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Seppuku: a history of samurai suicide, Andrew Rankin (book review)

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men knew that defeat would be their certain death or, at best, lengthy incarceration. **VERDICT** This is an essential work by a distinguished historian; valuable for all collections. [See Prepub Alert, 3/21/11.]—**Ed Goedeke, Iowa State Univ. Lib., Ames**

O'Clery, Conor. *Moscow, December 25, 1991: The Last Day of the Soviet Union*. PublicAffairs: Perseus. Aug. 2011. c.384p. photogs. bibliog. index. ISBN 9781586487966. \$26.99. HIST

Writing with a journalist's flair for detail, O'Clery (*The Billionaire Who Wasn't*), Moscow correspondent for the *Irish Times* during the breakup of the Soviet Union, here offers a well-researched look at the last day of the Soviet Union and provides a balanced portrait of the characters involved. He is careful to consider the myriad factors that affected President Mikhail Gorbachev and his successor, Boris Yeltsin, in their struggle to bring their conflicting views of the future of their country into reality, including how international opinion and support reinforced their respective mindsets. O'Clery keeps his lens trained on the interaction and rivalry between these two personalities and discusses how their conflicts directed their decision making and how their tumultuous relationship drew others into action. Rather than stopping at that fateful Christmas day in 1991—the dissolution of the Soviet Union—O'Clery also provides a succinct history of the major events afterward, tracing Russia's rocky conversion to a market economy and the reemergence of communist ideology in the period following Yeltsin's election that year. **VERDICT** Academics and lay readers alike will find this book a revealing addition to the history of modern Russia, as well as an engrossing journalistic study of two of Russia's most intriguing political leaders.—**Elizabeth Zeitz, Otterbein Univ. Lib., Westerville, OH**

Parker, Matthew. *The Sugar Barons: Family, Corruption, Empire, and War in the West Indies*. Walker. Aug. 2011. c.464p. illus. maps. bibliog. index. ISBN 9780802717443. \$30. HIST

Parker (*Panama Fever*) traces the social, political, and economic history of the sugar trade in the British West Indies from the 17th to the 19th centuries through the stories of several families who ran enormous plantations with indentured and slave labor and amassed great wealth. Along with harrowing tales of the extreme hazards of harvesting sugarcane, the author also conjures incongruous images of the conspicuous consumption by the landowners who insisted

on wearing full European wardrobes (wool coats and wigs) in tropical climates. In this concise volume, Parker manages to cover disease, race relations, slave rebellions, imperial rivalry, and more, leaving the reader impressed by his command of the sources—many of which are letters and diaries of the plantation owners and their visitors—and the comprehensiveness of the treatment. **VERDICT** Successful both as a scholarly introduction to the topic and as an entertaining narrative, this is recommended for readers of any kind of history. (Illustrations not seen.)—**Megan Hahn Fraser, Univ. of California, Los Angeles, Lib.**

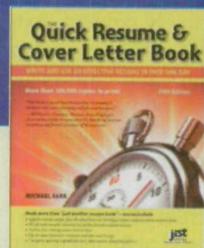
Rankin, Andrew. *Seppuku: A History of Samurai Suicide*. Kodansha, dist. by Oxford Univ. 2011. 255p. illus. bibliog. index. ISBN 9784770031426. \$24.95. HIST

A study of over 800 years of the Japanese practice of ritual suicide by disembowelment might seem grisly, but there's far more here than blood and gore. British author Rankin, who lived in Japan for many years, provides an array of fictional and historical accounts from the practice's earliest days to the beginning of the 20th century to examine seppuku's history, its shift from a spontaneous martial

deed performed in the heat of battle to a formalized ritual with elaborate protocols, and the act's philosophical resonances that led it to become an intrinsic part of samurai culture. Interspersed are a selection of rules from seppuku manuals, a look at types of seppuku, and a chapter of quotes from plays, death poems, and other sources. Rankin also casts a critical eye on narratives that might have been embellished or romanticized; accounts of popular figures long admired in Japan and elsewhere as ideals of samurai loyalty come under particularly sharp scrutiny. **VERDICT** Rankin clearly intends this to be the definitive English work on seppuku. A fascinating book—well researched and extensively cited without being overly dry—it's an excellent read for anyone intrigued by the subject or by Japanese history in general.—**Kathleen McCallister, Univ. of South Carolina Lib., Columbia**

Stein, Mark. *How the States Got Their Shapes Too: The People Behind the Borderlines*. Smithsonian. Jun. 2011. c.360p. illus. maps. index. ISBN 9781588343147. \$24.95. HIST

In an evocative sequel to his popular *How the States Got Their Shapes*, Stein presents



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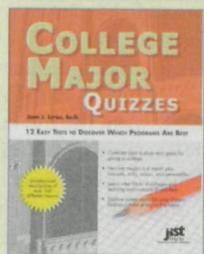
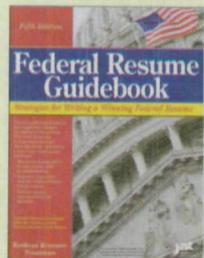
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