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The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery

Vincent Brown

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New Book

The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery

By Vincent Brown.

Harvard University Press, Cloth, 368 pp., illus., ISBN-13: 978-0674024229, February, 2008.

Description from the Publisher:



"Vincent Brown makes the dead talk. With his deep learning and powerful historical imagination, he calls upon the departed to explain the living. *The Reaper's Garden* stretches the historical canvas and forces readers to think afresh. It is a major contribution to the history of Atlantic slavery." -- Ira Berlin, author of *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*.

"An elegant and powerful study of the ways that all of Jamaica's people -- poor and rich, slave and free, black and white -- lived in the constant shadow of death in England's richest and most important colony. A profound exploration of the meanings of death and the dead for the living." -- James Sidbury, author of *Becoming African in*

America.

"In this riveting and remarkable book, Vincent Brown carries us to the epicenter of the experience of slavery. He shows us how, in plantation Jamaica and along the Atlantic currents that shaped it, the worlds of the living and the dead were always tightly intertwined." -- Laurent Dubois, author of *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*.

"*The Reaper's Garden* is a truly luminous book that will establish Vincent Brown's reputation as a brilliant interpreter of the African diaspora." -- Marcus Rediker, author of *The Slave Ship: A Human History*.

What did people make of death in the world of Atlantic slavery? In *The Reaper's Garden*, Vincent Brown asks this question about Jamaica, the staggeringly profitable hub of the British Empire in America -- and a human catastrophe. Popularly known as the grave of the Europeans, it was just as deadly for Africans and their descendants. Yet among the survivors, the dead remained both a vital presence and a social force.

In this compelling and evocative story of a world in flux, Brown shows that death was as generative as it was destructive. From the eighteenth-century zenith of British colonial slavery to its demise in the 1830s, the Grim Reaper cultivated essential aspects of social life in Jamaica -- belonging and status, dreams for the future, and commemorations of the past. Surveying a haunted landscape, Brown unfolds the letters of anxious colonists; listens in on wakes, eulogies, and solemn incantations; peers into crypts and coffins, and finds the very spirit of human struggle in slavery. Masters and enslaved, fortune seekers and spiritual healers, rebels and rulers, all summoned the dead to further their desires and ambitions. In

this turbulent transatlantic world, Brown argues, "mortuary politics" played a consequential role in determining the course of history.

Insightful and powerfully affecting, *The Reaper's Garden* promises to enrich our understanding of the ways that death shaped political life in the world of Atlantic slavery and beyond.