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| Discussion Questions 1. A *rônin* was a samurai with no master, and had something of the image of an outlaw or bandit in the American West. The word samurai itself came from a word meaning "to serve." How do you think it felt to be a samurai, but to have no master? How do you think you would be viewed by the rest of society?
2. Today, a student who fails the entrance exam to a particular college, and takes a year off after high school to study in order to take the exam again, is called a *rônin*. What does such a student have in common with a *rônin* of premodern times?
3. Why was it a mark of respect for the government to allow the *rônin* to commit suicide rather than be executed?
4. The suicide ritual was called *seppuku* — what we sometimes call *hara-kiri*, or "stomach cutting" — and required the warrior to slit open his own belly with a knife. A second person, or assistant, would then end his pain by swiftly decapitating him with a sword. Why was ritual suicide performed in such a painful way? What does all this tell about samurai values?
5. What values in contemporary, postindustrial Japan would account for the continued popularity of this story? What values in our own society have made figures such as Jesse James or Robin Hood popular heroes? How do the values of the two modern societies compare in these heroes?
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