John Bateson’s *The final leap: Suicide on the Golden Gate Bridge* presents a wide ranging examination of its subject, digging deeply into the more than 75 year history of the bridge and thoroughly exploring its notorious reputation as the nation’s leading suicide site; it attracts about 25 to 35 people yearly to jump to their deaths. Bateson, has had ample experience to prepare for this book, serving as an executive director of a crisis center in the San Francisco Bay area. According to Bateson, the Golden Gate’s allure as a suicide magnet has had long established roots. The lead bridge designer, a short man of only five feet, decided, at the last moment, to shorten the original higher railing design for a more aesthetically pleasing level of four feet, ultimately making it relatively easy for persons of all ages and diverging health statuses to scale the low barrier and put themselves at risk.

What makes Bateson’s book so especially valuable is its far reaching probing into the suicidality associated with the bridge. Bateson investigates the demographics of bridge jumpers and finds all ages, ethnicities and social class members represented in the mix of more than 1,600 confirmed suicides. He presents case illustration data from the small percentage of bridge jump survivors, numbering more than 30, who generally share the belief that they made a grave mistake the moment they let go of the railing. Bateson also interviewed bereaved families, most often parents, who lost their children at the bridge, who invariably experienced great pain and sorrow. Many have now become activists, joining organizations in the Bay area, committed to erecting a higher railing or a safety net under the bridge to deter would-be jumpers.

There is a section of the book devoted to crisis counselors and their interactions with those sharing suicidal ideation. This section is especially valuable for better understanding the mind set of suicide attempters. In an appendix Bateson also offers a brief overview of major theories of suicide causation. These sections help to make this book useful as a supplementary text for undergraduate psychology or sociology classes. Additional chapters also delve into the work of the Marin County coroner who generally performs autopsies and often has the challenging task of informing next-of-kin about loved ones’ deaths. There are also chapters or partial chapters devoted to Coast Guard personnel, Bridge District officials who govern bridge operations and bridge personnel (and who manage to deter at least twice as many would-be jumpers each year than actually do jump). A final chapter marshals all the evidence supporting the value of a higher railing or safety net at the bridge. All these pieces help to establish a carefully woven tapestry enabling readers to understand all facets of the Golden Gate Bridge story, a structure of unparalleled beauty, but one that holds the unsavory distinction of being not only the nation’s but the world’s leading suicide site.

The most perplexing question Bateson’s book addresses is why San Franciscans haven’t shown the same public health consciousness demonstrated by other urbanites in New York, Paris, Seattle, Washington, DC, Aukland, New Zealand, who have established suicide barriers around their national monuments and bridges, successfully lowering suicides at these suicide-attracting locations. Bateson identifies a common misunderstanding shared by the public-at-large, the belief that most people trying to jump from the bridge will find alternate means to kill themselves. Yet, abundant research evidence actually suggests that when people are deterred from pursuing their
first choice killing method, they often have a high likelihood of remaining alive. Bateson’s book does an excellent job examining all the complexities associated with this conundrum of getting the public to pay attention to social science evidence. Though the author could have done a better job of identifying where his references fit into the text, this well researched and clearly written book is highly recommended and deserves a wide readership.