

# The Multifaceted Journey of BRAD BALUKJIAN

## Exploring Truth, Humanity, and the Unconventional in Science, Journalism, and Literature

In the realm where journalism and science intersect, Brad Balukjian, PhD stands as a dynamic figure, his pursuits weaving a tapestry of curiosity, truth-seeking, and storytelling. A published author whose bylines grace the pages of esteemed publications like Rolling Stone, Smithsonian, and National Geographic, Balukjian's multidisciplinary journey spans from the halls of academia to the open road. His debut book, *The Wax Pack: On the Open Road in Search of Baseball's Afterlife*, not only ascended to the ranks of the LA Times bestseller list but also earned recognition as one of NPR's Best Books of 2020. Yet, his narrative prowess doesn't solely rest within the confines of literary acclaim; as a Research Associate at the California Academy of Sciences, he's unveiled the secrets of Tahitian insects, even immortalizing Harrison Ford in the taxonomy of entomology.

Embarking on odysseys that transcend the conventional, Balukjian's works serve as portals into realms both familiar and obscure. From the hallowed grounds of baseball to the squared circle of professional wrestling, he traverses landscapes of nostalgia, loss, and personal discovery, extracting narratives that resonate with the universal human experience.

In a conversation with Reader's House Magazine, Balukjian offers insights into his unconventional approach to storytelling, the symbiosis between his scientific and literary endeavors, and the profound connections that thread through his narratives.

From his childhood passions to the corridors of academia, Balukjian's journey is one of relentless pursuit—a quest to uncover truths, unveil hidden narratives, and bridge the chasm between hero and human. As readers delve into his works, they're invited not only to witness the lives of icons but also to confront the echoes of their own stories reflected in the pages. Balukjian's oeuvre stands as a testament to the transformative power of storytelling, a beacon guiding aspiring writers to embrace the unconventional, traverse the uncharted, and unearth the profound in the overlooked.

**What inspired you to embark on journeys that led to writing books like *The Six Pack* and *The Wax Pack*?**

I was trained as a magazine journalist in the craft of longform narrative journalism (a craft that is becoming increasingly rare, unfortunately), and always dreamed of being able to flex those muscles in the space afforded by a book. I loved four things when I was a kid—baseball, wrestling, islands, and Star Wars—and still love those four things to this day. With baseball and wrestling, it wasn't enough for me to have my heroes, I wanted to know everything about them, to know what they are like as people beyond the performance on the field or in the ring. I have a somewhat obsessive nature (and truly have OCD, as documented in *The Wax Pack*), which comes in handy when you're doing a PhD on Tahitian insects or writing a book about former athletes. Embarking on these road trips to track down the heroes of my youth gave me the opportunity to indulge that childhood passion while also attempting to paint portraits of the humanity of these people who experienced a level of fame you and I will never know.

**Brad Balukjian, scientist and journalist, delves into his journeys behind "The Six Pack" and "The Wax Pack," intertwining nostalgia, discovery, and human connection**

**How did your background in island biogeography and entomology inform your approach to storytelling in your books?**

There is surprising and substantial overlap between my two career choices, science and journalism. Both are about seeking truth through the compilation of evidence to test some hypothesis and answer some question about the world. With my entomology research I started with the question of: how many species of green flash bugs are there on these islands? With *The Six Pack* it was, to what extent did each of these wrestlers become their character? That's why the title of each chapter pits the wrestler against himself, e.g. Terry Bollea vs. Hulk Hogan. Terry Bollea is a sensitive kid from Port Tampa, Florida while Hulk Hogan is the paragon of virtue from Venice Beach, California.

**Can you share an anecdote from your travels that particularly resonated with you or shaped your perspective on the subjects**

