ALL YOU NEED IS GLOVE

SAL CETRANO

Fighters and Writers
By John G. Rodwan, Jr.
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Clichés walk a long road. They don't start out the sorry, threadbare creatures we finally make some out to be, bumbling and clutching at straws, but once were young and thoroughly of their time, cracking wise at parties and stoking dying talk. That boxers and journalists are somehow cut from the same cloth or share some wild atavistic gene has stoked individual imagination and shaped American popular culture, occasionally touching upon history, for better than a century, a long, if not unbroken, line.

In his essentially titled collection of essays, *Fighters and Writers*, John Rodwan Jr., a veteran observer of the boxing scene, as well as a respected commentator on jazz and American social change, leads us on such a wide-ranging expedition, through the parallel histories and changing roles of these sometimes-glamorous, sometimes-infamous occupations, as seen from forefronts of masculinity and violence, race and identity, image and reality.

Byron and Keats were boxing fans. Conan Doyle made Sherlock Holmes an amateur pugilist. Jack London led a search for a "Great White Hope." George Orwell, who would have much to say about violence, was a schoolboy boxer, and Albert Camus a capable amateur. George Bernard Shaw, Dashiell Hammett, Charles Bukowski . . . the roster of boxing's bedazzled is both pedigreed and diverse.

There are, of course, the familiar exploits of those who themselves famously laced up the gloves: Hemingway, A.J. Liebling, Plimpton, and Mailer.

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Scott Fitzgerald, object of platonic passion, manages to bruise a hapless Papa, head and heart, without tossing a punch, and even Oscar Wilde makes an unexpected appearance.

"*The Ali Act*," not surprisingly, is Rodwan's starting point, an acknowledgment of that magical confluence of a phenomenal boxer and one of the most turbulent eras in American history. Before rap music's arid syntax of bluster and threat, greed and lust, spastic id and unwarranted ego, Ali gushed flowers, effortless as waterfall, always of the moment, even his harshest invective laced with poetry, and always that wicked motherlove smile.

Principally through the duelling biographical attitudes of several dons of "Ali Studies," Rodwan conducts the flood of critical opinion surrounding Ali, from opprobrium to adulation. Mark Kram questions Ali's intelligence and incisive wit. A fatigued Michael Arkush cannot finally see past Ali's façade, distinguish hero from hype. Mike Marquesee sees the champ as humanist and iconoclast, a deft and instinctive molder of attitudes. Thomas Hauser goes one better: Ali "changed the experience of being black."

Whether as "emblem of black pride," "embodiment of rebellion," or "surest sign of capitalism's capacity to transform almost anything into a commodity," Rodwan leads us through the measured schizophrenia of America embracing a separationist Civil Rights hero and pacifist warrior, simple poet and disturbingly complex thinker.

In the end as much a product of self-promoter supreme Gorgeous George as of either Angelo Dundee or Malcolm X, Ali becomes symbolic of a myriad of things to a myriad of observers with different axes to grind, until in danger of becoming "a generic representative of greatness."

Rodwan helps to sort out this heavyweight welter of sport, politics, celebrity and pop psychology in which so many were able to see exactly what they wanted to see (a McLuhanism comes to mind: "I wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't believed it"): prismatic Ali the apparent envy of scribes less facile at persuasive charm, guile and misdirection, without which narrative does not dance, but sags into the canvas.

E. M. Forster used the phrase "the beast and the monk" to describe man's unsettling duality. (Feel free to insert the author of your choice here.) We are given a prime example of this in "*Seeing Stars*," where James Toback's dark film portrait "*Tyson*" is examined. Tyson, as iconic of his time as Ali of a flowery, more dramatic era, was arguably as adept at the concept of

creating and inhabiting roles as Ali, but without what Rodman identifies as the successful fighter or writer's aspirational ability to adapt and control.

