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Review of Bret Hart's *Hitman: My Real Life in the Cartoon World of Wrestling*

By Irvin Muchnick

Red Smith wrote that baseball was a dull game only to dull minds. In his sprawling autobiography, Bret Hart sets out to prove that the genre “pro wrestling literature” is oxymoronic only to oxymorons.

And Hart succeeds. Despite its intimidating length, *Hitman: My Real Life in the Cartoon World of Wrestling* (a runaway bestseller in Canada, not yet available in the U.S.) has a surprisingly high muscle-to-fat ratio. With the superb *Have a Nice Day!*, published in 1999, Mick Foley pioneered the picaresque wrestler's memoir. But Hart, who doesn't do goofy, is hunting bigger game.

Inevitably, one turns to earthy details of mundane score-settling – both conscious and unconscious, both within the peculiar industry that defined him and within the even more peculiar Calgary-based clan that, for a certain population of fans, helped define the industry.

Before getting to all that, though, it's important to remark upon the sheer beauty of the prose in *Hitman*'s best parts. Like his favorite writer, Mark Helprin, Hart occupies the border between phantasmagoria and realism. My favorite passages cover his foreign travels, during which he either reflects on the social conditions he observes there (Manila) or delights in lush landscape (Capetown). Domestically, you can all but smell the Alberta and Saskatchewan prairies; faithful depictions of hardscrabble life on the tundra, inside and outside the ring, make for something close to the Great Western Canadian Novel. (To readers inspired to learn more about the iconic promotion of Bret's father Stu Hart, I highly recommend Heath McCoy's *Pain and Passion: The History of Stampede Wrestling*.) This is one wrestler whose consciousness transcends the incest and addiction of his profession.

Less persuasive – and at times cringe-inducing – are Hart's assertions that he was the second coming of John, Paul, George, and Ringo in places like Hamburg, Germany, and Tel Aviv, Israel. The Hitman, it seems, is no more capable than the next guy of resisting the temptation to justify and aggrandize. Hart treats wrestling's backstage machinations, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of fellow performers, with admirable nuance. Yet whenever anyone, high, medium, or low on the totem pole, gushes about Bret's being the greatest worker of all time, the recipient of the praise dutifully forwards it to the reader without stopping to filter for validity or motivation.

Running through *Hitman* like a green thread is the author's competition with Ric Flair for a meaningful legacy in wrestling history. "Flair is a real mark for you!" go-between Kevin Sullivan reports to Hart, arranging his first conversation with the multi-crowned champion of the National Wrestling Alliance. (Hart wrestled in the main for Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation – now World Wrestling Entertainment – though at different times he and Flair would find themselves on the same rosters at both WWF and the NWA's successor, Ted Turner's now-defunct World Championship Wrestling.) For his part, Hart tells us that because of his busy schedule, he had "never" seen the legendary Flair work. Never? One great thing about a well-done autobiography is that even where it's less than candid, it's revealing.

In the same vein, your Grinch-reviewer has the unpopular task of reminding us of the difference between a media celebrity and a person of profound accomplishment. It's true that Hart was a celebrated face for many wrestling fans and a rallying figure for Canadian nationalists – a testament both to his survival and to integrity of a sort. But the way he gamed the system, in service of a "dignified" persona, merely bends reality; it isn't reality itself. As a movie buff who dropped plans to attend film school in order to pursue the wrestling life, Hart should realize as well as anyone that John Wayne – who parked himself in Hollywood during the fight against fascism – was an actor, not an actual war hero, for Pete's sake. Entertainers, those ultimate attention junkies, tend to over-appraise their connections with their audience.

Regarding Stu Hart, I understand the pull to honor one's parents. But there are also such things as common sense and judgment. Though this view apparently puts me in the minority, I find about as charming as a suitcase bomb the anecdotes – now clichés of Canadian sports mythology – of the sadistic pleasure this "shooter" took in "stretching" and torturing wannabes, or dispensing vigilante justice, in his basement gym, known as "The Dungeon." However you slice it (or should I say "blade it"?), Stu was a world-class sicko. He also pulled off the not-so-manly feat of fathering 12 children with the love of his life, Helen – a diminutive New Yorker he affectionately called "Tiger Belle" – while granting emotional access to none of them.

The final fuse was lit by the 1999 death of the family's youngest son, Owen, during an ill-advised stunt gone wrong at a WWE pay-per-view show. Still, one can't help thinking the Harts were destined to devolve into scenes of violent infighting, which at times involved Bret himself and which even he labels, unflinchingly, as straight out of Jerry Springer. Older brother Smith Hart was a ne're-do-well who left a trail of unsupported women and children. Another older brother, Bruce, probably needed success in wrestling more desperately than Bret, but it was a clear case of reach exceeding grasp. All four Hart sisters married Stampede talent – including Ellie (Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart) and Diana (Davey Boy "The British Bulldog" Smith); by the time Davey Boy's heart exploded from steroid abuse in 2002, he had left Diana and taken up with Bruce's wife Andrea. In sum, the Harts were a kind of a non-denominational, transnational echo of the Von Erich wrestlers of Texas (about whom I've written extensively): proof that, as Tolstoy said, all

unhappy families are unhappy in different ways. Also that you can't tell the players apart without a scorecard.

Though comparatively in control and blessed with a saving intelligence, Bret internalized his particular demons through horrible relations with women. His openness about his chronically flawed marriage to his first wife, Julie, and his philandering on the road are key selling points of the book. A bit too glibly, Hart frames womanizing as a conscious choice from a menu of addictions without which he simply couldn't have survived the mental stress of wrestling tours. In his formulation, a compulsion to get one's rocks off, by any available means, was a lot less destructive than rock cocaine, from which he abstained.

