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The World Of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, And Mexican National Identity



Synopsis

The World of Lucha Libre is an insider's account of lucha libre, the popular Mexican form of professional wrestling. Heather Levi spent more than a year immersed in the world of wrestling in Mexico City. Not only did she observe live events and interview wrestlers, referees, officials, promoters, and reporters; she also apprenticed with a retired luchador (wrestler). Drawing on her insider's perspective, she explores lucha libre as a cultural performance, an occupational subculture, and a set of symbols that circulate through Mexican culture and politics. Levi argues that the broad appeal of lucha libre lies in its capacity to stage contradictions at the heart of Mexican national identity: between the rural and the urban, tradition and modernity, ritual and parody, machismo and feminism, politics and spectacle. Levi considers lucha libre in light of scholarship about sport, modernization, and the formation of the Mexican nation-state, and in connection to professional wrestling in the United States. She examines the role of secrecy in wrestling, the relationship between wrestlers and the characters they embody, and the meanings of the masks worn by luchadors. She discusses male wrestlers who perform masculine roles, those who cross-dress and perform feminine roles, and female wrestlers who wrestle each other. Investigating the relationship between lucha libre and the mass media, she highlights the history of the sport's engagement with television: it was televised briefly in the early 1950s, but not again until 1991. Finally, Levi traces the circulation of lucha libre symbols in avant-garde artistic movements and its appropriation in left-wing political discourse. *The World of Lucha Libre* shows how a sport imported from the United States in the 1930s came to be an iconic symbol of Mexican cultural authenticity.

Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Duke University Press; unknown edition (October 24, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0822342324

ISBN-13: 978-0822342328

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.7 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 4 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #139,092 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #46 in Books > Sports & Outdoors > Individual Sports > Wrestling #142 in Books > History > Americas > Mexico

Customer Reviews

In this investigation of lucha libre wrestling, Levi's immersion in the Mexican professional wrestling world and her training as a luchadora (female wrestler) give her an insider's perspective well-placed to analyze the rich symbolic vocabulary the sport has conferred on political and cultural life. The author, an anthropologist, delves into the significance of masks, theatrics and familial training, capably recreating the action in the ring to demonstrate how *técnicos* (technical wrestlers), *rudos* (rule-breakers), referees and spectators interact to create the spectacle. Levi examines how luchadoras and *exóticos* (feminine male wrestlers) support and subvert Mexican gender roles, why masked luchadores moonlight as political activists and how lucha libre has recently re-emerged as pop culture kitsch on this side of the border in the movie *Nacho Libre* and the Cartoon Network's *Mucha Lucha*. While the book is too academic to be an entertaining piece of reportage, it is a good primer. Its sophisticated analysis links lucha libre with Mexican political theater in which the heroes and villains work for the same team, masks alternately hide and reveal the truth, and the outcomes are determined before the matches even begin. (Nov.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

“The World of Lucha Libre describes a strange and fascinating place in which masked men and women possessing incredible strength and agility punch, kick, and pummel one another into submission. For those reasons alone the book is worth reading, but, as Levi demonstrates, it’s the layers of meaning encoded in all that strange violence that make the struggle interesting.” - Jeremy Estes, PopMatters
“Levi’s entertaining *The World of Lucha Libre* assumes the role of engaged anthropologist. Levi takes the novice into the world of lucha libre, veering between explaining the basics (moves, traditions, the difference between *rudos* and *técnicos* - bad and good guys, respectively) and recounting a thorough history of the sport, touching on major fighters, developments and its frequent intersections with Mexican politics and identity. The author knows her lucha libre. . . . This book entertains, informs and breezes by. . . .” - Gustavo Arellano, Los Angeles Times
“Besides having the coolest cover I’ve ever seen on an ethnography, the book is riveting. I never thought I would be so fascinated by wrestling and men in tights, but I guess that’s the magic of a well done ethnography.” - Mary Theberge, Picking Up Sticks blog
“The World of Lucha Libre is an informative and entertaining read based on thorough and definitely innovative research

methodology that contributes substantively to our understanding of contemporary Mexican national identity. There is much that readers at all levels of familiarity with Mexico can take from this text and much that this text can contribute to discussions of cultural performance and national life beyond Mexico.

• Julia Sloan, *A Contracorriente* “[The World of Lucha Libre] remains an excellent study of popular culture, politics, and identity in twentieth-century Mexico, one that will be of interest to scholars and perhaps even some lucha libre fans.

• Ronda L. Brulotte, *Journal of Anthropological Research* “The World of Lucha Libre will doubtless become the reference in English for a cultural phenomenon with a mass following in Mexico and the United States.

Heather Levi provides an insider’s knowledge of the popular practice of lucha libre. For those who know wrestling in passing, *The World of Lucha Libre* will be revelatory. For those specialists in the multiple fields it engages, the book is welcome indeed.

• Randy Martin, author of *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* “Heather Levi’s book reveals her deep understanding of the many ways that Mexicans enact their identities as women and men, as cosmopolitan consumers, and as citizens. Beautifully written and well-grounded in history, *The World of Lucha Libre* will matter to anyone who cares about Mexico, spectator sports, or performance in Latin America.