We gawk in *Tyson* at a haunted man, strange yet familiar, his remorse and self-loathing convincing beyond craft, bizarrely framed by a filmmaker more arch than artist. The savage mauler of memory sits stonily in mood-lit profile, Hamlet as Elephant Man, and fed doctored reflections.

Veteran fight fans will remember the bashful, wounded boy and respectful student of boxing history that Tyson, under the nurture of Cus D'Amato and Jimmy Jacobs, once was. For a strange, brief time the confident, self-proclaimed "master of skullduggery," Tyson's eyes now wander past the camera into the dark, onto the blank page of his next incarnation, and you sense the wordless terror at the gaping task of filling it.

Rodwan reminds us that Iron Mike "enjoyed outsmarting others as a criminal," but we are also reminded of the boy "living in constant fear" of being bullied in the "horrific" streets of Brownsville. At root of the baleful, psyche-shrinking legend, that of the rapacious, baby-eating *bête noire*, is the frightened child-man still in the process of growing up. Yet when D'Amato tells him that it was Ali's personality that made him a great fighter, Tyson does not understand. Ali, Rodwan tells us, perfected the writerly capacity "for ceaseless reinvention." The contrast here with Tyson is, in the strictest sense of the word, pathetic. It is pure *schadenfreude*, with not a penny's worth of difference between the most depraved ringsider screaming for blood and the armchair moralist deriving satisfaction at the *auto de fé* of this tragic soul.

In "*The Cinderella Man Fairytale*," Rodwan brings to earth the myth of James J. Braddock, "a strong but limited fighter" who succeeded little in life's basic tests, but rode an inspirational wave as one of the first to tap a boxer's "special capacity to become emblematic figures of their time." Rodwan echoes the familiar—and cinematic—notion that certain eras in history cry out for heroes, searching for the genuine and admirable in the contrasting personalities of the prosaic stevedore Braddock and the flashy but lackadaisical Max Baer, who presaged the media-milkers to come more than the laconic Louis, who was soon to stand colossus-like astride a rare, exhilarating confluence of fistic spectacle and world history.

Although Braddock biographer Jeremy Shaap's assertion that "great champions usually are fashioned by adversity" serves as stirring paean to all who fashioned lives beneath the Great Depression's boot, Rodwan reels this

in as "far too simplistic." Both in fiction and the ring, the buffered version "Hard times don't create heroes; they reveal them" is probably nearer the truth. "*The Cinderella Man* Fairytale," sets the stage for later champions whose adversities will be measured on wholly different scales.

Alhough a bit disjointed—the essays are neither closely connected nor presented as such—Rodwan is steadily engaging. Some of Rodwan's personal essays, as much of life's soft parade, are trivial. In "*Weight Loss: A Love Story*," Rodwan weds logic to romance through the scrupulous gleaning of the proper foods for his hypoglycemic wife, while providing quixotic inspiration through his own gut-busting exertions. We get the practical appreciation of a fighter's heart in a slightly-saggy everyman's body. Boxing, the author maintains, being a sport where a fighter's inattention to his weight can have fell consequence, gave him "a perspective on size, one that I found changed as my body did." The equation between self-image and exercise as a habit, then, defines the price of admission to the boxer's world.

Rodwan's peregrinations are wide: from weight loss to Melville's use of what Liebling termed "labyrinthine digressions" in *Moby-Dick*; what book dedications apparent and lesser known (*Fighters and Writers* is dedicated to Jose Torres, whom only death could KO) reveal about the headwaters of creation; the "tribal" fractiousness of state boxing commissions in "*There Are No Easy Answers*" to the futility of "health and safety" measures in a sport bent on focused destruction in—what else—*Health & Safety*; the habits of jaguars or James Bond girls, or the use of repetition in the bodies of authors' work.

Wander as he might, Rodwan is an effective gate-keeper, no musing too far from his unifying thesis: that boxing is a significant window on both the human condition and pivotal historic events.

