New Guinea, New Caledonia, Fiji, and Vanuatu. Lack of representation from Northern Pacific (Micronesian) societies, however, continues an entrenched but unfortunate north-south divide that permeates and thus limits the scholarly literature on the Pacific Basin.

These latter comments notwithstanding, this carefully crafted collection is a very valuable and welcome addition to the literature. It makes a contribution not just to Pacific scholarship but also to the entire arena of maternity in the contemporary world as it lucidly and provocatively uncovers and grapples with central tensions and dilemmas permeating current scholarship. This volume will spur students and faculty in a wide range of disciplines (such as social science, epidemiology, demography, history, and economics, to name a few central disciplines), as well as clinicians, policy makers, and politicians, to (re)examine their assumptions about the science and existential realities that underlie birthing and reproduction.

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Is there an anthropologist who conducted fieldwork in Papua New Guinea during the 1970s who does not dream of returning to the original research site? Wouldn’t we all, like Kenneth Read (Return to the High Valley, 1986), like to return to “high valleys” of our youth and first fieldwork? The journey we envision is a complex personal pilgrimage as well as an intellectual and academic quest: What happened to our friends and the people who meant—and mean—so much to us? Have their lives been altered, experiences been modified, new meanings evolved? Michael French Smith originally did field research on Kairiru Island off the north coast near Wewak in 1975–76 and was able to make brief and informal visits back to the village of Kragur in 1981, 1995, and 1998. In this book he chronicles these visits and reflects on the changes perceptible to him through this period. A variety of Kragur voices (from both village and town) addressing these changes are a strong element in the narrative.

Smith does not claim to have conducted a thorough study of sociocultural change, but he does pick up on significant themes from his earlier published work (Hard Times on Kairiru Island, 1994)—especially the embeddedness of material and moral concerns in Melanesian societies—and thus contributes significantly to our knowledge of transformation in Papua New Guinea. He carefully summarizes data from 1974 and then recounts what he encountered in later years. The puzzles perplexing the people of Kragur in 1974 only intensified as a capitalistic economy, characterized by commodities, competition, and individualism, penetrated the texture of people’s lives and challenged their understanding of value and creation of meaning. The dilemma people face is one that seems to have no satisfactory
solution: If they relinquish the central-
ity of reciprocity as the basis of their
social relationships, they must also
give up their core belief that to be
“good,” to be moral, is to be gener-
ous and hospitable; if they engage in
predominantly market-driven relation-
ships based on commodity rather than
gift, individual rather than social net-
work, they necessarily relinquish being
virtuous. But at the same time, if they
choose not to participate in these new
commodity-based relationships, they
will not achieve the prosperity evident
among other groups, such as Euro-
peans and elite Papua New Guineans;
matter success is inherently embed-
ded in moral and social success. Moral
and material concerns melt together,
and the conundrum of determining
appropriate action as well as con-
structing meaning becomes even more
problematic.

Smith’s earlier work concerned the
nature and role of religion, especially
the Catholic Church, in Kairiru life,
and this volume extends that earlier
discussion and provides additional
information and analysis. The Church
plays a direct part in the escalation of
the tension between overlapping yet
conflicting systems of value: the dis-
junction and perhaps even conflict
between Church rhetoric, especially
of equality and generosity, and the
perceived reality of human behavior
within capitalistic systems is probably
more evident to Kragur villagers than
many western theologians.

Although a variety of scholars and
professional anthropologists will ben-
et from reading this book, Smith’s
intended audience is much wider (and
includes residents of Kragur, some of
whom have read his earlier work and
comment in this volume). In academe,

Village on the Edge will be particu-
larly useful in teaching undergraduates
about three important topics, not
because it contains advanced theoretical
discussions of them but because it
includes suggestive and basic material
that can lead instructors into more
complex considerations. The first of
these is the intricacy of understanding
change in Papua New Guinea, the
ways in which indigenous belief sys-
tems are challenged and yet also, at
the same time, interpret aspects of the
powerful forces that have impinged
from without. The second is the
nature of issues of reflexivity and
representation in anthropology. Smith
does not go to great lengths to include
subjectivity, plumb his personal psych-
ological states, or focus on highly
abstract aspects of the problems of
representation and reflexivity, but he
does include enough personal and
processual material (“How did you do
that? How did you feel?”) to help stu-
dents to begin thinking about these
issues. The voices of the people of
Kragur that are heard here sometimes
conflict with one another and some-
times conflict with Smith’s own voice,
and the illustration of this multivocal-
ity is a rich teaching opportunity.
Finally, Smith’s honest account of his
work for the World Bank in Papua
New Guinea and the role of the World
Bank in general can initiate significant
and important conversations about
the nature and force of capitalism
and its role in global change.

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