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# Thrown



## Synopsis

In this darkly funny work of literary nonfiction, a bookish young woman insinuates herself into the lives of two cage fighters—one a young prodigy, the other an aging journeyman. Acclaimed essayist Kerry Howley follows these men for three years through the bloody world of mixed martial arts as they starve themselves, break bones, fail their families and form new ones in the quest to rise from remote Midwestern fairgrounds to packed Vegas arenas. With penetrating intelligence and wry humor, Howley exposes the profundities and absurdities of this American subculture. Kerry Howley's work has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *New York Times Magazine*, the *Atlantic*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Slate*, and frequently in *Bookforum*. She holds an MFA from the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A New York Times Book Review, NPR, Slate, and Time Magazine best book of the year “It probably started with Homer. Writers ever since have been probing athletes for signifiers, for metaphor amped by grit under pressure. Now the erudite essayist Kerry Howley makes her full-length debut in this sweaty but honorable tradition. She endows it with sly humor, trenchant vision and a curious twist on our concepts of genre. . . . Howley depicts it all with piercing skill. . . . Thrown is compulsively readable, informative, hilarious. . . . It is also a ferocious dissection of the essence of the spectator. “The most bizarre and fascinating book I’ve read this year. . . . The precision of Howley’s

prose reminds me of Joan Didion or David Foster Wallace: she's so involved with the fight, it's as if she were trying to eat it with words. Howley writes like someone who's been flayed, all nerve endings exposed, no barriers between her and the world around her.

• Lev Grossman, Time magazine "This sui generis debut threatens to remap the entire genre of nonfiction. . . . Howley's brilliant prose is as dexterous and doughty as the fighters she trails, torquing into philosophy, parody, and sweat-soaked poetry."

• Publishers Weekly, starred boxed review "Three years in the lives of two Midwestern cage fighters as seen through the eyes of a neurotic academic. A poetic portrait of a bloody American subculture, and a knockout of a nonfiction debut."

• O, The Oprah Magazine "Kerry Howley embarks on a quest for ecstasy delivered in an unexpected forum: MMA fights. This transfixing nonfiction narrative combines bloody play-by-play with philosophical inquiry, delivering serious punches. Welcome to the Octagon."

• Playboy "In her highly original memoir, *Thrown*, Howley follows two local fighters at very different points in their careers, from their training gyms in Iowa to big events in New Orleans, Las Vegas and New Jersey. Hilarious, sometimes tragic, and philosophical, Howley's first book is remarkably innovative and self-assured. It's a sly, unexpected and endlessly promising debut."

• NPR.org "Howley manages to conjure the moments that make fights so thrilling. And it is striking that she manages to do so in a book that is also a very funny satire of the ways in which elites including, famously, Norman Mailer often make a fetish of violence and the people who commit it. . . . as dark and funny as anything I have read this year."

• Washington Post "A truly gripping account of the insular world of MMA—the history, the personalities, the injuries, the money, the white-hot fighters and the foundering ones. . . . Howley stepped into the cage and stepped out of it with something new and stunning."

• Salon "Engrossing . . . . *Thrown* is a sympathetic book about people who might otherwise be written off as dirtbags. . . . an intimate, artful look at violence on the smallest scale."

• Chicago Tribune "In *Thrown*, a fresh, funny, and highly cerebral treatise on the philosophical merits of cage fighting, she challenges not only the stigma surrounding the sport but the conventions of literary nonfiction itself."

• Boston Globe "An exciting brand of nonfiction depicting the darker side of the American dream. . . . Kerry Howley's *M>*, which spends three years inside the trenchant subculture of mixed martial arts cage fighting, following two men from desolate Des Moines fairgrounds to Vegas arenas and in worlds beyond as they battle to win and as they battle the unraveling of their separate lives, is both part of that tradition and an intimate, front-row look at two stories of hope, glory, and

violence. "Thrown is the only MMA book anyone ever needs to write. . . . This is easily the best inside-fights book ever written. Readers follow the lives of two mixed martial arts fighters—men who fight in cage matches, who starve themselves, bleed, suffer and inflict as much pain as possible on their opponents. And along the way, we consider matters such as masculinity, brutality and fame. It's a mesmerizing read." Houston Chronicle "Thrown is a triangle choke, a leglock, a one-two-three sequence of humor, passion, and philosophy. It's a knockout debut. A round one win." Oxford American "I don't care about cage fighting, ultimate fighting, MMA; Kerry Howley made me care. . . . The book is about fighting, yes, about an extreme sport and some of the men involved, who maybe aren't, after all, Odysseus or Hector, but possessing of a more earthbound sort of humanity and heroism. It's about the the strong pull of home, the powerful binds of blood, and the press, everpresent, of time. In what we seek, Howley shows us what we fear. The Millions "The fight book of our generation has landed. . . . Thrown is a fantastic debut, and an immediate addition to the great canon of fight-lit, down from Jack London to O. Henry to Oates. If you can navigate this breakthrough in nonfiction, you may feel a bit of ecstasy, too. Howley's contemporaries should feel beat up after reading it; I did. The Week "Thrown is Kerry Howley's masterful debut. A work of rigorous nonfiction that's sure to be branded experimental, but that's as involving and page-turning as any book I've read in a while." Gary Shteyngart "Who can explain what draws a young brilliant writer and a woman no less to be mesmerized by the sight of a young man being pummeled in the ring? But out of this passion—maybe obsession—comes a great American story about overlooked heroes, the nature of violence, hope, love and nearly everything else that matters." Hanna Rosin, author of The End of Men "Kerry Howley gives us a front row seat to the dark, brutal inner world of cage fighters. About the yearning dream for fame, the way violence becomes both poetry and obsession, and the way life can lift you up or crush you, this isn't just a masterpiece debut, it's an electrifying classic." Caroline Leavitt, New York Times bestselling author of Is This Tomorrow and Pictures of You "Out of the dank basements and glitzy arenas of a brutal sport, Kerry Howley has created a story that is virtuous, rapturous, and utterly consequential. In language that's as daring as it is astute, she tells the story of two young guys from the middle of America, an overachiever and an underachiever, whom the world, it turns out, has equally little use for. It's a story we've read about a thousand times, and one we've seen nothing else like. This is a gloriously

heartbreaking debut. — John D'Agata, author of *The Lifespan of a Fact* — “Lyrical and brutal in its subject matter, the poetic voice within offers humor, heart, and grace from the first page and kept me in awe until the end. This is a powerful book reminiscent of Hemingway’s early work. — Frank Bill, author of *Crimes in Southern Indiana* and *Donnybrook*

