Poets and Pahlevans: A Journey into the Heart of Iran

Marcello Di Cintio
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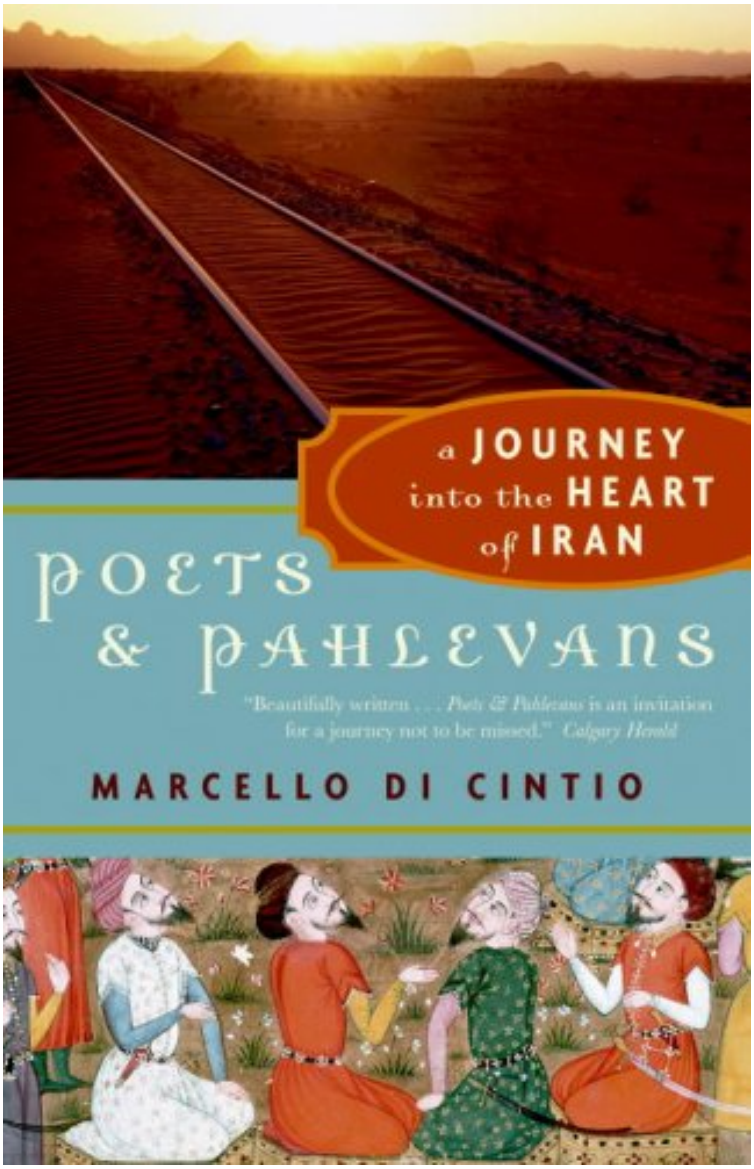

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Marcello Di Cintio : Poets and Pahlevans: A Journey into the Heart of Iran before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Poets and Pahlevans: A Journey into the Heart of Iran:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Preferred Roger Housden's version of Iran.By V. M. BadertscherDi Cintio is an accomplished writer and I liked the way he painted word pictures of the places he went by observant use of details of his surroundings. On the other hand, as a tour of Iran and its love of poetry, I prefer Saved by Beauty by Roger Housden. This book combines the authors interest in poetry and wrestling. I found that wrestling is a bit arcane

