

## FOREWORD

by Bert Randolph Sugar

I met Irvin Muchnick, the author of this book, on the 44th floor of the World Trade Center back in 1985 at a hearing conducted by a state senator named Abraham Bernstein to investigate whether professional wrestling should be banned in New York State. I was hustling a book that had just been published about the latest “wrestling renaissance” — one of dozens of books I’ve had the pleasure of penning on all manner of American sport and folly. Irv, for his part, was hustling a book that had yet to be published. Bill Geist (now a correspondent for *CBS Sunday Morning*) was writing a comedy column about the hearing for *The New York Times*.

Irv got to Geist first with a quote to the effect that Senator Bernstein was behaving like the Grinch Who Stole Christmas. Never known to suffer from a loss of words, I sucked my thumb and told Geist: “I know how it’s going to end when I see *Hamlet*, too, but I still go to the theater to watch Olivier.”

Here we are two-plus decades later, and the World Trade Center is no more, but I’m delighted to be calling attention to Irv Muchnick’s powerful pieces on grossly undercovered aspects of pro wrestling behind the scenes. This is an industry with as much to say about our collective consciousness as ballet, opera, and athletics combined — and with *Wrestling Babylon* it has met its match. A few hundred years from now some archeologist is going

to dig up a copy, alongside a box of men's neckties, and wonder which aspect of our culture was stranger.

Irv is a nephew of another modest person, but also a formidable figure in wrestling history: long-time St. Louis promoter and National Wrestling Alliance president Sam Muchnick. And though Irv would never put it quite this way himself, let me say that he is truly a writer ahead of his times. In 1991 he talked *Spy* magazine into letting him write a thousand words about the backstage war in bodybuilding, where wrestling honcho Vince McMahon was trying to horn in on the turf of Joe Weider. A few months later the editors wound up giving Irv an extra 3,000 words and putting the story on the cover. This was seven years before McMahon and Martha Stewart issued public stock offerings on Wall Street in the same week. That *Spy* magazine would soon go the way of Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling — in other words, into oblivion — is beside the point.

Proving his versatility, Irv has put more than one magazine out of business. In between exposing the Von Erich wrestling family for *Penthouse* (a story selected for the book *Best Magazine Articles: 1988*) and retailing naughty outside-the-ring anecdotes for a short-lived online publication of New York's Museum of Sex, he profiled a maverick college professor for *Lingua Franca*, which at the time was the *Ring* magazine of academia. His writings reveal the tension between his impressive talent and his slumming instincts. He would be the first to tell you that he has never quite gotten a toehold in the mainstream publishing world, but maybe he likes it that way. His own writer and his own man, he sprinkles his findings at intervals, like Smokey the Bear on fire prevention. (That one is from Charles Einstein, the baseball anthologist; along with Irv and Milton Berle, I know a good line when I steal it.)

Call Muchnick vulgar if you must, but it's a hard charge to make stick because his prose is too elegant. Besides, he revels in the characterization, every bit as much as I enjoy being pegged "Runyonesque." (You could look it up in Wikipedia.) Quoting

Bill Veeck — whom he wrote about and befriended late in Veeck’s life — Irv points out that the Latin root of “vulgar” is *vulgaris*, which means “of the people.” In his heart of hearts Irv will always be a midwestern populist who spent his adult life exiled on two coasts. “Part of me would dearly love to return to the United States of America,” he says, “but I know it will never happen.”

Still, Irv is a man on a mission. For a time he served as assistant director of the National Writers Union and started a rights-clearance agency that modeled for authors in new technologies what ASCAP has done for creators in the music business. He later became a consultant, in which capacity he more or less invented class-action copyright litigation on behalf of writers. When the lawyers and plaintiffs of one of his stepchildren suits went into the tank for publishers, Irv spearheaded objections to the settlement and took the case up to appellate courts. Somehow along the way he and his long-suffering wife have found time to raise four children in the People’s Republic of Berkeley, California, the Madison Square Garden of political theater. According to Irv, Yeats said we all have to choose between perfection of the art and of the life.

And now ECW PRESS has chosen the perfect vehicle — and done all of us a service — by collecting Muchnick’s writings on wrestling. The result is a wacky marriage of author and subject, form and function, lowbrow and no-brow. In a world of timid, formulaic scrivenings on sports and entertainment and sports entertainment, *Wrestling Babylon* is a sock on the jaw.