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Lou Thesz, Kit Bauman. *Hooker: An Authentic Wrestler's Adventures Inside the Bizarre World of Pro Wrestling.* Norfolk, Va.: Lou Thesz, 1995.

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Though not really what one might expect from a book with the word "hooker" in the title, Lou Thesz's autobiography is an unabashed and candid account of the life and exploits of a man who wrestled in more than 6,000 matches, suffered over 200 broken bones, and logged millions of road miles from the mid-1930's to the late 1970's. At the age of 20, Thesz became the youngest man to hold the world title–in an era before the proliferation of world titles–and was so highly regarded that the alliance of promoters who made the "cold blooded business decisions" behind title changes crowned him world champion on six separate occasions. He wrestled his last match at age 74 in 1990.

While Thesz relates a fascinating account of his own experiences, from growing up in an immigrant family in St Louis, to learning his craft, and eventually becoming a champion, his book often transcends the confines of personal narrative and becomes an enthralling chronicle of the development of one of America's best loved, yet least understood, forms of popular entertainment. Unparalleled by anything else in print, this book is especially valuable because it comes from the pen of an authoritative, authentic voice within the wrestling world itself.

The reminiscences of Thesz and countless friends and mentors, such as Ed Strangler Lewis (one of the first true sports celebrities of the twentieth centuries), are carefully woven into the narrative to give this book a deep, historical perspective on the emergence of the genre from the barnstorming and carnival scene onto center stage in American popular entertainment. The author's discussion of the transformation of professional wrestling from a competitive sport into a performed spectacle will definitely be consulted by all future students of wrestling's place in popular culture. Thesz also masterfully describes the unexpected and revolutionary effect that television had on the genre in the fifties. Readers will relish the frank discussion of the author's dealings with the superstars, colorful characters, and unscrupulous thieves (promoters) of his world, and delightfully detour with Thesz behind the facade into a world the public was never allowed to see. Here double-crosses, mafia-like backroom deals, starvation wages, drinking, womanizing, grueling road schedules, and legitimate bone-crushing were common.

Thesz, who came into the business when competitive matches were still prevalent (if only in front of insiders), cannot help but express some negative feelings on the current state of the sport he knew and loved as a young man. Sometimes wistful, sometimes stinging in his evaluations, Thesz feels he has earned the right to speak out because he tried to preserve the credibility of wrestling at a time when sport was succumbing to showmanship. He states: "My 'gimmick' was wrestling, and I wasn't about to abandon it for the sake of making those characters look good." As one of the last hookers, an elite group of true competitors who mastered the techniques of hooking (the secret knowledge of how to hurt or cripple someone in the ring) the author's occasional disdain for mere performers forms a recurring leitmotif for the transformation of the sport in this century.

This book will make a valuable addition to library collections on twentieth century popular culture. It has already become a classic among the denizens of the cyberworld, contributing in part to the trend towards a new type of wrestling consumer: the "smart" fan who thrives on tearing down the boundaries between spectacle and reality. While Kit Bauman has done an admirable job in helping the author to create an account that is engaging and readable, the book suffers from numerous editorial glitches. If the book is reissued by a professional publishing house–and it should be–more stringent copy editing and the inclusion of photographs will enhance its appreciation. Undoubtedly, scholars and wrestling fans alike will never be able to view professional wrestling the same way after reading this book.

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