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The Cruellest Sport

Joyce Carol Oates

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A romance of (expendable) maleness—in which The Fight is honored, and even great champions come, and go.

Reviewed:

Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times

by Thomas Hauser

Simon and Schuster, 543 pp., \$24.95

The Black Lights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing

by Thomas Hauser

Simon and Schuster, 259 pp., \$9.95 (paper)

+ See All

And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?

And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?

—Walt Whitman, “I Sing the Body Electric”

A boxer’s victory is gained in blood.

—Greek inscription

Professional boxing is the only major American sport whose primary, and often murderous, energies are not coyly deflected by such artifacts as balls and pucks. Though highly ritualized, and as rigidly bound by rules, traditions, and taboos as any religious ceremony, it survives as the most primitive and terrifying of contests: two men, near-naked, fight each other in a brightly lit, elevated space roped in like an animal pen (though the ropes were originally to keep rowdy spectators out); two men climb into the ring from which only one, symbolically, will climb out. (Draws do occur in boxing, but are rare, and unpopular.)

Boxing is a stylized mimicry of a fight to the death, yet its mimesis is an uncertain convention, for boxers do sometimes die in the ring, or as a consequence of a bout; their lives are sometimes, perhaps always, shortened by the stress and punishment of their careers (in training camps no less than in official fights). Certainly, as in the melancholy case of Muhammad Ali, the most acclaimed and beloved heavyweight in boxing history, the quality of the boxer’s post-retirement life is frequently diminished. For the great majority of boxers, past and present, life in the ring is nasty, brutish, and short—and not even that remunerative.

Yet, for inhabitants of the boxing world, the ideal conclusion of a fight is a knockout, and not a decision; and this, ideally, not the kind in which a man is counted “out” on his feet, still less a TKO (“technical knockout” —from injuries), but a knockout in the least ambiguous sense—one man collapsed and unconscious, the other leaping about the ring with his gloves raised in victory, the very embodiment of adolescent masculine fantasy. Like a tragedy in which no one dies, the fight lacking a classic knockout seems unresolved, unfulfilled: the strength, courage, ingenuity, and desperation of neither boxer have been adequately measured. Catharsis is but partial, the Aristotelian principle of an action complete in itself has been thwarted. (Recall the fury of young Muhammad Ali at the too-readily-defeated Sonny Liston in their second, notorious title fight, of 1965: instead of going to a neutral corner, Ali stood over his fallen opponent with his fist cocked, screaming, “Get up and fight, sucker!”)

This is because boxing’s mimesis is not that of a mere game, but a powerful analogue of human struggle in the rawest of life-and-death terms. When the analogue is not evoked, as, in most fights, it is not, the action is likely to be unengaging, or dull; “boxing” is the art, but “fighting” is the passion. The delirium of the crowd at one of those matches called “great” must be experienced firsthand to be believed (Frazier–Ali I, 1971, Hagler–Hearns, 1986, for instance); identification with the fighters is so intense, it is as if barriers between egos dissolve, and one is in the presence of a Dionysian rite of cruelty, sacrifice, and redemption. “The nearest thing to death,” Ali described it, after his third title match with Joe Frazier, in 1975, which he won when the fight was stopped after the fourteenth round. Or: “This is some way to make a living, isn’t it?” as the superlightweight Saoul Mamby said, badly battered after a title fight with the champion Billy Costello, in 1984.

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For these reasons, among others, boxing has long been America’s most popularly despised sport: a “so-called” sport, even a “meta-” or an “anti-” sport: a “vicious exploitation of maleness”¹ as prostitution and pornography may be said to be a vicious exploitation of femaleness. It is not, contrary to common supposition, the most dangerous sport (the American Medical Association, arguing for boxing’s abolition, acknowledges that it is statistically less dangerous than speedway racing, thoroughbred racing, downhill skiing, professional football, et al.), but it is the most spectacularly and pointedly cruel sport, its intention being to stun one’s opponent’s brain; to affect the orgasmic communal “knockout” that is the culminating point of the rising action of the ideal fight. The humanitarian argues that boxing’s very intentions are obscene, which sets it apart, theoretically at least, from purer (i.e., Caucasian) establishment sports bracketed above.