But while he doesn't glorify his bad behavior, neither does he doesn't have much of a perspective on it. Hart's sexual escapades are interchangeable: wife, hooker, groupie, random extended affair. By the end of the book, mercifully, he summons a gentleman's discretion in the discussion of his brief second marriage, to a beautiful Italian woman sketched so flimsily that you could be excused for concluding that he confused a superfan with a life partner.

The thriller that is the movie script of the Hitman's career had too many twists for a single, pat climax. However, he knows, and understandably remains obsessed over, the one date certain to live in wrestling infamy: November 9, 1997, at Molson Centre in Montreal. That was the night Vince McMahon and his shameless henchmen – wrestling rival Shawn Michaels, referee Earl Hebner, and an army of agents – conspired to double-cross Hart out of the WWF championship just as Hart was about to finish his WWF run and start up with WCW. Hart was old-school enough not to have a problem with “doing the job” on his way out of a promotion, but he had balked at losing before loyal fans in his native Canada, and he had worked out a deal for an ambiguous disqualification finish in Montreal and a clean loss to Michaels or someone else at a later point.

McMahon's secret renegeing on that understanding, as well as the betrayals flowing therefrom, are established beyond a reasonable doubt through extensive sources, most notably the award-winning documentary *Hitman Hart: Wrestling With Shadows*. In Hart's account of the laborious and nearly year-long Kabuki dance by which Vince somehow persuaded Bret to dissolve his lucrative lifetime contract with WWF, I would make just a few adjustments for ego and vanity.

First, Hart indeed deserves credit for bringing a faster-paced smaller-man Stampede influence to WWF at a moment when McMahon was reeling from his indictment and near-conviction on steroid-trafficking charges. The success of the Hitman educated the WWF brass and fan base – who favored big, slow, cartoonish muscle men – that there were other ways to skin a cat, and that one of those ways was to hew to the fundamentals.

Second, alas, Hart was a transitional champion during a down time for WWF; his reign did not translate into the box office gold of Hulk Hogan before, or Stone Cold Steve Austin and The Rock after. In the end, I think, McMahon was shoving Hart out the door, as a ruthless boss is wont to do when an asset approaches the end of its shelf life. The methods of the coup de grace don't speak well for McMahon's character, but then again wrestling promoters aren't known to lose sleep over their reputations. Advertently or otherwise, the notoriety of the "Montreal screwjob" set up the character of the evil "Mr. McMahon" and catapulted WWF/WWE to an era of even higher profits and pop-cult clout.

Hart and Michaels played out their fictional feud with genuine behind-the-scenes heat. In one "shoot" interview, Michaels taunted Hart with the line, "You've been having a lot of 'Sunny' days lately" – an unmistakable implication that he was having an affair with WWF diva Tammy "Sunny" Sytch. (In the book, Hart doesn't dignify the charge; but, ironically, it's well known that the contemptible Michaels himself regularly bopped Sunny behind the back of her boyfriend, the late wrestler Chris Candido.)

As pro wrestling morphs from fake sport to a weird new form of attitude-fueled reality TV, *Hitman* documents the phenomenon of fans booing babyfaces ... cheering heels ... pretending to cheer heels pretending to be babyfaces pretending to be heels ... it all gets rather mind-numbing for non-hardcores. There's no denying, however, that from Montreal forward, the narrative surges. Only a jerk could be unmoved by the stories of Bret's career-ending concussion, which also sent him into a dark psychological hole; of how litigation with WWE over Owen's wrongful death sent the family imploding into greedy, self-serving camps; and finally of the author's courageous recovery from a stroke at age 44.

In June 2007 Hart's close friend and one-time Stampede Wrestling stablemate, Chris Benoit, murdered his wife and son and killed himself – a palling penumbra over all things wrestling, including *Hitman*. In a last-minute edit, Hart lists Benoit, *inter alia*, in the reaper's grim toll of colleagues and friends, but does not mark that special event in a special way. (The August death by overdose of Brian "Crush" Adams, who had talked with Hart about settling together in retirement in Adams' native Hawaii, missed the book's deadline altogether.)

Most likely, Hart felt he lacked anything compelling to add to the existing stockpile of instant commentary on the Benoit tragedy. Unfortunately what Hart did choose to say in summing up a grand book – the importance of living life to the fullest, a rambling paean to his demented dad, a riposte to a recent jab by Hulk Hogan, and a couple of parting shots at McMahon and Michaels – adds up to an unsatisfying peroration.

On June 29, I found myself on a panel with Hart on an edition of CNN Headline's *Nancy Grace Show*. (A clip is viewable on the front page of my website, <http://wrestlingbabylon.com>.) I think his post-Benoit line, that wrestlers need a union, is

perfunctory. Retired wrestlers can make themselves look good with these rhetorical gestures, but the fact of the matter is that organizing requires the activism of the people still working, and especially the support of those still at the top of the game. Let's face it: As hard as it is to pull together independent contractors for the common good, and as narcissistic and narrow-minded as almost all wrestlers are, a union will probably never happen.

For my money, the issue at hand is wrestling's drug culture, which is responsible for hundreds of deaths over the last generation, and which at this point requires outside regulation – a subject currently under investigation by two committees of the House of Representatives. On that one, so far, Bret Hart has failed to step up to the plate. On *Nancy Grace* – not long before a toxicology report would confirm that the perpetrator, with the collusion of the WWE “wellness policy,” had been filled with ten times the normal level of testosterone – he was still part of the chorus denying that steroids would prove to have anything to do with the demise of Chris, Nancy, and Daniel Benoit.

Moving forward, here's hoping that the Hitman uses his bestseller platform to stop “protecting the business” and to speak out for meaningful change of the high-tech carnival that made his name.