Book Review/ Compte rendu

Smith, R. Tyson. *Fighting for Recognition: Identity, Masculinity, and the Act of Violence in Professional Wrestling*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, 220 pp., $23.95 paper (9780822357223).

In *Fighting for Recognition*, R. Tyson Smith crafts a sophisticated and readable ethnographic analysis of the experiences of the young men involved in independent ("indie") professional wrestling – a local, low-budget form of show business spectacle operating in the shadow of the much more visible and profitable World Wrestling Entertainment Corporation (WWE). Rather than focusing on fans' consumption of professional wrestling, Smith explores the meanings of wrestling for the participants, especially the interactions between wrestlers that sustain and sell the spectacle of the sport. The book is a product of more than two years of observations and interviews conducted between 2003 and 2005 among performers, trainers, and promoters at a professional wrestling school in a suburb of New York City. What motivates this group of mostly white, mainly working-class, heterosexual, suburban men? Why do they voluntarily choose to focus so much of their lives on wrestling, despite its physical, emotional, and financial costs?

Smith is particularly adept at moving between the "onstage," public face of wrestling and the intimate, "backstage" interactions that make the performance possible. He carefully explores the multiple meanings and, especially, the set of contradictions that are central to the identities of participants in professional wrestling. Behind a public face of strength and invulnerability lies a system of backstage relationships based on intimacy and sensitivity. Wrestling is a spectacle of combat and competition, but what happens in the ring is scripted and choreographed. Pain and suffering are glorified and sold, but avoiding injury is crucial to the business. And violent displays of aggression and physical dominance are dependent on an underlying ethic of care and teamwork.

In Chapter 1, Smith presents five detailed profiles of wrestling performers from the core group of fifteen wrestlers he studies, including their individual backgrounds and motivations as well as their social and community connections. These men work for little pay, face significant expenses, and juggle day jobs outside of wrestling, while generally receiving only marginal support for their involvement in wrestling from

family, friends, and employers. Chapter 2 focuses on the social recognition wrestlers seek from fans and peers. Smith highlights how performers immerse themselves completely in wrestling, noting such easily overlooked items as time spent working on their "look" or "character," and studying videotapes of classic wrestling performances.

Chapter 3 examines the bodily craft of wrestling. Extending Arlie Hochschild's idea of "emotional labor" – and, at times, turning it on its head – Smith analyzes the *voluntary* and *joint* performances of violence conducted by wrestlers as they create "feelings of contempt, indignation, and suspense among the audience" (67). Smith labels this form of emotional labor "passion work" – it is an intimate enactment of agony and hostility that is only possible through a high degree of cooperation and collaboration. Rather than experiencing the alienation found in other types of emotional labor, wrestlers find meaningful social connections with their opponents and develop a high degree of "empathy built upon mutual trust and protection" (87).

Chapter 4 looks at the complex masculinities associated with pro wrestling – the delicate, homoerotic, even effeminate behaviors that playfully undergird the displays of conventional hypermasculinity celebrated in the ring. Smith acknowledges that wrestling, to some extent, upholds the traditional tenets of hegemonic masculinity, but he is more interested in the ways in which the "vanity, pageantry, and choreography of pro wrestling…flout the ideals of hard masculinity" (96). In effect, wrestlers must *unlearn* masculinity in order to be successful, since the job demands displays of beauty, investments in appearance, and acts of physical intimacy. Chapter 5 explores the central role of pain in wrestlers' lives. While performers work to evade injury, physical suffering is unavoidable, and it becomes a marker of status and an affirmation of solidarity among participants. Wrestlers describe astonishing lists of injuries in their conversations with the author, as well as a disturbing lack of treatment and medical care.

Resisting simple, straightforward conclusions, Smith assembles a nuanced and sympathetic assessment of the world of independent wrestling. He effectively uses interviews, anecdotes, excerpts from his field notes, and vivid descriptions of training sessions and performances to construct an engaging portrayal of an under-examined subject. Perhaps the book's greatest strength is the way in which Smith deftly explains the full range of contradictory and paradoxical meanings woven through professional wrestling. He successfully captures the complexity of the culture of pro wrestling, and provides an extremely useful model for ethnographic research into groups and subcultures.

Smith demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of related literature on work, masculinity, and identity, and he uses his detailed end notes, in particular, to draw some parallels to other contexts. However, the book's contribution to broader sociological inquiry would be strengthened by discussing more of these key issues explicitly in the text. For instance, while Smith makes thoughtful connections to the extensive scholarly work on labor, bodies, pain, and gender identities, the precise challenges presented by this study – or its support for the findings of other scholars – could be presented more clearly and more fully.

Smith asserts that the book can provide a broader understanding of "the dynamics of a variety of male performances – be they behaviors of athletes, soldiers, men colluding while out on the town, or even professors posturing among colleagues" (5). At times, though, it appears that indie wrestling is *so* unique that the insights provided by this meticulous case study don't really help us to understand other experiences of young men, or other forms of labor. For example, while the reader develops a strong awareness of the connections between the "onstage" and "backstage" elements of the performance, the focus on wrestling sometimes seems too close. How do the challenges and paradoxes of this particular occupation and entertainment business apply to other forms of work, or other activities through which young men forge their identities?

Despite these questions about the wider application of this study, Smith succeeds in linking pro wrestling to "larger social issues" (147) in several ways. For instance, he indicates that the connective, intimate form of masculinity embraced by pro wrestlers can be found within other male groups that rely on empathy and respect to sustain displays of violence and hostility, such as actors, stunt men, circus performers, even hockey players (88). Similarly, he contends that groups like athletes, soldiers, and fraternity members also express forms of toughness based on backstage trust and collaboration: "the greater the show of impenetrable hard masculinity, the greater the web of trust and vulnerability to be shared with one's intimates" (149). In addition, Smith argues that indie wrestlers find significant satisfaction in wrestling, rather than in their regular work. Does this help to explain how other groups of young working-class men disillusioned with the pursuit of middle-class lifestyles and long-term financial security seek an alternative sense of identity outside of work? Perhaps Smith could examine further here how this particular form of working-class masculinity is linked to earlier expressions of working-class culture that also challenged middle-class standards of manhood by placing a high value on expressions of masculine honor, toughness, and physical prowess.

Finally, Smith's discussion of health, risk, injury, and the normalization of pain is extremely useful to sociologists of sport. It provides a helpful framework for considering how participants in other athletic and entertainment contexts deal with similar issues. Athletes across a range of sports are expected to accept violence, absorb punishment, and persevere through danger. Wrestlers have frequently been described as the "canaries in the coal mine" of professional sport, and with this outstanding investigation of indie wrestling, Smith adds considerably to the insights that can be derived from studying this group. Researchers and instructors in sport studies, cultural studies, and performance studies will find significant value in Smith's analysis, and the book could be used effectively in courses dealing with masculinities, labor and identities, the work of performers, and qualitative research methods.

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