

Book Review - Big Happiness

The life and death of a modern day Hawaiian warrior

Author: Mark Panek

by Chris Gould

Mark Panek's second book is certainly an epic: a bold attempt to explain a Hawaiian sumo wrestler's career in the complex context of adverse domestic circumstances and addiction to drugs. It is a novel approach to covering Japan's national sport, and – for the most part – makes the reader want to keep turning pages.

Panek's knowledge of Hawaiian history is clearly second-to-none and his quotation of Hawaiian speech "as it comes" also adds fantastic gloss to the story, with every page evoking the image of powerful straight talking underneath a glowing sun, while surrounded by exotic fruits. The main character, Percy Kipapa, is brought to life superbly by the very detailed descriptions of his upbringing and family members. There is also a nice courtroom drama-style section which is just as gripping as any American TV-variant. As far as local research goes – especially in the field of the drugs trade – it is everything that you would expect from a university academic and more.

In addition to appealing to Hawaii lovers, the book will certainly appeal to any foreigner living in Japan. Percy's interview accounts

of reaching juryo under the ring name of Daiki are inspiring, accurately capturing the ups and downs of any gaijin trying to make a name for themselves over here. Percy's assertion that "Japan made me hate and lie" is, while not universally true, very understandable to anybody who deals with Japanese culture on a daily basis. The part about Percy "taking the fall" for other people – especially in sumo – will also leave many foreigners knowingly nodding their heads. In addition, Percy's comments on the fiancée who ditched him the moment he gave up sumo – "bitch!" – are perhaps the most culturally insightful of the lot.

Whether sumo fans will fall for this book, though, is not so clear. Interesting information about heya life is provided, but perhaps not as much as we'd like. Percy's ascent to juryo seems a little glossed over, leaving us wanting much more information about key matches that turned it for him or his emotions at crucial points along the way. There is another problem which stems from Panek's sheer awe of meeting the wrestlers, which – at times – threatens to deflect focus onto the author rather than the interviewee. If the aim is to write an

authoritative text on sumo, it cannot overly rely on emotions one feels as a rookie visiting a stable.

The main problem, essentially, is this. When Panek writes about Hawaii, the geography, the culture and the history, he is authoritative – because he knows his sources are watertight. However, whenever the subject of sumo life in Japan comes up – despite having visited sumo stables – he speculates. The words "he could have thought this," or "he may have thought that" fill up a little too much page space, suggesting that he has far less material on sumo than he does on Hawaii. Until the speculation is cut down, the text cannot be awarded full marks for sumo content.

Panek has worked his fingers to the bone to produce some fine research into Hawaiian culture, and this book must rank as one of the most fun academic texts ever. It's no mean feat to make a history and cultural book so accessible and readable, all the time drawing you into the character of Percy. Were the speculation replaced by sumo events which he has actually seen – and it seems he has seen plenty – then it would be even more commendable.