"*A First Class Sport*" is a breath of fresh air along Rodman's promenade. The phrase was coined by everybody's favorite tough-guy president, Teddy Roosevelt, who as New York's police commissioner, when cops still rode horses, staunchly averred that "the establishment of a boxing club in a tough neighborhood always tended to do away with knifing and gun-fighting among the young fellows who would otherwise have been in murderous gangs." First as governor, then as president, he would occasionally don the gloves, not leery of making a bad impression.

Trainer and boxing commentator Teddy Atlas traces his long career to "boxing in an old laundry room in a rough project." Boxing programs, he insists, give kids "care, direction, instruction, discipline, accountability and

dreams." Katherine Dunn maintains that women as well as men stand to benefit from the sport's contributions to an "individual's reflexes, stamina and strength." Linked as it is to the survival instinct, she sees "the aggressiveness of boxing as a positive good."

A twelve-year-old Cassius Clay's first trainer is a policeman in a neighborhood gym, where the pumped-up boy has come to report a stolen bicycle. Larry Holmes, who before following Ali as heavyweight champion had been a petty criminal and drug dealer, boxes first as a boy in PAL-organized bouts in Pennsylvania. Few writers could more eloquently express than the stolid ex-champion why he found himself through boxing, or the sport's broader significance: "People express themselves differently. Painters paint, writers write, dancers dance. I discovered I needed physical contact to let what was in me come out."

The mantra is repeated, old hand after old hand**:** how boxing helps young men "overcome long odds, just to be strong and functional." Where else might young men hone these qualities today? It is a sobering thought.

It is perhaps useful to view writers of Rodwan's age—and, if we're fortunate, scholarship—as a bridge between journalistic generations, as the grand, insipid machinations explored in "Is Martin Amos Serious*?*", a cautionary tale of polysyllabic bitch-slapping between effete critic and self-appointed social visionary in the post-Vietnam era, might seem truly other-worldly to a masculinity cut of the Hemingway-Miller-Mailer model or the Runyunesque romanticism of just-plain, tabloid-reading guys and dolls.

In so many Depression era movies—think *His Girl Friday* or *Kid Dynamite*—there is a hairy vitality in which words are punches, clever dialogue the bob and weave. A choice put-down is comparable to a jab, a prolonged exchange—often between man and woman—a promoter's dream of well-matched battlers. Reporters are scoop-driven individualists, resourceful and combative, or cigar-chomping cynics, sparring with snappy gangster patter. Writers romanticized, or were romanticized by, action in barroom, alley or ring, in corrida or on safari.

Over the years, muscular exercises in ribald badinage such as *Pat and Mike* and *The Philadelphia Story* established a salutary pugilism between clever men and women, toothsome adversaries, bent on loosing kindred angels from first row to balcony. Violence was mostly theatrical, and the theater had walls.

No more.

The journalist, however intrepid or self-possessed, confronting what Amis calls "a world of perfect terror and perfect boredom," is faced with the same dilemma as the other-directed, would-be reader. He is caught in a world where the numbing possibility of extreme, sudden violence is all around, while incidents of personal involvement with violence and tests of imminent physical danger become ever fewer, an inexpressible irony no poultice of gadgetry and spattered crimson image can mollify.

There is no stylistic shortcut for the writer who would wear Hemingway's hat. How to convey, in Mailer's words, "not only the fear of getting hurt, which is profound in more men than will admit to it, but . . . the opposite panic, equally unadmitted, of hurting others" without having drunk of both fountains? Charlatan! Fop! Poseur!

