



Gorgeous George: The Outrageous Bad-Boy Wrestler Who Created American Pop Culture

By John Capouya

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This is the first-ever biography of the legendary wrestler Gorgeous George, filled with incredible never-before-told stories. George directly influenced the likes of Muhammad Ali, who took his bragging and boasting from George; James Brown, who began to wear sequined capes onstage after seeing George on TV; John Waters, whose films featured the outrageous drag queen Divine as an homage to George; and too many wrestlers to count. Amid these pop culture discoveries are firsthand accounts of the pro wrestling game from the 1930s to the 1960s.

The ideal American male used to be stoic, quiet, and dignified. But for a young couple struggling to make ends meet, in the desperation born of the lingering Depression and wartime rationing, an idea was hatched that changed the face of American popular culture, an idea so bold, so over-the-top and absurd, that it was *perfect*. That idea transformed journeyman wrestler George Wagner from a dark-haired, clean-cut good guy to a peroxide-blond braggart who blatantly cheated every chance he got. Crowds were stunned—they had never seen anything like *this* before—and they came from miles around to witness it for themselves.

Suddenly George—guided by Betty, his pistol of a wife—was a draw. With his golden tresses grown long and styled in a marcel, George went from handsome to . . . well . . . *gorgeous* overnight, the small, dank wrestling venues giving way to major arenas. As if the hair wasn't enough, his robes—unmanly things of silk, lace, and chiffon in pale pinks, sunny yellows, and rich mauves—were but a prelude to the act: the regal entrance, the tailcoat-clad valet spraying the mat with perfume, the haughty looks and sneers for the "peasants" who paid to watch this outrageously prissy hulk prance around the ring. How they loved to see his glorious mane mussed up by his manly opponents. And how they loved that alluringly alliterative name . . . Gorgeous George . . . the self-proclaimed Toast of the Coast, the Sensation of the Nation!

All this was timed to the arrival of that new invention everyone was talking about—television. In its early days, professional wrestling and its larger-than-life characters dominated prime-time broadcasts—none more so than Gorgeous George, who sold as many sets as Uncle Miltie.

Fans came in droves—to boo him, to stick him with hatpins, to ogle his gowns, and to rejoice in his comeuppance. He was the man they loved to hate, and his provocative, gender-bending act took him to the top of the entertainment world. America would never be the same again.

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Capouya Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Capouya (*Real Men Do Yoga*) affectionately chronicles the life of the infamous Gorgeous George Wagoner. Born in 1915, Wagoner learns the ropes as a grappling carny at Sylvan Beach Amusement Park near Houston. During a stint on the grunt-and-groan circuit in Oregon, the wrestler meets his future wife Betty Hanson, whose handiness with textiles and hair dye transforms the likable babyface into a gender-bending aristocrat of the ring, a heel whom crowds love to hate. His antics off the mat (Wagoner holds all his press conferences in local beauty shops where he has his tresses marcelled before matches) and on (George takes 10 minutes to fold and refold his robe between perfumings) whips jeering crowds into frenzies. The histrionic, inexpensively staged sport proved, between 1948 and 1955, to be a perfect fit for the new medium of television. Although some of his psychoanalysis feels gratuitous, Capouya vividly portrays the ins and outs of wrestling and his own struggle to maintain the Gorgeousness of a public life in his private life as well. (*Sept.*)

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From [Booklist](#)

In the post-Hulk Hogan/Andre the Giant world, pro rasslers from the days of grainy black-and-white TV may seem a boring lot. Not the redoubtable Gorgeous George (né George Wagner), with his elaborate, platinum blond-dyed coiffure (held in place by gold-plated “Georgie pins”); pompous manner; and effete ways. Needless to say, his gaudy persona inflamed the sexually paranoid pro-wrestling audience of the 1940s and ’50s, making George a huge (for the day) media star. Later bad-guy wrestlers like Brutus Beefcake owe much to George’s groundbreaking exploration of over-the-top flamboyance in the “squared circle.” Capouya tells George’s story in well-researched detail, showing how the creation of the “Gorgeous” persona was carefully planned and cultivated by George and wife Betty and stood in stark contrast to the personality of George Wagner. In many ways, Gorgeous George superficially resembled Liberace, but that resemblance ended immediately beneath the image. As a show-biz bio and, for those who subscribe to a loose definition of sport, a sports bio, too, this is great stuff, entertaining and well referenced. --Mike Tribby

Review

“Finally, the tawdry but glamorous details behind the legend of one of my first childhood heroes. Gorgeous George is such a good read I felt like bleaching my hair afterwards.” (John Waters)

“Capouya’s biography vividly re-creates Gorgeous George’s antics and the world in which he had more shock value than a numerically named wideout could hope for today.” (Sports Illustrated)

“Compelling. . . . The tension between George’s excess and his era’s reserve is one of many in his story, and those are what make Capouya’s cultural anthropology so interesting.” (Newsweek)

“Terrifically, tantalizingly weird. . . . GORGEOUS GEORGE does leave the words of one long-ago sports reporter ringing in your ears: ‘Oh, my, what a strut. If only this man had been born in the barnyard. What a rooster he would have made.’” (New York Times)

“...[Capouya] delivers a solid, entertaining book about a long-forgotten character and a peculiar slice of American history.” (Entertainment Weekly)

“Capouya vividly portrays the ins and outs of wrestling and [Wagner’s] own struggle to maintain the ‘Gorgeousness’ of a public life in his private life as well.” (Publishers Weekly)

“In GORGEOUS GEORGE, Capouya combines extensive research and interviews with a colorful writing style and presents Gorgeous George as a cultural pioneer...Capouya’s words are as fast-paced as the action in the ring and connect with the reader as solidly as a dropkick to George’s kisser.” (Tampa Tribune)

“Compulsively entertaining...” (Penthouse)

“You see the title of John Capouya’s biography of Gorgeous George - which claims the flamboyant wrestler “created pop culture” - and you are struck by its audacity. A wrestler responsible for something that important? Impossible. But as you go through the pages, you can’t help but agree.” (New York Post)

“Gorgeous George invented a style of showmanship that was imitated by entertainers and athletes. With this biography, John Capouya has done an excellent job in introducing the most inventive of sport’s anti-heroes to a new generation of readers.” (Ishmael Reed (novelist, poet, and cultural critic))

NO DOUBT OF IT: GEE GEE’S THE BIGGEST THING IN TV (Washington Post, 1949)

“I don’t know if I was made for television, or television was made for me.” (Gorgeous George)

“Liberace stole my entire act, including the candelabra!” (Gorgeous George)

“One can explain the American condition as an eternal, televised battle between the Babyface and the Heel. That said, there’s never been a heel like Gorgeous George. John Capouya has done a fine job here, excavating a forgotten life and explaining why it mattered.” (Mark Kriegel, author of Pistol: The Life of Pete Maravich; National Columnist for FOXSports.com)

“Like the man himself, this inside look at a legendary performer challenges the reader to think beyond the wrestling ring. We give it four suplexes out of five.” (Pro Wrestling Illustrated)

“Former Newsweek editor John Capouya reveals the gory underworld of pre-WWE wrestling and shows how the Gorgeous One inspired James Brown, who loved George’s robes, and Muhammad Ali, whose “I am the prettiest” echoed the wrestler’s own vainglorious boasts.” (Los Angeles Magazine)

“As a show-biz bio and, for those who subscribe to a loose definition of sport, a sports bio, too, this is great stuff, entertaining and well referenced.” (Booklist)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jere Araujo:

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