as a focal point for looking at Persia/Iran. Additionally, the focus on wrestling meant that some of the must stunning features of the country got short shrift--particularly the ruins of Persepolis. Reading Dicintio and Housden's versions about the most famous epic poem in Iran--the Shahnameh, you get the feeling you are reading about entirely different works of literature. DiCintio's version is all about battle and heros and, of course, wrestling. Housen gives a more balanced view of the historical significance. This is just one example of why, despite its excellent writing, I was not wowed by Poets and Pahlevans, while Saved by Beauty made me yearn to go to Iran.5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Poets and Pahlavans a Pleasure!By Iran Writes"Elegant and tasteful" may not fit the language of wrestlers, even if the wrestler is a poet. However, this travelogue was indeed tasteful and elegant.The author visited only few standard tourist attraction cities; the rest were humble, dusty villages in the middle of nowhere, where he was looking for some zoorkhanehs (sport centers) to see the demonstration of some local wrestling techniques. Wherever he goes, he not only finds someone to demonstrate his wrestling, but he finds a dead poet under a tombstone which most of the time, though not so officially, serves as a shrine for the local people and the visitors. We find the author either wrestling on a wrestling mat or kneeling next to a tombstone of a poet...I learned a lot about this sport through this book, and I have found its significance and its function in our history. Though this sport was the primary reason that Di Cintio went to Iran, what he came back with is something greater. If I learned one thing about wrestling, it is that it is a game of balance, which is so central to the Iranian life. It is this underlying idea which makes it such a ritual in Iran and compensates for its lack of glamor.While traveling from village to village in search of a method which those local people use to test their ability to maintain their balance, the author comes to another central issue in Iranian life, and that is poetry. From Mashhad to Tous to Kashan to Isfahan to Shiraz and Kerman and Yazd or even tribal Luristan, our author finds the tomb of a poet. He is astounded to see that he is not the only visitor to those graves. Some of them are elaborate monuments and are shrines for the Iranian people. Hafez, Saadi, Khayyam, and Ferdowsi, are among the most popular and the most visited graves, while others, less famous, still receive their own share of attention. Once he asks two women why Iranians visit the grave of these poets as if they are shrines of saints. One of the women says that it is because "Iranians love their poets." "Well," the author replies, "We all love our poets too, but it would never occur to us to visit their graves as pilgrimage." The woman, not having an answer, says, "Or maybe because we do not have anything else to do."I do not think that if Di Cintio would have stayed in Iran for another four years, or for that matter another forty years, he would have found the answer to that question, just as I still do not know why in the case of domestic hardship and family dispute, or when I am confused about something important, I run to Attar or Hafez or press my mind to come up with a similar situation in a novel or a short story and use it as a guide. But I know that when for months I woke up every two hours to take my sick dog back and forth to the street to relieve himself, it was the poem "It is a rare fortune to serve the elder of the wine house," and its command of "love and servitude" which made me do so without knowing "its why." As the author noted, these poets' poetry is not valued just for its rhythm and beauty, but as a consultant and a companion for us all. The solutions we seek are not in their answer to us, but the virtue of our "seeking" the answer in their poetry. In almost every case, no matter what the question is, the answer is "love," which is supposed to keep the balance.The book, indeed, was a balanced report of its author's findings in Iranian life, among the poor and humble, among the strong and the weak, among the generous and the not so generous, among the love and sometimes the hate, among those who are greedy and those who are not, he is able to see with balanced eyes, and not get carried away. Whatever he tells us comes from a good dear place, his heart and mind of a poet and athlete with no exaggeration.Missing are photographs, though. I wished he had printed some of those pictures he took from those remote places in Kurdistan, Luristan, and Kerman or Yazd, which are off the beaten path. I think that, being a poet, he felt rightly confident that his words would draw the picture, but still I wish he had indulged us to a little more of real visual pleasure and not to relied so much on our imagination, which is sometimes poor.

Marcello Di Cintio prepares for his journey into the heart of Iran with the utmost diligence. He takes lessons in Farsi, researches Persian poetry and sharpens his wrestling skills by returning to the mat after a gap of some years. Knowing that there is a special relationship between heroic poetry and the various styles of traditional Persian wrestling, he sets out to discover how Iranians reconcile creativity with combat.From the moment of his arrival in Tehran, the author is overwhelmed by hospitality. He immerses himself in male company in tea houses, conversing while smoking the qalyun or water pipe. Iranian men are only too willing to talk, especially about politics. Confusingly, he is told conflicting statementsthat all Iranians love George Bush, that all Iranians hate George Bush; that life was infinitely better under the Shah, that the mullahs swept away the corruption of the Shahs regime and made life better for all.Once out of Tehran, he learns where the traditional forms of wrestling are practised. His path through the country is directed by a search for the variant disciplines and local techniques of wrestling and a need to visit sites and shrines associated with the great Persian poets: Hafez, Ferdosi, Omar Khayym, Attar, Shahriyar and many others. Everywhere his quest leads him, he discovers that poetry is loved and quoted by everyone from taxi-drivers to students.His engagement with Iranian culture is intimate: he wrestles (sometimes reluctantly) when invited, samples illegal home-brew alcohol, attends a wedding, joins mourners, learns a new way to drink tea and attempts to observe the Ramazan

