

SFM Book Review

Sumo: A Thinking Fan's Guide to Japan's National Sport

Author: David Benjamin

by Chris Gould

Spring 2010 saw the release of David Benjamin's *Sumo*, billed as an updated version of the author's original effort, *The Joy of Sumo*, released some 20 years ago. At 220 pages, it is a short, light read which makes for an entertaining companion on the commuter train.

Benjamin is clearly blessed with an outstanding vocabulary and storytelling ability which carries the reader effortlessly from page to page. Like or loathe the contents, once you pick this book up, you will find it difficult to put down.

The publisher's contention that the some parts "will have you laughing out loud" is very true – especially the Akinoshima interview and the line pertaining to "fat men dancing." And there are certain parts of the book that, as the title rightly suggests, will stimulate: for example, the passage about favours that oyakata and shimpan may or may not owe each other.

However, while the book scores highly in the humour department, it does not present a very detailed picture of modern day sumo. The original book was published just before the most seismic personnel changes in sumo history (when foreigners started winning yusho regularly and becoming yokozuna), meaning that a proper re-write would require unusually huge amounts of updating. It is thus surprising to find that this book continues to rely heavily on Benjamin's previous text, devoting pages of analysis to sumo events that happened 20 years ago while making mere cursory glances towards the present. The legendary 2001 contest between Takanohana and Musashimaru for example, voted by SFM members as "Match of the Decade," is not even mentioned.

An overriding impression is that the book is more about comedy than sumo. The author's attitude

towards sumo wrestlers is often highly disparaging, with comedy often getting in the way of a genuinely objective analysis. The general portrayal of sumo wrestlers as "unfit" and "out of condition" is a little unjust, with no mention given to the rigours of sumo training. Meanwhile, the author's speculations, although sometimes entertaining, often give the impression of filling pages due to a dearth of real facts about 21st century sumo.

The book is certainly worth a read to make the commute go faster, but leaves the reader regretting that Benjamin did not devote his wit to the stories that have shaped sumo recently. Had he done so, and provided a more balanced assessment of sumo wrestlers' strengths and physical conditioning, *Sumo* would be a much more accurate and complete guide than it currently is.