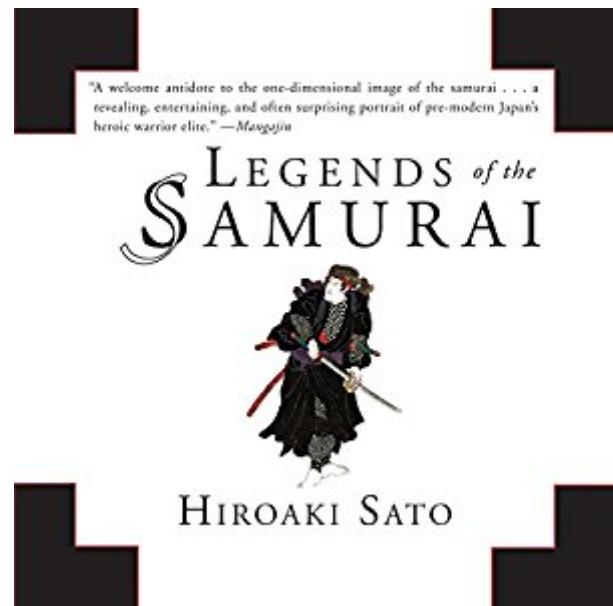


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Legends Of The Samurai



Synopsis

Over the decades, the reputation of the samurai has grown to mythical proportions, owing to such films as Akira Kurosawa's Seven Samurai and Yojimbo, as well as works such as James Clavell's epic Shogun. In Legends of the Samurai, Hiroaki Sato confronts both the history and the legend of the samurai, untangling the two to present an authentic picture of these legendary warriors. Through his masterful translations of original samurai tales, laws, dicta, reports, and arguments accompanied by insightful commentary, Sato chronicles the changing ethos of the Japanese warrior from the samurai's historical origins to his rise to political power. A fascinating look at Japanese history as seen through the evolution of the samurai, Legends of the Samurai stands as the ultimate authority on its subject.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

First things first. Do not purchase this book if you are looking for a storybook collection of Japanese Samurai legends, for this is not what it is. If I were to try to classify this in a genre, I would say it is a history book written for the lay person. Hiroaki Sato is an extraordinarily gifted translator who has chosen to trace the history, or metamorphosis, of the Samurai consciousness from its primitive roots to the point at which it reached its very peak before giving way to the socio-economic tidal wave created by Edo-era Japn. Sato's 'history' is not a linear depiction of events that he has marshalled into a unified narrative from a myriad of sources. Rather, he has chosen to wear his editor's hat to select various primary sources and then translate them into the English as faithfully as he can without rendering them meaningless. Many of the 'stories' he relates are translations of official

Japanese histories (however fancifully told and embellished), among them some of the earliest extant written Japanese documents, also of autobiographies and memoirs of important Samurai men of letters. Along the way he does a magnificent job of explaining to the reader the significance of certain lines of poetry, or literary references that crop up continually during the momentous and not so momentous exchanges between antagonists, friends, teachers and students, leaders and servants, etc. Thus the tradition of speaking volumes in three short lines of poetry comes alive for the Western reader. Much of the text is allowed to speak for itself, of course with Sato's guiding editorial hand to take us where he wants us to go. One way that this form of non-narrative narrative plays out, for example, is in an explication of that super-famous story 'The Forty-Seven Ronin.

Going by the last reviewer's tirade, one would be forgiven for avoiding this book as another example of Japanese right wing nationalism. Sadly, their review had little, if anything, to do with the book "Legends of the Samurai" itself. There is not one whiff of nationalistic parading in the entire book, and Hiroaki Sato avoids anything even hinting at it. Rather than call the Eastern Sea "The Sea of Japan", Sato uses "Eastern Sea", (see the chapter on Oda Nobunaga). The book itself is divided into 4 broad sections, each containing excerpts and sections dealing with the broad theme at hand. These themes include martial prowess, samurai in battle and war, samurai as they viewed themselves and so on. Although the arrangements come from a large array of sources, they are not as disjointed as they could have been. In fact, Sato has done exceptionally well to blend them as much as he has. All of the translations come from primary sources, providing a rare insight into a lot of events from people living much closer in time. The translation into English was handled well, and Sato has to be one of the more pleasurable translators to read. I enjoyed the translation for its ease and structure very much. Sections of particular interest to me were extracts dating to around the end of the Kamakura Bakufu, especially Kusunoki Masashige. Also, the trouble between Minamoto brothers, Yoritomo and Yoshitsune, made for absorbing reading. Having read about Takeda Shingen in novels, it was with relish that I read some primary sources that mentioned him. Sato provides commentary and explanatory footnotes throughout, and these prove both insightful and helpful in understanding the situation in which the events occurred.

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