The last white rose: the secret wars of the Tudors, Desmond Seward (book review)

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La Via Italiano


Surely, the dream of travel writers—inconsciously exemplified by Peter Mayle’s A Year in Provence—is to find out, “What would it be like to live here?” by going native. Anthropologist Coles crashes the fascinatingly stuck-in-time and often paradoxical paradigm of Venice with her family of six, offering a view of how all ages experience life there. Most of the adventures involve the domestic and logistical peculiarities of living on water, and while the author’s search for the authentic Venice often yields more questions than answers, she captures the nuances of daily life. Through interactions with neighbors and locals she finds the humor and centuries-old quirks of life in an “environment of stone, punctuated by water.”


Whether the tickets have been purchased and the bags have been packed, or the prospect of a European tour is a far-off fantasy, this book is a wonderful resource for planning that dream trip. The guide provides an introduction to the historical, cultural, and artistic underpinnings of Italian civilization, from its roots in the Roman Empire to the present. But Italy was only unified as a country in the late 1800s and so offerings vary widely from region to region. DK represents this fact skillfully with subguides to regional highlights and detailed sections on major cities such as Rome, Florence, and Venice, along with brief spotlights of smaller cities. The major focus in any DK guide is on art, architecture, and cultural attractions, and this work delivers with annotated cutaway guides to sumptuous churches, historic neighborhoods, and Roman ruins as well as full-color photos of art, sculpture, and scenic vistas. For visualizing where to go and what to see, this volume is ideal; for exact details on getting there and practical concerns once you’ve arrived (eating, shopping), other titles or Internet resources might have more up-to-the-minute information. VERDICT A beautiful, detailed resource to start planning the perfect trip to Italy.—Emilia Packard, Austin, TX

New Guinea (now called Papua and a part of Indonesia) in 1961? That is the question posed by Hoffman, a journalist and contributing editor at National Geographic Traveler magazine in this absorbing account of his search to unravel the true facts of the case. Hoffman has done impressive and meticulous investigation on the disappearance in the Dutch governmental and Catholic Church archives, through interviews with Dutch priests and government officials who were in the Asmat region at the time that Rockefeller went missing, and by making two trips in 2012 to the lowland region of southern Papua where the Asmat tribe still lives. There the author stayed in a local village for a month. Although Rockefeller’s official cause of death was listed as drowning after his boat overturned, Hoffman makes a very strong case for the shocking conclusion that Rockefeller may actually have been killed and eaten by Asmat tribesmen after he swam to shore. No trace of him has ever been found, but substantive circumstantial evidence exists in local lore and in the material and interviews that are presented. Like the Asmat people, whose history comes alive through oral tradition, Hoffman is an excellent storyteller. VERDICT This enthralling real-life mystery will appeal to general readers with interests in history, anthropology, and exploration.—Elizabeth Salt, Otterbein Univ. Lib., Westerville, OH


Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) and Prussian scientist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) shared a fascination with natural history and geography and an intense desire to learn more about the world, especially the Americas. After a brief meeting in 1804 they exchanged nearly two dozen letters, some very short, over 20 years. Using these correspondences (reproduced in an appendix) as a starting point, Humboldt scholar Rebok offers this narrowly focused study of the relationship between two eminent intellectuals. The author draws on primary and secondary sources in several languages to explore topics discussed in the men’s correspondence. The scholarship here is sound, and Rebok’s writing avoids the jargon that sometimes plagues academic monographs. General readers are likely to get bogged down in the detailed recounting of Jefferson’s and Humboldt’s responses to scientific debates of their era, however. VERDICT While several chapters touch on topics of broader interest, such as the men’s views on the Haitian Revolution of 1804, this book’s appeal will be limited to specialists in intellectual and natural history.—Charles K. Piehl, Minnesota State Univ., Mankato


Henry Tudor’s defeat of Richard III at Bosworth Field is commonly thought of as the end to the conflict known as the Wars of the Roses—the rivalry between the houses of Lancaster and York for the English crown. However, while the Lancastrians won the day and put the first Tudor on the throne, the roots of the white rose of the House of York proved difficult to extinguish, with figures both legitimate and false troubling Henry VII and Henry VIII throughout their reigns. The Yorkist claimants and pretenders are often relegated to smaller parts in histories of the Tudor monarchy, so a volume that focuses particularly on them and their supporters is a welcome sight. Unfortunately, though Seward’s treatment of the subject is detailed, his reliance on biased sources and his tendency to present opinions and theories as fact undermine the book’s worth as a whole. VERDICT