

Book Reviews

Moore, Pamela L., ed., *Building Bodies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

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Bringing together some of the foremost authors in the academic study of bodybuilding, Pamela Moore's *Building Bodies* marks the first collection, from a scholarly press, to deal specifically with bodybuilding. With contributions from: Anne Bolin, Susan Bordo, Leslee Fisher, Jonathan Goldberg, Lynda Goldstein, Leslie Heywood, Christine Anne Holmlund, Pamela Moore, Novid Parisi and Laurie Schulze, *Building Bodies* focuses on conceptualizations of the "body built." In *Building Bodies*, the authors delve into issues of gender, race, homoeroticism, and media interpretations (to name a few) surrounding the sport of bodybuilding. Some of the authors also address representations of the muscular body outside of the realm of athletic endeavor.

Representing various academic disciplines—philosophy, gender studies, sociology, media studies, and literary criticism—*Building Bodies* provides an eye-opening, interdisciplinary view of the muscular body as more than a mere mass of flesh and sinew. The "built body" is examined as a political and cultural symbol.

Of Moore's selections, perhaps the most illuminating is Susan Bordo's, "Reading the Male Body." First published in 1993, this essay is an illuminating view of the masculine body through lenses of gender, race, sexuality, and cultural iconography. Bordo's text is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of a number of well-chosen illustrations of common conceptualizations of muscular masculinity in American popular culture. From Charles Atlas to a Bally's Health Club advertisement, Bordo interweaves her complex tale of embattled gender configurations through both picture and prose. In doing so, she provides the most fascinating of all the book's selections.

While *Building Bodies* offers a fine "intellectual" portrait of "bodies built," the text is distinctly lacking in what I can only term the "gym atmosphere of bodybuilding." Despite articles which have a very intimate understanding of bodybuilding culture and weight-training in general (most notably Anne Bolin's and Laurie Schulze's

pieces), many articles fall short of engaging the weightlifting or bodybuilding fan.

A prime example of this is the treatment of the venerable bodybuilding movie *Pumping Iron*. While a number of articles in the text point out that the authors have scrutinized *Pumping Iron*, none impart the “flavor” of the film. The authors often seem content to deal in abstractions and make tenuous theoretical leaps, leaving the reader to wonder if the film the scholars speak of is the same Schwarzenegger movie the reader may have seen ten times. Sadly, this is not an isolated incident, but is endemic to the entire text. Those unacquainted with bodybuilding who read this work may come away with a distorted view of bodybuilding (which among the uninitiated is often skewed to begin with).

Building Bodies, while utilizing well-written and intellectually stimulating pieces, neglects to offer a true depiction of the culture surrounding the “body built.” Even so, for those who would wade through the jargon and (sometimes) over-analysis, Pamela Moore’s text offers eye-opening insights and a great impetus for scholarly study and self-analysis as a “lifter.”

The aspect of *Building Bodies* that offers the most fascinating insights to the non-academic devotee of the “strength game” may be the interpretations of the bodybuilding and weightlifting subcultures from a scholarly perspective. While some of the academics in the text profess to be, and write as if they are, well acquainted with weight training, most articles read as if they are written by “outsiders,” and thus offer a fresh perspective.

All told, the text is a valiant effort. It falls short of expectations, but nonetheless offers intriguing selections to anyone seriously interested in the academic study of “building bodies.”