

INTRODUCTION TO THE TASCHEN
EDITION OF NORMAN MAILER'S
THE FIGHT: A MEETING OF GIANTS

J. MICHAEL LENNON, AUTHOR OF
NORMAN MAILER: A DOUBLE LIFE

IT WAS INEVITABLE THAT MUHAMMAD ALI AND NORMAN MAILER, two of the most talented, narcissistic, and ferociously ambitious artists America has ever produced, would become friends. Their talents and assets were happily reciprocal. Consummate professionals, the first in boxing, the second in literature, they were amateurs on each other's turf. Mailer, therefore, did not hesitate to call Ali's poems doggerel, and Ali gave faint praise to Mailer's athletic abilities after jogging with him. But it was all superlatives when they spoke of each other's achievements in their chosen fields: Ali called Mailer a "man of wisdom" for his writing; Mailer called Ali "the world's greatest athlete." Nineteen years Ali's senior, Mailer's position at the pinnacle of American letters corresponded with Ali's greatest years in the ring, 1964–1979.

"The heavyweight champion of writers" (as Mailer was often called after the death of Ernest Hemingway), and "the professor of boxing" (as Ali sometimes referred to himself) met in July 1963 in Las Vegas, where they attended the rematch of Floyd Patterson and reigning champion Sonny Liston. Liston won, only to lose to Cassius Clay seven months later (February 25, 1964), after which Clay converted to Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. At the time of this fight, Mailer was frantically writing *An American Dream* as a month-by-month serial novel for *Esquire*, but nevertheless took time off to attend the fight in Miami. He was so impressed by Ali's performance that he asked his editor if he could postpone the serial and write

about the agile young boxer from Louisville, Kentucky. *Esquire* denied his request, but by then Mailer was permanently absorbed in Ali's career.

In July 1965 Mailer saw Ali fight in an exhibition match in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and was photographed arm wrestling with him at the Hilton Hotel. Baffling reporters, he described himself as Ali's "intellectual precursor" in the accompanying story, his point being that the philosophy of existentialism first articulated in his famous 1957 essay, "The White Negro," anticipated the brand of pugilistic vigilance that Ali essayed in the ring. Ali, in short, was a physical existentialist, ever ready to adapt. From that time on, largely because of the endlessly reprinted photo, he became associated with Ali in the collective mind of the media. He attended several of Ali's subsequent bouts, and wrote about Ali's March 1971 loss to "Smokin' Joe" Frazier—his first career defeat—who became undisputed champion. The essay, titled "King of the Hill," appeared as a *Life* magazine cover story, accompanied by a suite of photographs by Frank Sinatra. Ali's portfolio of punches is expertly analyzed by Mailer, but the essay is more notable for his contention that Ali was not only a superb practitioner of the "sweet science," he was also "the first psychologist of the body," forever pondering the subtle tactics employed by his opponents, as well as his own, to avoid or assimilate incoming blows. He boxed with his head held back, Mailer wrote, and with "his arms low, surveying the fighter in front of him, avoiding punches by the speed of his feet, the reflexes of his waist, the long spoiling deployment of his arms which were always tipping other fighters off-balance."

Further on in the essay, he equated Ali's inner life with those of several literary giants—Joyce, Hemingway, Dostoevsky, Proust, and Conrad—writers with sensibilities so idiosyncratically brilliant that they had few peers. Lonely, unorthodox novelists, they were at times nearly deranged, as were heavyweights like Ali:

The closer a heavyweight comes to the championship, the more natural it is for him to be a little bit insane, secretly insane, for the heavyweight champion of the world is either the toughest man in the world or he is not, but there is a real possibility he is. It is like being the big toe of God. You have nothing to measure yourself by.

Four years later Mailer was back to cover "the Rumble in the Jungle," Ali's majestic, grueling bout with George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire, on Octo-

ber 30, 1974. Ali was then perhaps the best-known athlete in the world, and Mailer, who also had an international reputation, had no difficulty obtaining press credentials from *Playboy* to cover the bout. His account of Ali's attempt to win the heavyweight title from the young champion—Foreman was then twenty-five, seven years younger than Ali—appeared first in that magazine in May and June 1975, and was published a month later by Little, Brown, Mailer's publisher. It was generally well-received, but over time its merits became more and more celebrated, and it was often referred to as the finest book ever written about a boxing match. Novelist Larry McMurtry called it "one of Mailer's most perfectly toned books . . . One could ransack the whole literature of sport and not find a better book than *The Fight. Death in the Afternoon* [Hemingway's book about bullfighting] is a distinguished book, but in this book Mailer simply writes circles around his sometime master, Hemingway."

The Fight is the culmination of a seven-book, eight-year run in which Mailer writes in the third person personal, using himself as a mirror and a lamp to illumine the events and characters of a historical event. It is also one of the masterpieces of the New Journalism, which Mailer, along with Joan Didion, Gay Talese and Tom Wolfe, were largely responsible for creating in the 1960s. Writing at the peak of his powers, Mailer ransacked his metaphoric armory to depict Ali's complex psyche and his Nijinsky-like ring artistry—the inner and outer modalities of his genius. He compared him to writers, painters, toreros, even chess champions, as well as a number of boxers, some journeymen such as Shotgun Sheldon, and others from the twentieth century's pantheon of great fighters—Sugar Ray Robinson, Rocky Marciano, Sonny Liston, Floyd Patterson, Joe Frazier (defeated by Ali in a January 1974 rematch), and Archie Moore, "The old mongoose," who had fought professionally for almost thirty years. Frazier and Moore were both present for the fight. Also in attendance and portrayed deftly by Mailer are Ali's crafty trainer, the legendary Angelo Dundee, and his assistant, Drew Bundini Brown, Ali's animated doppelganger who loudly echoes Ali's ideas and words. Among the others depicted are Foreman's manager, Dick Sadler, who had spent a lifetime in the boxing game, and his assistant and cousin, Sandy Saddler, a former featherweight champ and one of the greatest punchers of all time. Before the match, Saddler said, "I'm concerned for Ali. I'm afraid he's going to get hurt."