fast, though not a Muslim himself. Though he has inevitable brushes with officialdom, he never feels in danger, even when he hears that a Canadian photo-journalist has apparently been beaten to death in a police cell during the authors visit. The outraged and horrified reaction of those around him to this violent act tightens the already close bond he has formed with the Persians.His greatest frustration is that he is unable to converse freely with Iranian women aware that an important part of his picture of Iran is thus absent. Yet the mosaic of incidents, encounters, vistas, conversations, atmospheres and acutely observed sights, smells and moments creates a detailed impression of a country and society that will challenge most, if not all, preconceptions.From the Hardcover edition.

A fine, fine talent to be savoured. Wayson ChoyThe worlds of poetry and Persian wrestling intersect in this captivating book. Its a journey spiced with sweat and the scent of saffron. Will FergusonTravel is all about connecting, true, but Di Cintios headlocks and body slams take cross-cultural bonding to a new level. . . . Though its subject is wrestling, this is much more a book about putting your life in other peoples hands in an age of distrust. The Globe and MailAbout the AuthorMarcello Di Cintio was born in Calgary and studied Microbiology and English at the University of Calgary. Di Cintio was also a member of the University of Calgary wrestling team. He graduated in 1997 with a pair of degrees (a BA and BSc) and, he says, two cauliflower ears. Later that year, Di Cintio travelled to West Africa with a volunteer organization, Canadian Crossroads International, and taught biology in a Ghanaian village for three months. (This would be the first and last time he used his science degree, much to his mothers chagrin). When his volunteer placement was complete, Di Cintio travelled through western and northern Africa for nine months. His time amid the colour and heat of Africa led to a love affair with travel and resulted in his first book, Harmattan: Wind across West Africa, which won the Henry Kriesel Award for Best First Book and was also a finalist for the Wilfred Eggleston Prize for Best Nonfiction at the Alberta Book Awards.In December 1999, hot with millennium fever, Di Cintio travelled to Jerusalem to watch the clock turn on 2000. He wandered throughout Israel and Egypt before returning to Calgary to begin his career as a freelance writer in earnest. Since then he has published articles in numerous magazines and literary journals including The Walrus, EnRoute, Geist and The Globe and Mail. His writing received several honours including the 2002 Maclean-Hunter Endowment Prize for Creative Nonfiction and a number of Western and National Magazine Award nominations. Di Cintio travelled to Iran in the summer of 2003 seeking the connection between Persian poets and traditional wrestlers. This trip to Iran, and a subsequent return to the country the following year, yielded the stories that comprise Di Cintios new travel memoir, Poets Pahlevans: A Journey into the Heart of Iran. Knopf Canada published Poets Pahlevans in 2006.From the Hardcover edition.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.1INTO IRANAnd now they meet now rise, and now descend,And strong and fierce their sinewy arms extend;Wrestling with all their strength they grasp and strain,And blood and sweat flow copious on the plain;Like raging elephants they furious close;Commutual wounds are given and wrenching blows.Sohrab now claps his hands, and forward springsImpatiently, and round the Champion clings;Seizes his girdle belt, with power to tearThe very earth asunder . . . An old man recites poetry into a microphone. The measured verses float over the assembled crowd through a static-garbled loudspeaker. When the poem ends he calls two wrestlers to the centre of the circle. Both are barefoot, and both brush the ground with their fingertips before touching their lips and forehead. This is an invocation to Allah, something I dont quite understand. Village men sit on the perimeter in their white turbans and old fedoras, smoke cigarettes and spit out black sunflower seeds. They shout and cheer their muscled heroes.The wrestlers shake hands and kiss each other on both cheeks, then lock their arms around each other in a warriors embrace. Their bodies, now merged, are tense and already sweating. I can see their faces: both are nervous but resolute. Their stillness is momentary. When a referee taps them on their shoulders the men clash.The poetry, epic tales of ancient wars and legendary heroes, was meant to inspire the wrestlers in their battle, but now the crowds roar replaces the old verses in their scarred ears. They push each other back and forth in the circle, maintaining their grip around each others waist. Their knuckles blanch. The dust mingles with their sweat and slicks their legs with salty mud. The mob wave their arms and holler instructions in the village dialect. Young boys bounce on their grandfathers laps.Then one wrestler thrusts his body forward. His grip turns to stone and he lifts his opponent from his feet. The noise of the crowd swells. The man hurls his rival to the ground and crashes down on top of him. They are invisible in the cloud of dust until the referee helps them stand. Both are filthy and exhausted, but only one man is a winner. The referee raises his arm and the two wrestlers shake hands and kiss again. The victor strides into the throng of his fans and is immersed in their cheers. The loser leaves alone.When I pressed the button at the Iranian consulate in Istanbul I had no reason to be confident. I wasnt granted a visa from the embassy in Ottawa and the verdict on my visa in Istanbul had already been delayed twice. I did not know why. Admitting I was a writer was, in retrospect, a strategic error; Iran is famously wary of foreign journalists. Also, Toronto was in the middle of its sars crisis. Canadians were being turned away at borders around the world. The man at the embassy who accepted my visa application wasnt overly diligent on this point. Do you have sars? he asked. I said no and that was that. I worried, though, that his superiors might be less cavalier.I waited for nearly two weeks, wandering through the fabulous mosques that crown each of Istanbuls hills and point the way to heaven with their slender minarets. Five times a day the call to prayer boomed out over the city and gave a moments respite from the Turkish pop music blaring from every storefront and

