Tucker, Samantha with Amy Spears. *Collective Chaos: A Roller Derby Team Memoir*. Athens, OH: Swallow Press, an imprint of Ohio University Press, 2023. $15.96 paper. 978-0-8040-1242-3. VIII + 169. Illus.

Reviewed by Duncan Jamieson

While I thoroughly enjoy my position as SLA’s book review editor, it does have its challenges, the biggest of which is finding reviewers (HINT, HINT, you can help me out here!). Publishers send books they think we might review, which is fine but my attempts to find reviewers sometimes fall flat. In those instances, I’ll sometimes have success strongarming someone, or if that fails yet the book seems worthwhile, I’ll attempt a review myself. Generally, I’ll find the book expands my knowledge of the sport under consideration, which is always a plus, at least for me. Hopefully the readers will find the review interesting and help them decide if the book is something that might be worth their time.

SLA received a query from Swallow Press, an imprint of Ohio University Press, if we might be interested in *Collective Chaos: A Roller Derby Team Memoir*, by Samantha Tucker with Amy Spears. Looking at the blurb it seemed worthwhile. Both are published authors; Tucker has a MA in English as well as a MFA, the latter from Ohio State.

I’m sure everyone reading this knows what Roller Derby is, though the extent and depth of knowledge is likely vastly different. Decades ago, I spent a year as an intern in Providence, Rhode Island, working with the poor and disadvantaged. In that capacity I visited a family who watched Roller Derby on television. This is my only connection to the sport, snippets of the game playing in the background while the family and I discussed the challenges of living in public housing. Since no one expressed any interest in the book, I thought I’d give it a try, hoping to learn more about this sport and its place in American culture. I don’t know much more about the former but my knowledge base for the latter has been exponentially expanded.

While I learned a few of the basics about roller derby, most of the content is a gritty, personal memoir by the author, other players, and their culture, which is engrossing, perhaps because it is so far removed from the normative American scene in which I live. Tucker does supply a bit of history (a Chicago promoter created the sport in 1935); though the basics remain the same the rules have been standardized and updated. While this full body contact sport is played by both men and women Tucker focuses on the women’s game. The Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) is the international governing association with over 400 member leagues on six continents. It is played on an eighty-eight-foot oval track by five women on each team, one jammer who scores points during a jam by passing players on the opposing team, one pivot who can trade places with the jammer, and three blockers whose role is to impede the jammer’s forward progress. The game is divided into two thirty-minute halves. Jams last for two minutes or less if ended by the jammer earlier. After thirty seconds for the players to rest and regroup, a new jam begins and again points can be scored. The sport is “strategic” and “powerful.” “It’s played all over the planet. And the vast majority of roller derby, unlike most contact sports, is played by cis women, trans women, trans men, and nonbinary people” (p 7).

Unlike America’s major and minor sports, roller derby receives only the scantiest attention. The only support comes from the women players themselves. Yes, it is organized, yes there are leagues, rules and regulations, yes there are tournaments and championships and yes there are spectators, as rowdy and boisterous as the players themselves. At the same time, there are few, if any, permanent tracks. The players set up and tear down the track. The elect the governing board. They establish teams and leagues. They recruit and train new players. They hire referees, score keepers and announcers. They rent facilities. They sell tickets. They manage fundraisers. They advertise the schedule and the games. They pay for their own equipment, uniforms, skates, travel, lodging and food. They are not paid to play or to serve on committees. It is all voluntary, and all for the love of the sport.

I’m not at all sure how to categorize this book. Based on the back cover roller derby is an amateur

women’s sport, though it seems to be far more organized and professional. *Collective Chaos* is “part

sports autobiography” and “part cultural critique,” but to me it Is also Samantha Tucker’s catharsis. She

grew up in Colorado with a Korean mother and an addicted father. While she dabbled in sports, she did

not see herself as terribly athletic, though she did enjoy roller skating on quads (two wheels front and

back), and she did off and on play roller derby. She earned a degree in theatre, moved to New York but

was unable to make a go of it. Back in Colorado she married about the time of the Great Recession and

with her husband moved to Korea where they taught English for a couple of years, still dabbling in roller

derby. Back in the United States they moved to Ohio where she earned her MFA and became deeply

immersed in roller derby, playing, traveling, organizing, serving on committees and fulfilling leadership

roles, because for her roller derby fit her counter culture vibe where she was accepted as she was. Like

most other players she had no health insurance and only later learned that while playing before moving

to Ohio she had broken her back. Uninsured, she could not afford x-rays so it went undiagnosed and

untreated.

Tucker has given much credit to Amy Spears who has added significant insights to roller derby’s

history and culture and how it stands in opposition to mainstream American society. Primarily, however,

this is Tucker’s voice for “those who’ve struggled within the mainstream.” She, and the women whose

mini-biographies are included, have all found a home and a safe place in this increasingly white male

supremacist society bent on further marginalization and control of those who just want to live their non-

conventional lives in peace and safety.

Tucker is not at all shy about calling out the abuse that American society heaps on those who do not conform to the narrow definitions of the far right. She has no use for Donald Trump and MAGA. On the other hand, in an interesting disconnect, she is perhaps the epitome of the diehard Ohioan. Though a transplant, she fell head over heels in love with the state, its people, its sports and its culture. It is said that if Woody Hayes, the paragon of Ohio boosterism, were driving back from “the game” and ran out of gas in Michigan, he would push the car across the state line before refueling. I am convinced that Samantha would help push. At the same time, she seems blind to the reality that is a politically conservative state, not all that interested in allowing people to live and let live. She seems to be unaware of the state’s historic ties to the Ku Klux Klan and its continuing racism While I have no evidence I would not be surprised if *Collective Chaos* were banned from Ohio’s public schools and curriculum.

This is a fascinating read; I recommend it highly to any who want to expand their horizons.