



# **Women of Steel: Female Bodybuilders and the Struggle for Self-Definition (Cambridge Texts in Hist.of Pol.Thought)**

*Maria R. Lowe*

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"A lot of people in the general public think female bodybuilding is gross and freaky . . . that that's not what a woman is supposed to look like." So says Michelle, a national bodybuilding judge. In fact, athletic women, especially those in sports where strength, muscle, and sweat feature prominently, are typically viewed by the public as being outside the boundaries of appropriate femininity. And perhaps no group of women athletes embodies this gender outlaw status more than female bodybuilders, who by their bulk and sheer strength challenge our very notions of what it means to be a woman. Why would women choose to look like that? And what does it take to get and stay so muscular?

Maria R. Lowe has interviewed more than one hundred people connected with women's bodybuilding, from the bodybuilders themselves, to trainers, family members, spouses, judges, and sponsors. In **Women of Steel**, Lowe introduces us to a world where size and strength must be balanced with a nod toward grace and femininity. Lowe, who actually worked out with a couple of the bodybuilders she interviewed, gets at the heart of what it is to be a woman bodybuilder. We learn about "paying the price"--doing the necessary exercise, and sometimes drugs--that allows women to rise to the top of their profession. We follow their successes and failures, and discover the benefits-- including increased self-esteem and physical strength--as well as the sometimes unhealthy effects of their training regimen, from dehydration to baldness to rampant acne to high blood pressure. We travel with the women from competition to competition and find that judges' standards seem to vary alarmingly depending on momentary notions of what constitutes "the overall package"--that elusive perfect body that catches judges' eyes and wins competitions.

Above all, **Women of Steel** is a keenly observant diary of life in women's bodybuilding, a must-read for people interested in sports, competition, physical culture, and gender.

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