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The Perreaus and Mrs. Rudd: Forgery and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century London

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Readers may well ask, "When is the mini-series scheduled?" while enjoying this captivating account of forgery, fame, and personal disaster in London of the 1770s. Before the story ends, le beau monde will crowd the courts, pamphlet wars will erupt, upper-crust twins will swing from the gallows, a beautiful woman of mysterious birth will be both praised and pilloried in the insatiable popular press—and the average Londoner will be enthralled. So will the reader.

In dissecting the forgery central to the story and the law's response, the authors (both professors of history) also analyze the hopes, fears, and operation of the brilliant society that characterized London. It was a nervous decade: Britain looked out over an empire and prosperity severely threatened by the restless American colonies.

At first glance the crime was deceptively straightforward: on behalf of his brother Daniel and Daniel's mistress, Margaret Rudd, the impeccable apothecary Robert Perreau offered a forged bond to a banker. What follows is a series of fascinating and far-ranging explorations of the sinews and flesh of late eighteenth-century life. The authors analyze the vital alliance between private credit and public confidence in ensuring commercial and financial stability; they present the contemporary debate on law and justice occasioned by the Perreau-Rudd case, and they comment incisively on the limitations of a trial system in which appearance often overwhelmed reality. They also reflect on the case and its significance as elements in contemporary political polemics.

Even more rewarding is the authors' treatment of the immediate human-interest issues. They explore fashionable life and its extravagant cost, offering insights that will delight even hardened glitterati hounds; they engagingly treat the role of the oft-mentioned but never seen influential relative; they touch on politics and prostitution. They generously quote the egregious exaggerations of media vultures and vampires who reported a saga that upstaged even the fast-breaking events from Britain's American colonies.

Readers join Boswell, Johnson, Garrick, Fielding, Wilkes, King George III, and a host of

makers and shakers in this micro-history of devious crime, legal manipulation, media frenzy, popular response, and at-risk public confidence. A satisfying and digestible feast, this finely researched book will please both gourmet and sampler.

Peter Skinner