taxicab. Fashionable Istanbulus smoked water pipes and drank tea in popular garden cafs. The bazaars were filled with briny olives, Turkish silks, Ottoman antiques and cheesy belly-dance costumes. It had been three years since my last visit to the Middle East and it was a pleasure to be back among the pistachio vendors, tea houses and honey-soaked pastries.But for all Istanbuls charms, my mind was a thousand kilometres east. Id spent the last two years infatuated with Iran. I had read Persian history and become obsessed with Irans politics, but it was the Persian love for poetry that first drew me to the place. I learned that all Iranians, even small children, could recite poetry from memory. Poets who have been dead for centuries are revered. Their verses resonate over time and colour everyday language. I wanted to investigate this devotion and be in a place where bazaaris and taxi drivers spoke in measured verse. Istanbul was a poor consolation. I wanted to be in Iran.While the consulate deliberated on my visa application, I bought my ticket for the Trans-Asya Express to Tehran, and did all the things I knew I would not be able to do once I crossed the border. I watched American action films in modern cinemas. I went to European-styled coffee shops to sip espresso, and drank pints of Efes lager in noisy bars. I read a copy of Salman Rushdies Fury I found in a used bookstore.I returned to the consulate. When the visa official opened the door he was not smiling. Neither was I. Mr. Marcello? he asked. I nodded. Then he tapped my passport against my chest and opened it to a fresh visa sticker. You have one month. Have good times in Iran.The Haydarapasa train station stands on the banks of the Bosphorus Strait on the very edge of the continent. Asia begins here, and from Haydarapasa there is only east. I went to the station early, and was the first passenger on the train. The car was dark, but enough light filtered in through the window for me to find my cabin and stow my rucksack beneath a seat.Another man entered the cabin. He was in his fifties, balding and with a thick white moustache. He smiled and greeted me, but beyond his salaam I didnt know what he said.Im sorry, but I dont understand.You are a foreigner, he said in English. I was relieved. Tourist?Yes, I said, though I hate that designation.From the Hardcover edition.