If, then, few of us face real violence on an imminent basis in a sanitized, secularized, keep-everybody-alive, everybody's-a-star world, what then are "life-and-death" or "fight-or-flight" but desiccated phrases in lives passively and dutifully led? Boxing has all but disappeared from the public eye today. "Mixed martial arts," with its gladiatorial setting, heightened ceiling of violence and ignominious possibility of "submission," has at least temporarily cornered the attention of erstwhile boxing fans. Motion pictures, replete with superheroes who neither sweat nor bleed, facile special effects and editing friendly to the goldfish attention span of a generation raised on television, have largely replaced the novel as the preferred vehicle of narrative expression. Newspapers are an endangered species, with a surfeit of commentators clinging jealously to odd perches in the blogosphere, desperate to attract attention.

Were Hemingway to rise from the dead, would anybody notice?

There is in Rodwan the suggestion that today's writer, self-appointed priest in a vanishing church of print, wears uneasily a burden of responsibility to taste life at its extremes, the better to proffer menus to the meek. The parallel between fighter and writer becomes more the whimsical conceit of the writer, anxious of the masculinity of his chosen bread and butter, sublimating with virtuosity what cannot be shown in action.

Rodwan offers the familiar premise: it is boxing's skill, honed in solitude through training and discipline, together with an inner strength that separates champion from journeyman, contender from "opponent." "Fighters," he avers, "are athletes, not brutes." What, then, of those who presume to explain them?

Although he likens the "artful evisceration" of critics trying to "outshine Amis's authorial flair" to "a degraded version of Ali's style of taunting his opponents," it is clear that the tenuous metaphor between boxing and violence has come under considerable strain, with ad hominem and hyperbole increasingly the arsenal of the infuriated and morally outraged, where pointed plain speaking once sufficed. Fathers who did not dance have sons who play air guitar. While the spectacle of boxing has, to be sure, changed little, the nature of violence, as Amis insists in his "The Second Plane," has.

"The Fighting Life" looks at the use of boxing in the fiction of two literary giants, Philip Roth and Norman Mailer. In "The Human Stain," Roth's Coleman Silk, a light-skinned black who succeeds in convincing the world, including a wife, that he is a nappy-haired, sallow-skinned Jew, flowers a lifelong self-image based on boxing metaphors: "the pleasures and uses of concealment" . . . "taking the measure of every last situation," "heeding the internal voice that counsels." These dovetail nicely with "the boxer's tough-guy code" often espoused by Mailer: disguising intentions, never letting your thoughts be known or your guard down, self-knowledge as power, all to be found in Mailer's *tour de force* of baroque violence, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and epic *The Fight*.

Silk's personal struggle for identity is mirrored in and magnified by the national catharsis of Joe Louis's symbolic slaying of Nazism's vaunted *übermensch*—poor, kindly Max Schmeling, a man who would later befriend Louis, even pay for his burial—as fully conflating Max Baer's "situational" Jewishness to democracy as Mailer later does blackness to boxing.

As Rodman's many-voiced analysis of this episode infers, the lippy Ali and the laconic Louis each jogged people free of preconceptions, but did it in different ways. To some extent each was a helpless fulcrum for forces playing out about them. Louis, by and large, had only to go with history's flow, Fate having provided no lesser dragon than Hitler for him to slay. Before even entering the ring for Louis-Schmeling II, Louis was a champion on multiple levels. He was not, as Jack Johnson had been, the black fighting the white; he was the American fighting the German.

The wind that blew at Louis's back was comparable in intensity to the evil inexorably rising in Europe, a conception eagerly reinforced by patriotic journalists, awash in the infinite possibilities of good versus evil, light versus dark, slavery versus liberation. Silk, a classics professor, tells his students that "all of European literature springs from a fight," referring to *The Iliad*'s

"barroom brawl between Achilles and Agamemnon." He finds integrity in the inner consistency of his life of misdirection and disguise, just as "Mailer forged a fighter's persona for himself" which even caustic critics unwittingly bolstered to the writer's ongoing advantage.

