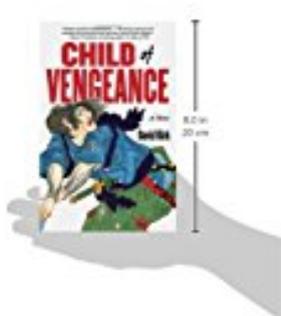


[PDF] Child Of Vengeance

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Description:

Amazon Exclusive: The Code of the Samurai

What did it mean to be samurai? Over the centuries they were prevalent in Japan, the concept was quite open to interpretation. Malleable may be too strong a word, for there were many constants--a stoic and reserved sword-bearing man who valued the honor of his name and clan above all--and yet change was undeniable. When the samurai began to emerge as a dominant class in the eleventh and twelfth centuries they were simply those who were the best at hitting things with bow or sword, and yet by the end of their era in the mid 1800s many could be fairly described as little more than heavily armed bureaucrats. The period this novel depicts happens to be a time of great upheaval: the transitory years as samurai society evolved from a meritocratic order of warriors into a caste that

one was either born into or forbidden. The warlord Hideyoshi Toyotomi, who effectively ruled Japan from 1585 to his death in 1598, was the great instigator of this process, starting off by forbidding any non-samurai to bear weapons early in his reign. Though it would be a few decades later that codified law would be put in place by the Tokugawa Shogunate, it was Toyotomi's decree that truly began the separation of the populace into rigid strata of samurai, peasant, artisan, merchant, and lowest of all the corpse-handlers. The great and unavoidable irony of course is that Toyotomi was himself born a peasant, and tried a number of vocations in his life before he enrolled as a soldier and discovered his aptitude for war, clawing his way upwards through the ranks to the highest position of all. Though lineage had always been given prestige, by the decree of a commoner it now became everything, much to the carefully hidden disgust of a lot of his contemporaries and descendents. Though this kind of radical alteration tended to happen in sporadic violent bursts of activity and incident rather than a steady and continual progression, it was nevertheless the case that different ideals of 'samurai-hood' waxed and waned from decade to decade, even from city to city. Attitudes towards dress, towards the spiritual or practical importance of the sword, towards art - some Lords encouraged their samurai to study poetry because they thought the practice civilizing, whereas others rejected it as a feminine distraction - all varied with time and location. The protagonist of *Child of Vengeance* is the man who would come to be known as Musashi Miyamoto, the greatest samurai ever to grace this earth. His father, Munisai Shinmen, was a legendary samurai in his own right. The father's belief, espoused throughout the novel, could be taken as a very conservative, 'traditional' archetype which suggests that the entire point of samurai is to serve unto the death (which incidentally could be commanded by their Lord at any time). In this way, death proved the samurai's conviction and strength of spirit. Much of this is illustrated in one of the most important works on samurai culture entitled *Hagakure* (loosely: Hidden by Leaves), a collection of thoughts by Tsunetomo Yamamoto that was first published around 1716. Yamamoto was a samurai who had been forbidden to follow his Lord into death (a sometimes-observed traditional practice), something he was deeply troubled by. He spent his last years musing on what the 'correct' course for a samurai should have been. In true Japanese fashion he refrains from making a definite conclusion, but the general implication is that to live Lordless was nothing, to die for one divine, and to live as though that death had already been achieved the key to a higher 'purity'. Unlike his father, Musashi Miyamoto was almost diametrically opposed to this. He spent most of his life wandering Japan without a Lord, searching for enlightenment and honing what would come to be a legendary skill with his swords. Along the way he would enrage as many people as he inspired. The quote that opens this novel, taken from his collection of thoughts on strategy and bearing in life, *Go Rin No Sho* (The Book of Five Rings) illustrates his stance quite succinctly: "*Many people claim that the resolute acceptance of death is the way of the samurai. However, these people are wrong; warriors have no monopoly on this virtue. Monks, women and peasants too can face death bravely. No; the true distinction of a samurai lies in overcoming other men and bringing glory to himself.*" --Musashi Miyamoto, *Go Rin No Sho* (The Book of Five Rings), 1645 Though Musashi was unafraid of death he did not long for it, instead yearning to be a master of all things for and by himself. There were universal beliefs though, and one of the utmost and most relevant to this novel was that of vengeance. If someone wronged you or someone you were bound to by blood or oath it was simply inconceivable for a samurai not to pursue an equal or worse revenge. An interesting theory suggests that (prior to its prohibition by law) Christianity did not flourish in Japan as it did in other Asian countries visited by missionaries because the samurai could neither understand nor respect a God that preached forgiveness. Grudges and slights were so important they were passed down over generations; after the battle of Sekigahara that ends the novel the defeated Mori clan would ritualistically open its subsequent annual gatherings of elders with some variation of: "Has the time come to avenge ourselves upon the Tokugawa?" This they did for over two hundred and fifty years, the answer always being no, until eventually the dynastic Shogunate showed signs of weakness. Then the ancestors of the men who had actually lost the battle sprang into action and became one of the foremost agitators in the sequence of events that eventually brought down the Tokugawa. In

doing so though, of course, they also brought about the end of the era of the samurai--the new post-Tokugawa of Japan of the 1860s would model itself on European democracies, and one of the first things to go was the right to wear swords. In itself this, I think, is a fine illustration of the samurai: devoutly loyal, even at the cost of their own destruction. So, what did it mean to be samurai? Perhaps it is best to think of the idea of it as a rock that has sat in a garden of carefully raked sand through centuries; though it is the same rock, different men have seen it in different lights from different angles. Willingly or unwillingly the men all die; the rock endures. Furthermore, I feel the most pertinent fact that often gets forgotten when one thinks of bygone eras and castes is that regardless of which ideals were venerated at whichever time - beneath it all lay a human being. Of the millions of people to ever be called samurai, their ability or readiness to live up to whatever standards were set before them was determined entirely by themselves. --This text refers to the edition.

From This coming-of-age biographical novel features the famous seventeenth-century samurai warrior-poet Musashi Miyamoto, who created the double sword fighting method kenjutsu. Readers unfamiliar with Japanese history initially may feel lost in this detailed and measured account of the samurai's life and the strict traditions surrounding family and personal honor. Kirk does, however, provide backstory in the form of vivid explanatory drama—a child committing seppuku (hara-kiri), a temple burning, and several brutal acts of vengeance. Young Bennosuke declares his samurai name, Miyamoto, at the Battle of Sekigahara (1600), which is described in tense and gruesome detail. The characters, even the young Bennosuke, aren't particularly likable in conventional terms, but Kirk's spare portrayal of the way of life of the samurai, whose duty it is to protect, defend, and avenge and for whom dying is nothing and winning is all, proves remarkably compelling. Those who enjoyed James Clavell's *Shogun* (1975) or who read the Sano Ichiro mysteries by Laura Joh Rowlands will find much to ponder in this starkly realistic and bleak portrait of Bushido, the way of the samurai warrior. --Jen Baker --This text refers to the edition.

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