**you were exploring?**

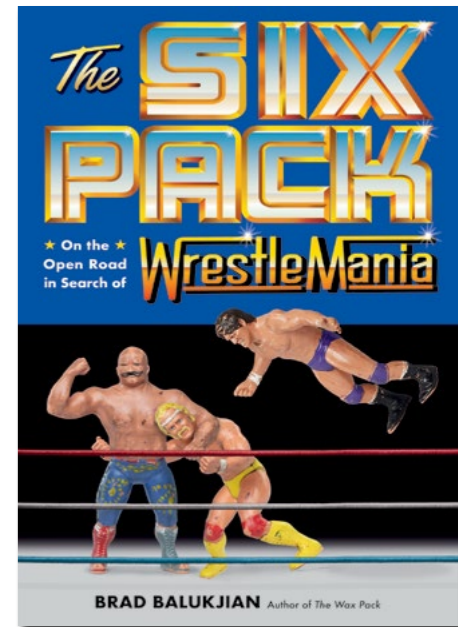
One of the wrestlers in *The Six Pack* who I covered is named Tony Atlas (real name: Anthony White). Tony, who is Black, grew up in abject poverty in western Virginia in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when overt racism dominated the South as Jim Crow was still very much in effect. Not only did Tony have to contend with that, he was placed in a boys home during his adolescence, where he told me he had to fight all the time to not get raped. Before he was 18, Tony had already dealt with more adversity than most people experience in a lifetime, and so to see him rise out of that to become a star and then crash and burn due to having too much too soon was powerful stuff. I wanted to see his hometown for myself, so I drove to Low Moor, Virginia, and creeping around those country roads at ten miles per hour I got a true appreciation for the place that shaped him. Place matters in books like these, and I wanted to be able to describe that place first-hand.

**In *The Six Pack*, you delve into the lives of professional wrestlers from the 1980s. What drew you to this particular era and subculture within wrestling?**

The mid-to-late 1980s WWF was a unique period in wrestling history because of the extreme schedule that was kept. The WWF put on almost 1,000 shows per year, with three troupes running in different parts of the country, with no off-season. Many of these wrestlers performed 310-320 days per year, with a flight every day to a new city. Sure wrestling is staged, but having gotten in the ring myself for a day of training, I can tell you that that canvas is no trampoline, and these guys took a beating. They had no health insurance, no union, no retirement plan. If they didn't wrestle, they didn't get paid. What does that do to a person? To their psyche? To their family?

**The *Wax Pack* takes a unique approach by tracing the lives of baseball players from a single pack of cards. What challenges did you face in tracking down these players, and were there any unexpected revelations during your journey?**

Delve into the lives of 1980s wrestling icons with Brad Balukjian's "The Six Pack," a journey of resilience, fame, and humanity.



I consider myself first and foremost a travel writer. I take the reader on the road with me to investigate the afterlives of our childhood heroes. I'm not a baseball or sportswriter, and I don't have the pedigree in those areas that might impress a potential interview subject. So it was challenging to get some of the former players to talk to me because they may not have felt it was worth their time. That book produced plenty of surprises. For example, when I set out I had no idea what a pivotal role the father/son relationship would play in that story. And not just the feel-good Field of Dreams father-son stuff, but the dark side as well.

**Both of your books explore themes of nostalgia, loss, and personal discovery. How do you navigate these themes while maintaining an engaging narrative for your readers?**

These are universal themes that we can all relate to, which is why I write these books with a general reader in mind. You don't have to be a baseball or wrestling fan to enjoy these books. I think that teasing out these themes is what helps make the narrative engaging, because the reader is hopefully emotionally invested. I also try to draw on the techniques of the New Journalism (dialogue, point-of-view, status-conveying details) to paint a vivid picture of the scenes that I am in.

**Your books seem to blend elements of memoir, investigative journalism, and travelogue. How do you balance these different storytelling modes, and what do you hope readers take away from your work?**

I try to write books similar to those I most enjoy reading, which is narrative non-fiction where the reader is informed, entertained, and emotionally engaged. By combining these different genres, I believe the widest set of potential readers is served. But it's a tightrope walk because go too far in one direction and you'll lose your audience. I hope readers take away how much they have in common with their heroes. These baseball players and athletes are people just like you and me, and they contend with the same challenges in life that we contend with. Everything in life is tradeoffs.

**What advice would you give to aspiring writers who are interested in pursuing unconventional storytelling formats or exploring niche subcultures in their work?**

Don't rush it, take the time to understand your subject matter at a deep level. Be willing to take risks and stick to your convictions, but at the same time be wary of expectations. The road of suffering is paved in expectation. Be honest about your motivation for a particular project and adjust your goals accordingly. Are you writing this to make money? For creative fulfillment? Be honest.

Brad Balukjian's multidisciplinary approach illuminates hidden narratives, bridging science and storytelling with grace, depth, and universal resonance.