

SHADOW BOXING WITH POP

M I C H A E L M A I L E R

I WAS BORN ON SAINT PATRICK'S DAY and my father had a dream that when I turned six years old I would walk into the toughest Irish bar in town and say in my finest brogue: "My name is Michael Mailer, I'm six years old and I can lick any man in the bar." I wasn't a very tough kid at six and so never fulfilled my father's vision of a prepubescent St. Patty's Day brawl but his lifelong love of boxing and his determination to share it with me formed in many ways the bedrock of our relationship. Boxing was his way of breaking the ice with a young son easily intimidated. He knew instinctively that the best way for me to confront my fears was the knowledge that I could handle my own in the ring, a confidence which would of course extend to the school yard if need be.

And so began my father's tutelage of the sweet science. He would drill me in the fundamentals of the Peekabo style, a boxing language made famous by his friend and legendary trainer, Cus D'Amato, who employed it to great effect with his three champions: Floyd Patterson, José Torres and Mike Tyson. It was a style in which a fighter kept his gloves glued to his chin and thus proved difficult to hit while the bob and weave would open the way for glorious assaults.

Often in my pre-adolescent years when I was at odds with my dad he would have me whale away at his belly. I remember how satisfying the feeling was—to punch my father with wrathful abandon and get away with it. It probably saved me years of therapy. In calmer moments when the instruction turned to sparring—he would gently tap me wherever I left myself exposed. On occasion when those taps would sting more than I thought justified and I would protest, he would sit me down and look me in the eye and say, "I'm harder on you than the others because I believe in you the most." Later I was to learn that he would express similar sentiments in one way or another to all of his children.

As I approached my early teens and moved to Brooklyn to live with my father our boxing routine evolved into an ad hoc Boxing Club. A group, consisting of my father, myself, José Torres, my cousin, Peter Alson, Jeffrey Michaelson, and whatever friend or visiting dignitary was in town who wanted to get manly would assemble at Gramercy Gym on 14th Street on Sunday mornings. It was during those times that my legendary battles in the ring with my father took place. We would pound away at each other—the young buck striving to prove he had the mettle to dethrone the aging lion who still had a few tricks up his sleeve. I remember after one of our particularly hard hitting sessions, an old Puerto Rican janitor who lived at the gym looked at my father and said: “THAT IS YOUR SON!!”

As my skills advanced and the stamina of youth became too much for my father to handle, we called it quits after one brutal bout in which I had given him a bruised eye. It was the passing of the torch and I remember the look in his eyes, a mixture of pride and remorse that I had graduated beyond him and that we would no longer be communicating with each other so eloquently, if mutely, between the ropes.

When I went on to college and fought in the Golden Gloves, thus achieving the apotheosis of my boxing career—it was my pop who was at ring-side shouting instructions much to the dismay of my trainer. After the bout in which I ultimately lost to a fighter slicker than me, I remember trying to hold it together in the shower at the arena while Dad set about interviewing my opponent—ever the journalist—to get a detailed analysis of my strengths and weaknesses. My father dutifully reported the verdict: “A strong puncher, but a little slow.” Afterwards, when we dined quietly on cheeseburgers and fries, his eyes welled with the faintest trace of a tear as he said to me, “It’s a great feeling to have pride in your kids.”

If my father had trouble expressing the words, “I love you” to me he had something better to offer, a shadow boxing routine when I would walk through the door after having been away for a while. We would raise our hands in peekaboo style and dance around each other, feinting and jabbing. It was his way of signaling that he loved me, that he was my father and I was his son, and the intimacy of that equation would never change.

My father used to joke that if he could box the way he wrote he would be heavyweight champion of the world. Well, Pop, you were the heavyweight champ of letters and if you could throw a decent punch, your best knock-out was with words. You wrote as a champ, fought for what you believed in,

and rarely, if ever, backed down from a good fight. Your writing leaves as indelible a mark as any in American letters and I believe, in generations to come, the reader who enters your ring of words will forever be dazzled by the speed, seduced by the charm, and floored by the substance and prescience of what you had to say.