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□ Dell, Chad:

The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s

New York: Peter Lang Press (2006). ISBN 0-8204-7270-0 (pbk), pp. xii + 172

Particip@tions Volume 4, Issue 1 (May 2007)

A Review by Clarissa Smith

The iconic image of 1950s femininity - the domestic goddess whose pleasures centred on hearth and home, tending to her family and husband with ineffable charm and satisfaction - is put to rest in Chad Dell's account of women gone wild at the wrestling ringside. Making use of a range of sources including television archive footage, photographs, newspaper reports of wrestling bouts in the official wrestling press, and the voices found in fan club magazines as well as the memories of fans and wrestlers, Dell's examination places women fans centre stage as active participants in the spectacle of professional wrestling. Dell writes in a very easy style, this is not a heavy academic tome and there is plenty to enjoy for 'interested' readers, as an alternative history of 1950s femininity it is an amusing and interesting read.

Starring flamboyantly named opponents such as Wladek 'Killer' Kowalski, Maurice 'the French Angel' Tillett, Hans 'the Horrid Hun' Schmidt, 'Gorgeous' George Wagner and Buddy 'Nature Boy' Rogers, wrestling offered a heightened performance of sport and 'the passion play of good and evil, hero and villain' to American housewives. By 1948 the sport was a popular weekly feature on three of four national television broadcast networks with women making up almost 90% of the home audiences. Dell links the rise of wrestling to the rising popularity of television – the new medium screened local bouts across the nation and through close-ups, brought the action, narrative and, most provocatively, men's bodies closer to the largely female audience. For Dell, it is the public display of the male body which most dramatically demonstrates the targeting of female viewers and which is linked to a nascent politics of rebellion.

The book paints a lively picture of the excitements and pleasures of 1950s pro wrestling, from the vivid colours of the performers' costumes to the heady delights of participation in the spectacle. As with many researches into women's media use, these pleasures are harnessed to a nascent political sensibility in that wrestling is seen to offer women audiences the possibilities of carving out 'me-time' and it is this that seems to constitute the rebellion against the restrictive patterns of 1950s domestic life. I wonder if this doesn't overstate the political potentials of wrestling and indeed I'm not entirely convinced that Dell provides the evidence to sustain the claim that screaming at a match was directly linked to the growth of women's liberation in the following decade. Or indeed, that he makes the case that we should investigate women's participations for their progressive or conservative dimensions.

Chapters are divided into investigations of the various spaces in which wrestling and its fans were shown and discussed and one chapter draws on fan's memories of attending wrestling shows. In each of these chapters, Dell tells us how difficult it has been to research his topic – wrestling magazines were rarely catalogued and archived by libraries and he was reliant upon fans for access to the more ephemeral materials associated with the sport – the fanzines and fan club newsletters – when he does find this material, he makes good use of it to explore the ways in which, for example, home-made publications offered direct conversations and connections to fans across America. He also demonstrates that, for many fans, the bodies of the wrestlers were just as important to their fandom as their sporting prowess in the ring. As with research by Studlar and Hansen, these snippets of female admiration for the male body are important traces of women's viewing pleasures often ignored by feminist theory focused on the objectification of the female body.

The book is not weighed down by lengthy discussions of methodology or theoretical issues: where necessary, justification for his approach is offered, in places this comes down to description of some of the production contexts of, for example, wrestling fan publications – they attracted very little advertising revenue and so were required to remain very sensitive to their readers' interests. From this Dell discusses the ways in which the address of these publications changed from 'masculine' focus on the professional sports element of wrestling to a more inclusive and chatty style of speaking with fans. This chapter offers an interesting emphasis on the discursive nature of articles, features and letters pages which encouraged fans to join in 'the performance of journalism' and the extension of the wrestling narratives of good and evil outside of the ring. Moreover, it demonstrates the different kinds of talk and belonging offered in sports fandoms.

Other chapters describe the wrestling match and its audiences as seen on TV. Dell has been lucky here that he can view audience response and the ways television made considerable use of the ringside as part of the narrative of the match: the 'lively visual and aural backdrop surrounding the action taking place at center stage' (23). Dell goes on to claim that 'the voices of active women at ringside articulated the challenge to patriarchal norms of femininity demonstrating the turmoil below the calm ideological surface of the 1950s' (24). The re-writing of 1950s femininity is intriguing but I don't think that the case is fully made here, indeed its political possibilities are only speculative. Even the claims regarding women's sexual appreciation of men in abbreviated clothing have a rather exaggerated importance. Dell claims 'women were making visible what sports culture tends to deny: the sexual appreciation of the athlete. This has a further destabilising effect on the relationship between the audience and performer, when defined in strictly masculine terms, which typically denies any sexual dynamic. By acknowledging the sexual aspect of an athlete's performance, women were asserting their power – through their control of the gaze – to be public consumers of male sexuality.' (25) While his analysis of the televised events demonstrates that women were not just visible in terms of their numbers in the audience and that their participation at an

event was a key element in its theatricality and its televisual appeal, the larger case is not satisfactorily made for this reader.