You can almost hear Mailer chuckling when, in *The Spooky Art*, he refers to his being provided "a false legend of much machismo." Yet, as one who had the pleasure of sharing a ring with the man, I can tell you it is true: when style failed, Norman would just block a punch or three with his face, bearing down, relentless, clubbing like a Kodiak bear. Those jealous of his galling facility with language, as with Amis's detractors, will conveniently question the manhood behind the words. In the case of Norman Mailer, there was nothing false about it.

In "George and Me," a duly reverential Rodwan echoes the view of countless readers first enthralled by *Animal Farm* of a saintly, prescient Orwell against a charge leveled at him, long after his death, that he had raped a woman. It is an interesting story, one I'd not heard before, and I'll not give up the ending.

Particulars aside, we are served a meaty example—feel free to fill in your own— of how "accomplished writers may have led less than exemplary lives." Long after high ideals emphasized in the writing "have come to be associated with the man," to what degree can a writer's persona be separated from his work? Should a single incident forever jaundice a gift of vision?

Recognizing that pernicious streak in man that delights in finding inconsistencies in those we hate—or grudgingly admire—Rodwan asks, "Was Orwell, decency's advocate, merely a fraud?" The author, plainly troubled that the reputation of one synonymous with clarity and justice might be vitiated by even the rumor of a single incongruous ugliness, finds himself poring over Orwell's collected work for any clues about his attitudes toward women. In the end, he bemoans "the inevitability of failure in reaching complete truth."

Incidents of "justifiable violence" in the writer's life, including a bloody involvement in the Spanish Civil War, moral crucible for a virtual squadron of writers and artists, ironically seem to buttress both sides of the dark possibility. Again citing Amis's critics, he revisits the thin line between certain pacifists and an admiration for totalitarianism, finding there the same sort of narrow-mindedness that would sully a career so esteemed as Orwell's for the questionable goal of striking a vein of inconsistency in a mountain of verity.

The title essay in *Fighters and Writers* offers a last hurrah to all working stiffs blessed to have just enough Mickey Spillane in the blood to hear their romantic inner drummer over the clatter of the morning commute. It opens with a banner on the wall of Gleason's Gym—from Virgil: "Now, whoever has courage and a strong and collected spirit in his breast let him come forward, lace on the gloves and put his hands up."

That ordinary men (let alone those blessed with a touch of imagination and the price of a pencil) should find in the spectacle of humans fighting "something akin to their own efforts," gives nuance to every action so illumined. "To write about boxing," says Joyce Carol Oates, as heavyweight a mind as ever weighed in on the subject, "is to write about oneself—however elliptically, and unintentionally." What dark parentheses the writer may insert in either life or work speak of something other than pure perception, and therein lie all tales. Misogyny, racial hatred, brutality, deception, intolerance: all inhabit niches of boxing's dark side as surely as courage, tenacity, resourcefulness and skill do the light. When heroes have faults, we share their pain; when they are assholes, we look twice in the mirror.

"Boxers are liars," quotes Rodman of Jose Torres. So, too, then are lovers. In either case, it keeps you alive.

Boxing is about violence, the ability to inflict and withstand, impulses old as man from instincts even older. On one side of what we might call the Oates/Mailer Scale is the myth-nipping conviction that boxing is not a sport, has nothing playful about it, consumes the excellence it displays, damages the body, brain and spirit, and presents a stylized image of man's collectivized aggression, while in the white corner stand endless protean metaphors for dialectics in manhood, sex, race, personal identity and, yes, even literary style. Writers, at best imperious directors of the play of their imaginings, see fighters in "straightforward pursuits of victory under the unmediated imposition of their wills."

For all, ugliness and beauty blur in the beholder's fevered eye. In arenas of dreams, you pays your money and you takes your chance.

In covering Sonny Liston's 1962 knock-out of Floyd Patterson, Mailer describes boxing as "a murderous and sensitive religion that mocks the effort of understanding to approach it." We may be thankful that the likes of John Rodwan still make the effort. *Fighters and Writers* is superbly referenced grist for the ringside scholar's mill.