Saddler was not alone. Archie Moore prayed that Foreman wouldn't kill

Ali in the ring, and Ali's wife, Belinda, told him, "You better take lessons on how to fall on your ass." A lot of other people were worried, and they had cause. Comparable in height, weight and reach, the two boxers differed in speed, power and styles. Ali had an amazingly fast left jab, and was perhaps the most light-footed heavyweight of all time, but his punches lacked the concussive force of his opponent. Mailer, watching Foreman hit the heavy bag with six hundred punches in less than fifteen minutes, concluded: "They were probably the heaviest cumulative series of punches any boxing writer had seen," enough to crack the ribs or break the spine of an average athlete. Foreman's strategy was brutally simple: wait until Ali weakened after several rounds of dancing, and then "beat on every angle of Ali's cowering and self-protective meat." If Ali desired a victory over the champ, Mailer summed up, "he would have to take more punishment than ever before in his career."

Of the nineteen chapters of Mailer's narrative, abridged here for this volume, only three are devoted to the actual fight. Earlier and later chapters follow Ali around Zaire before and after the match, and paint a grim picture of life under the nation's authoritarian president, Mobutu Sese Seko, the "archetypal African dictator," who changed the name of the country from Democratic Republic of the Congo to Zaire. Mailer admires the "tragic magnetic sense of self" displayed by the people of the country, and the magic of a landscape where everything seems to quiver with meaning. He reads about the Congolese ethos, and finds that one of its underlying precepts is a belief in *n'golo*, the life force: humans are not merely individuals; they are part of a pattern of forces emanating from nature and history. The championship boxing match, therefore, will be enveloped in the *n'golo* resonating from Ali and Foreman, their teams, sixty thousand spectators, Mobutu, the weather, the land, as well as "the messages, the curses, and the loyalties of the dead."

Mailer recognizes that he is also a force in this mystical evanescent web, but to what extent is impossible to gauge. He has written about himself and his effect on events before; now, however, the accumulation of these self-renderings weighs on him. "He was no longer so pleased with his presence. His daily reactions bored him." He also has the feeling that his reputation has been "burning low in the literary cathedral these last few years." Despite these uncertainties, Mailer cannot resist insinuating himself into the transcendental aura enveloping the fight. Superstitious to a fault, he measures every one of his actions by how it might help the contender—he is an unambiguous partisan for Ali. One evening, while "good and drunk," he clambers up

on a seven-story-ledge in his hotel and squeezes around a partition separating two rooms for the purpose of aiding Ali's cause—don't ask how—although he is angry at himself for being vain enough to believe it will make any difference.

On the big night, Mailer and George Plimpton, who was also covering the fight, are seated in the press row of the outdoor arena. The rainy season has begun, and the sky looks threatening. After a long delay, the fight begins dramatically with Ali hitting Foreman with a series of straight right hand punches instead of the jabs ordinarily used in opening rounds. Foreman seems surprised, but by the end of the round adjusts and begins to cut off the ring and corner Ali. In the next round, Ali eschews dancing, retreats to the ropes, and lets Foreman pound away. By leaning back on ropes (allegedly loosened just before the match began by Ali's corner man, Dundee), Ali forced Foreman to extend himself while he twisted and bounced on the spring-like ropes. This tactic, which Ali called the "rope-a-dope," went on for several rounds. During all this time, Ali buttoned up as best he could, elbows over belly and gloves in front of his face, occasionally hitting Foreman, as he tired, with a few combinations. Foreman did well in the fifth, but by the seventh was moving as slowly as "a man walking up a hill of pillows." By now he was swinging wildly and Ali was scoring almost at will. As Foreman's strength weakened, Mailer likened him to a sleepwalker in a dance marathon. When Ali hit him several times in succession near the end of the eighth round, Foreman fell "like a six-foot sixty-year-old butler who has just heard tragic news." Until Foreman's powers were greatly diminished, Ali's use of the rope-a-dope, Mailer wrote, was "about as safe as riding a unicycle on a parapet. Still what is genius but balance on the edge of the impossible?" Like Ulysses, Ali triumphed over brute force with cunning and audacity. He was champion again, and held the title almost until the end of his career.

Coda: Mailer's warm friendship with Ali continued over the decades, and he, along with George Plimpton, added their recollections to the commentary in Leon Gast's extraordinary documentary about the fight, *When We Were Kings*. In 1996 Ali was part of the group receiving the Oscar for the documentary. His Parkinson's disease was now advanced, and when he had trouble climbing the stairs to receive the award, Foreman came to his aid. In 2012 Forman said that after Ali's 1981 retirement he and Ali became "the best of friends. By 1984 we loved each other. I am not closer to anyone else in this life than I am to Muhammad Ali."