However, I defy anyone not to enjoy the chapters describing audience members and their actions. The eponymous Hatpin Mary was a member of the wrestling audience almost as famous as the men she came to watch. Real name Eloise Patricia Barnett, Hatpin Mary sat at the ringside armed with hatpin and baby bottles with which she would 'punish' wrestlers and, as the book's cover image makes clear, any policeman who got in her way. The loud antics of Mary and her fellow fan Ringside Rosie brought their own performative dimensions to the match and, Dell argues, gave license to other women to loudly 'enact' their spectatorship and appreciation of barely clothed, fit male bodies. The key problem with his discussion is that this account owes a little too much to the kind of celebratory thinking about fans that has been roundly critiqued in recent years. Throughout his account Dell returns to the idea that the participation of women in wrestling audiences has to have progressive force and yet apart from the assertions that hollering insults at individual sportsmen signalled rebellion there is little tangible evidence that the women saw this activity as rebellious in the ways Dell suggests. There is also the 'small' issue of the violence these women meted out to wrestlers – in the section 'Physical Confrontations' Dell offers the following anecdote:

“One night in Buffalo” one referee recalls, “a lady objected to a decision I made concerning her favourite wrestler, a large bundle of suet called The Bat. She leaped into the ring, hit me in the eye with her shoe, removed a handful of my hair, and jumped up and down on my feet. It took four cops to get her out of there.”

He goes on to say that

It is as though these women were gleefully throwing the emblems of femininity back into the face of a patriarchy that was temporarily suspended and momentarily vulnerable. Exacting payment, drawing blood, these female fans drew pleasure from violent disorder and bodies out of control. (42)

And there endeth the explanation. I'd have liked to have read more about the specific pleasures of violence – for the women who perpetrated it and those who egged them on.

More satisfactory, is Dell's discussion of the reception of such behaviour by the popular press. In this third chapter Dell shows that there was considerable disquiet at the sight of 'women "gone berserk" at the wrestling arena' (31). The numbers of women in attendance at wrestling matches was debated and, as has been the case for many other generic forms identified as 'female', the newspaper commentaries are distinguished by their disparaging tones and their alignment of women's tastes as low brow and low class. Dell suggests that this disparagement is a clear indication of 'just how thin the ideological façade of femininity in the 1950s had become.' (34) Thus rather than try to refute the denigration by trying to demonstrate value in the wrestling match he argues that, 'we can and should take these articles seriously as data, despite their playful and mocking tone.

They are evidence of the real tension that existed in the postwar era over appropriate constructions of femininity, and serious attempts – to my mind, failed attempts – at containment. The existence of this discussion of women’s fandom of wrestling is evidence of the central challenge this posed.’ (36)

While wrestling attendances may have benefited from ‘[women’s] growing sense of empowerment and resistance to gender boundaries in the postwar era’ (12), the assertions that the sport and its popularity were a manifestation and outlet for rebellion requires more sustained development. At the outset, Dell asks the following questions:

What motivated millions of women to break with the dominant construction of femininity and attend professional wrestling in such numbers that they at times outnumbered their male counterparts at the arena? Who were these women? What meanings and pleasures did they find? What purposes did women’s attendance and fandom of wrestling serve?

And goes on to make the bold claim

I will argue that, far from a marginalized activity, women’s fandom of professional wrestling is central to our understanding of the 1950s and of women’s pivotal role in the decade. (5)

I really enjoyed *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary* and yet I find myself dissatisfied with the answers here. Some historical detail is offered as contextual justification for women’s motivations but class and race are effectively sidelined in this account – except where he can point to women in furs sitting next to more soberly and cheaply dressed women. Thus the cultural significances of wrestling seem to turn almost entirely on a generalised account of gendered viewing. The particular social situations of the women in the audiences remain a matter of speculation. These gaps are perhaps inevitable given the difficulties of researching popular culture forms at a historical remove but they may also be evidence of a central failure at the heart of the book – the refusal to discuss the specifically sexual dimensions to some women’s pleasure in the male form as well as their very physical responses. In the section exploring the memories of fans, the expression of desire is discussed and yet its fulfilment is carefully marginalised. Even at an historical arms length it seems we’re reluctant to admit that women’s expressions of desire may be just that: expressions of sexual desire in all its possible complexities and problematic dynamics; instead we seem to search for a purpose behind desire which can recuperate the fandom as an instance of rebellion.

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