• Anne Rubenstein, author of *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* “In *The World of Lucha Libre*, Heather Levi offers up a backstage pass to the scene of muscles, sweat, passion, and politics that is lucha libre. It’s a world in which performing a public secret reveals that what is deadly serious is also a sham and that what is frivolous speaks of the grit and business of living. Levi illuminates lucha libre’s fractal relationship to Mexican politics and its playful and serious regulation of gender and mestizaje as a dramatic staging of embodied contradiction that brings the messy world of lived experience into brute contact with its cultural ideals. *The World of Lucha Libre* is important not just for wrestling fans but for any student of popular performance and social practice.

• Nicholas Sammond, editor of *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* “*The World of Lucha Libre* describes a strange and fascinating place in which masked men and women possessing incredible strength and agility punch, kick, and pummel one another into submission. For those reasons alone the book is worth reading, but, as Levi demonstrates, it’s the layers of meaning encoded in all that strange violence that make the struggle interesting.

• (Jeremy Estes *PopMatters*) “*The World of Lucha Libre* is an informative and entertaining read based on thorough and definitely innovative research methodology that contributes substantively to our understanding of contemporary Mexican national identity. There is much that readers at all levels of

familiarity with Mexico can take from this text and much that this text can contribute to discussions of cultural performance and national life beyond Mexico. (Julia Sloan A Contracorriente) "[The World of Lucha Libre] remains an excellent study of popular culture, politics, and identity in twentieth-century Mexico, one that will be of interest to scholars and perhaps even some lucha libre fans. (Ronda L. Brulotte Journal of Anthropological Research) "Besides having the coolest cover I've ever seen on an ethnography, the book is riveting. I never thought I would be so fascinated by wrestling and men in tights, but I guess that's the magic of a well done ethnography. (Mary Theberge Picking Up Sticks blog) "Levi's entertaining The World of Lucha Libre assumes the role of engaged anthropologist. Levi takes the novice into the world of lucha libre, veering between explaining the basics (moves, traditions, the difference between rudos and técnicos bad and good guys, respectively) and recounting a thorough history of the sport, touching on major fighters, developments and its frequent intersections with Mexican politics and identity. The author knows her lucha libre. . . . This book entertains, informs and breezes by. . . . (Gustavo Arellano Los Angeles Times)

For the more cerebral wrestling fans out there, this book is going to be for you. Heather Levi examines the history of lucha libre, how it diverges from the rest of North American wrestling, and how it reflects 20th century Mexican culture and mores. This is a pretty impressive feat in itself. Most scholarly books on pop culture that I've read widely miss the mark, but Levi seems to be enough of a fan to not only accurately describe several lucha libre events she attended in detail but also to have taken basic training in the sport herself. This is a big step away from how lucha libre is often portrayed in English-language media, which all too often focus on the 60s Mexplotation films starring Santo and the Blue Demon rather than the genuine live experience in Mexico City. I also found that Levi's anthropological speculations seem pretty close to how lucha libre can be interpreted by someone from the outside. As you'd expect in a book intended for an academic bookshelf, there are limited photos and all of them are black and white. I mention this only because most fans probably expect that the colorful masks and costumes that are a hallmark of modern-day lucha libre would be represented in color photos. This is not the case here. Is this a perfect, all-inclusive, totally accurate history? No. But the spirit of the book is true. It goes far beyond what typical wrestling paperbacks cover, and is an exceptionally good read. Lest anyone come across video footage of "Lucha Va Voom" and get the false impression that Mexican wrestling is nothing more than a camp fest, this book will guide you in the right direction.

I appreciate that the author actually participated in lucha and attempted to learn about it from the inside. It is clear, the author was very involved and was passionate about the project. You will learn a lot about lucha from reading this and I think its true value is the historical context she puts around it. The place of lucha in Mexico is important, although some don't realize it. I think the discussion of gender roles is illuminating, as is the rudo/technico distinction. My impression is that both of those come together as a kind of therapy for the fan. It is the one place where political correctness no longer matters, and almost anything is acceptable. Lucha to this ends is a true expression of the will, albeit complicated. My only complaint is that I think her political associations and the like are weak at best. If you talk to the average lucha fan they don't see what the author is putting forth. There is no political metaphor going on. Outside of Mexico City (particular groups even), many would not share her view, or care about it. And, arguably that could be due to the uneducated populace. Modern day lucha tends to appeal to the lower socioeconomic group, which is further disconnected from the political power structure. This book shines when the author talks about lucha and its direct cultural associations; it is dulled when the author is an academic and adopts that paradigm of explanation, talking in jargon and losing "traction" as Wittgenstein would say. Overall, worth reading.

Great ethnography, with respect given for interviewed participants as luchadors or real, live people. Fantastic perspective on cultural history and Mexican events that show how important Lucha Libre is to its people. 4-stars, because the glaring, obvious exclusion of colorful masks is just too hard to swallow, especially given the topic.

Great book. Well written & insightful.

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