. Katherine Dunham comes across as very accepting person as she socialized with many different people regardless of their various social classes. However, I did find this last quality to be somewhat bothersome as she became friendly with several dictators of Haiti and Argentina. In fact, Dunham's psychological profiles of Dumarsais Estime, Paul Magloire and Francois Duvalier comes across as mumbo jumbo and it is the weakest part of the

book. All in all, Dunham gives a wonderful account of her trip to Haiti. She does digress a lot when telling a story but eventually returns to complete her interesting tale.

Most remember her as great dancer but her literary skills were just as impressive. This limited biography of her life is an excellent introduction into the inquisitive nature of her mind and how she opened up her life to new people and experiences. The latter part of the book is devoted into her exploration of Voodoo Religion and is eye opening but difficult to believe, I guess I am not as open minded as Ms. Dunham. This is a very good read.

Want to understand? Read this!

Got the book very quickly. Came in same condition as expected. Will do business again.

Manbo Dunham is a good writer and her prose flows as she talks about her sojourn in Haiti and the religious and political and other figures she interacts with there. This book is of especial interest for her description of the 3-day initiation called the lave tet [or sevis tet or kanzwe depending on where you are and who you ask], which is less well known than the more popular modern kanzo rite initiation centered in Potoprens and other urban centers in Haiti and the Diaspora.

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