**Kerry Howley:** Kerry Howley’s work has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Slate*, and frequently in *Bookforum*. She holds an MFA from the University of Iowa, where she was an Arts Fellow and the Provost’s Visiting Writer in Nonfiction.

I love the concept here of going into the smaller shows (i.e.: non UFC) where we can see what the majority of no-name fighters really have to go through in their lives. She finds two opposite subjects to learn from which was great. But I felt she may have been a little more interested in her own experience than those details of the fighters. Don’t get me wrong, there is some good descriptions of events and what happens there, but I feel the focus is more on minutia that allows her to showcase how eloquent she is. So, I was a bit overwhelmed with her speech rather than the events in front of her at times, but definitely worth a read if you want a less known picture of the regional MMA scene.

I have some serious reservations about *Thrown*. The book is generally well written. Howley is a fine prose stylist: her prose is intelligent, lively, striking. She offers us detailed portraits of two young men, MMA fighters, and the strange and fascinating world of the fight culture. The point of the narrative is that Howley is entranced, liberated, thrown from the confines of her too involuted self, by the spectacle of these young men inflicting and absorbing violent physical damage. That is okay. The book is a valuable look at a primal fact of humankind, the cathartic power of the spectacle of violence. That Howley celebrates, revels in this violence might be problematic to her parents, say, but is not to me. She is a “space taker,” a nicely empty word: synonyms would include “groupie” and “sycophant.” In exchange for hanging out with these two young men, spending countless hours with them, listening to them, bucking them up, watching muscle building documentaries and B movie comedies again and again, bolstering their egos, getting them energy bars, she is granted, at rare occasions, moments of ecstatic release in the course of witnessing their fighting. And while she has emotional attachments of a sort for both men, strictly

speaking they are both instruments for her, solely of use to her for this courting of ecstasy that no one else (except us, now, the sympathetic reader) understands. What is problematic is her curt dismissal of all the rest of the world as pale, shallow, inauthentic, and essentially "sold out," by its keeping a healthy distance from this violence, or misunderstanding it. She is, or was, a philosophy grad student, and every single person in academia is a bloodless bookworm who does not get the essential power of what she is undertaking. Beware of any author who is so certain of her vision and who, at the same time (and this is the problem) dismisses all the rest of the world as beneath her level of insight. One of her two fighters, Sean Huffman, has a child with an unbalanced, unhealthy young woman with whom he had a brief, otherwise meaningless fling. And to his credit, in my eyes, he goes to great lengths, within his limited means and in spite of the vicious money grubbing of the child's mother, to become a father, to care for his child, to provide. In doing so he commits a cardinal sin: he gets a job, which distracts from his power, his commitment as a fighter. And Howley drops him, cold. He has failed her, failed the higher mission of her search for ecstatic release. Oddly, I rather think she failed him, in not supporting this good man's desire for a deeper, just connection with his child. Just shows you what a shallow, bloodless sort of guy I am, I guess. This book is good; it is powerfully written, offering insight into a culture I knew very little about. This book is also fundamentally flawed, or I am.

A perceptive inside look at the world of mixed martial arts from an open-minded outsider would have been enough for me to give this book five stars. Howley has added a whole other layer with a fictional narrator: the philosophy grad student who is supposedly researching and writing the book. The narrator, Kit, indeed pretentious and arrogant. A lot of the fun of the book is Howley sending up academic snoot while taking the fighters seriously. You don't need to know anything about philosophy (I don't) to enjoy this - and if you're reading on Kindle, you can always look up any words you don't know. Let me quote Howley herself on her intentions, I can't say it any better: "The material required a grander, perhaps antiquated voice distinct from the kind of self-deprecating 'gee whiz' smallness I see in a lot of current nonfiction. A voice absurd in its pretensions and ambitions but, in its willingness to risk absurdity, able to touch on ideas as big as the Schopenhauerian sublime. Also, it's supposed to be funny." She nailed it.

Ms. Howley can construct a sentence like no body's business. This really is some first class writing

about a subject not many literary-bugs would be very interested in - Mixed Martial Arts. There is mild drug use described but it isn't so bad you want to put the book down, only feel sorry for the fighters who participate. The Zen of preparing for an MMA fight and the first class writing make this a highly recommended read.

An instant classic in the "Sports for Non-Dummies" category, alongside Joyce Carol Oates on Boxing, David Foster Wallace on Tennis, George Bataille on Croquet, etc. In a world where smart writing about games often treats them like cupcakes - delightful experiences to be savored and analyzed. Howley shows what it means to confront their raw power, their ability to shatter us, enthrall us, to expose us to strange and difficult truths.

One of the best works of literary sports nonfiction I've ever read, and the best character study of MMA fighters I've read to date. Howley's dense, overly academic tone can be daunting at first, but that's half the point. This isn't a book of fighting techniques or a history of training: it's about a normal person's search for transcendent experiences, and how fighting offers a glimpse.

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