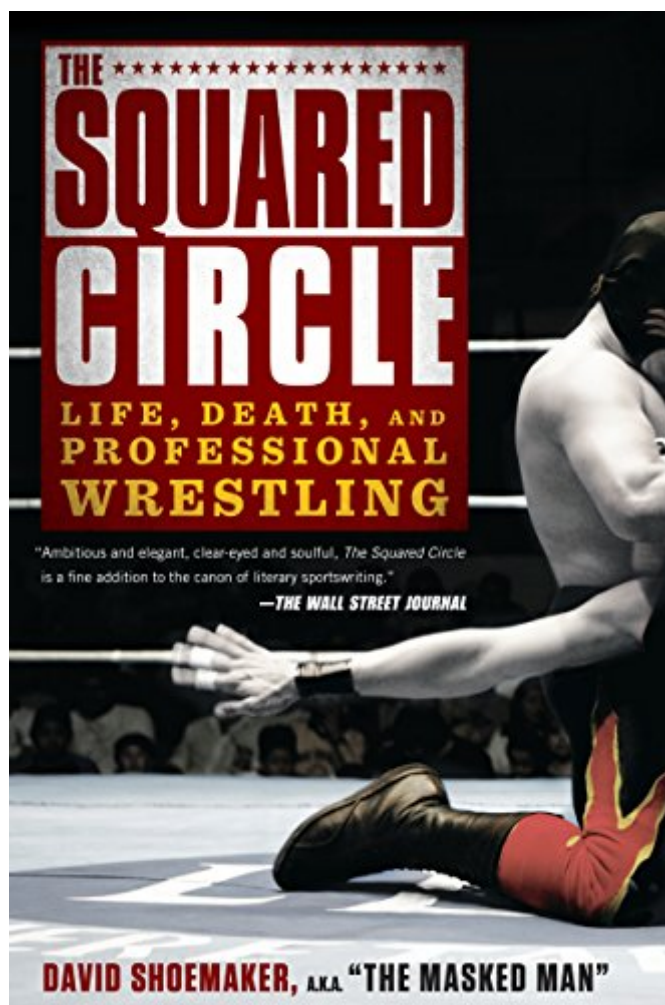


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The Squared Circle: Life, Death, And Professional Wrestling



Synopsis

Grantland and Deadspin correspondent presents a breakthrough examination of the professional wrestling, its history, its fans, and its wider cultural impact that does for the sport what Chuck Klosterman did for heavy metal. The Squared Circle grows out of David Shoemaker's writing for Deadspin, where he started the column "Dead Wrestler of the Week" (which boasts over 1 million page views) -- a feature on the many wrestling superstars who died too young because of the abuse they subject their bodies to -- and his writing for Grantland, where he covers the pro wrestling world, and its place in the pop culture mainstream. Shoemaker's sportswriting has since struck a nerve with generations of wrestling fans who like him grew up worshipping a sport often derided as "fake" in the wider culture. To them, these professional wrestling superstars are not just heroes but an emotional outlet and the lens through which they learned to see the world. Starting in the early 1900s and exploring the path of pro wrestling in America through the present day, The Squared Circle is the first book to acknowledge both the sport's broader significance and wrestling fans' keen intellect and sense of irony. Divided into eras, each section offers a snapshot of the wrestling world, profiles some of the period's preeminent wrestlers, and the sport's influence on our broader culture. Through the brawling, bombast, and bloodletting, Shoemaker argues that pro wrestling can teach us about the nature of performance, audience, and, yes, art. Full of unknown history, humor, and self-deprecating reminiscence but also offering a compelling look at the sport's rightful place in pop culture, The Squared Circle is the book that legions of wrestling fans have been waiting for. In it, Shoemaker teaches us to look past the spandex and body slams to see an art form that can explain the world.

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Customer Reviews

As someone who grew up on pro wrestling, I found "The Squared Circle" to be both a fun trip down memory lane and also a bit depressing. Shoemaker does a wonderful job telling the fascinating (and somewhat insane) history of the "sport", and provides a number of great anecdotes and factoids about the old days when everything was regionally based. In particular, the stories about the different wrestlers playing different roles in the territories were fascinating to read. There were also some wonderful anecdotes about a lot of the wrestlers I grew up watching, like Andre the Giant and Macho Man Randy Savage. And that's where the depressing part comes in. Shoemaker, who used to write "Dead Wrestler of the Week" for Deadspin, intersperses the book with sections on wrestlers who are no longer with us. Individually, the sections serve as nice tributes to the wrestlers.

Collectively, it's very scary to see just how many wrestlers have died young, especially when you get into later chapters about guys like Mike Awesome and Owen Hart. Using these profiles to tell the story of pro wrestling is a very unique angle that works very well, but it does leave you wondering why in the world anyone would get into this business. My one complaint is more of a technical issue:

Shoemaker has a ton of footnotes in this book (he obviously takes after his new boss, Bill Simmons). This wouldn't be so bad if the footnotes just showed up on the bottom of the screen but, unfortunately, you have to click down to the footnote and go to a different page to read it, then go back to the page you were on. This was a painful process that was repeated dozens of times in each chapter. Maybe that issue has been fixed on the newer Kindles (I have a first generation, although it happened on my iPad 3 as well), but it definitely made reading this book more labor intensive than it should have been! Other than that, I would recommend this book to anyone that grew up with pro wrestling and would like to learn more about its history and the characters that made it what it is today.

Professional wrestling is often derided by its critics as fake and staged. Ironically, many of these same people will readily plunk down money at a movie theater to see a story played out before them and not bat an eye at the hypocrisy. Wrestling has existed as an entertainment medium that is part myth, part morality play in a literal theater of the absurd. It is an arena where an athletic competition exists yet the viewer is asked to suspend his disbelief. Commentating on this peculiar world is Deadspin "Dead Wrestler of the Week" writer David Shoemaker. While he is a wrestling fan, his writings on the passing of various wrestling personalities read more like eulogies. Yet, he takes the time to place their career within context of the times in which they wrestled and opining on the fans and their reactions to what they see. Fortunately, the run of tragic passings of wrestling personages has slowed way down from when DWotW was a regular feature on Deadspin. (Ironically, this review comes not two days after the death of Nelson Frazier, Jr - aka Mabel, aka Viscera, aka Big Daddy V.) Shoemaker begins with the dawn of the sport, starting in the carnivals and working his way through the period of legitimate competition before it finally settles into its current mode of script. This initial era is treated quickly but does not leave out essential details. Having read Tim Hornbaker's history on the NWA, that early period can get quite tedious (and confusing), a mistake that Shoemaker does not make. The majority of the rest of the book is dedicated to his profiles of deceased wrestlers repackaged from his Deadspin column. (The exception to this is a brief interlude on the Ultimate Warrior.) The careers of the wrestlers are retraced with no punches pulled as to what made them great or what held them back. Shoemaker discusses each wrestler's pop culture context; while I didn't agree with a couple of them (notably Rick Rude's), his arguments are sound and makes his cases. At least for me, there were holes in some wrestler's careers that were filled in because of reading this book. In addition, there are features of various aspects of wrestling. Wrestling topics such as the portrayal of minorities and foreigners, marriage, geopolitics, maiming and killing, are covered very well. They give the smart fan more knowledge of what happens behind the curtain. Overall, this book is not written for the "It's still real to me, dammit!" wrestling fan. That fan does not want to have the magic ruined for him; the wise friend of said fan will not recommend this book to them. On the other hand, a book like this for the smart fan will be helpful as a resource, and as a way to remember those the wrestling community has lost. **BOTTOM LINE:** This is a book for the smart fan that he will not be able to put down.

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