Boxing is only possible if there is an endless supply of young men hungry to leave their impoverished ghetto neighborhoods, more than willing to substitute the putative dangers of the ring for the more evident, possibly daily, dangers of the street; yet it is rarely advanced as a means of eradicating boxing that poverty itself be abolished; that it is the social conditions feeding boxing that are obscene. The pious hypocrisy of Caucasian moralists vis-à-vis the sport that has become almost exclusively the province of black and ethnic minorities has its analogue in a classic statement of President Bush’s of some months ago, that he is worried by the amount of “filth” flooding America by way of televised hearings and trials: not that the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill hearing and the William Kennedy Smith rape trial revealed “filth” at the core of certain male–female relations in our society, but that public airings of such, the very hearings and trials, are the problem. Ban the spectacle, and the obscenity will cease to exist.

Black boxers from the time of Jack Johnson (the first and most flamboyant of the world's black heavyweight champions, 1908–1915) through Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Larry Holmes, Sugar Ray Leonard, and Mike Tyson have been acutely conscious of themselves as racially *other* from the majority of their audiences, whom they must please in one way or another, as black villains, or honorary whites. (After his pulverizing defeat of the “good, humble Negro” Floyd Patterson, in a heavyweight title match in 1962, Sonny Liston gloated in his role as black villain; when he lost so ingloriously to Muhammad Ali, a brash new-style black who drew upon Jack Johnson, Sugar Ray Robinson, and even the campy professional wrestler Gorgeous George for his own public persona, Liston lost his mystique, and his career soon ended.)

To see race as a predominant factor in American boxing is inevitable, but the moral issues, as always in this paradoxical sport, are ambiguous. Is there a moral distinction between the spectacle of black slaves in the Old South being forced by their white owners to fight, for purposes of gambling, and the spectacle of contemporary blacks fighting for multimillion-dollar paydays, for TV coverage from Las Vegas and Atlantic City? When, in 1980, in one of the most cynically promoted boxing matches in history, the aging and ailing Muhammad Ali fought the young heavyweight champion Larry Holmes, in an “execution” of a fight that was stopped after ten rounds, did it alleviate the pain, or the shame, that Ali was guaranteed \$8 million for the fight? (Of which, with characteristic finesse, promoter Don King cheated him of nearly \$1 million.) Ask the boxers.

Boxing today is very different from the boxing of the past, which allowed a man to be struck repeatedly while trying to get to his feet (Dempsey–Willard, 1919), or to be knocked down seven times in three wholly one-sided rounds (Patterson–Johansson I, 1959), or so savagely and senselessly struck in the head with countless unanswered blows that he died in a coma ten days later (Griffith-Paret, 1962); the more immediate danger, for any boxer fighting a Don King opponent, is that the fight will be stopped prematurely, by a zealous referee protective of King's investment.

As boxing is “reformed,” it becomes less satisfying on a deep, unconscious level, more nearly resembling amateur boxing; yet, as boxing remains primitive, brutal, bloody, and dangerous, it seems ever more anachronistic, if not in fact obscene, in a society with pretensions of humanitarianism. Its exemplary figure is that of the warrior, of some mythopoeic time before weapons were invented; the triumph of physical genius, in a technologically advanced world in which the physical counts for very little, set beside intellectual skills. Even in the gritty world of the underclass, who, today, would choose to fight with mere *fists*? Guns abound, death to one's opponents at a safe distance is possible even for children. Mike Tyson's boast, after his defeat of the twelve-to-one underdog Carl Williams in a heavyweight title defense of 1989, “I want to fight, fight, fight and destruct the world,” strikes a poignantly hollow note, even if we knew nothing of subsequent disastrous events in Tyson's life and career.²

Consider the boxing trainer's time-honored adage: *They all go if you hit them right.*

These themes are implicit in Thomas Hauser's *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* and *The Black Lights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing*; but it is only in the latter work that theoretical, historical, and psychological issues are considered—Hauser sees boxing as “the red light district of professional sports,” in which individuals of exceptional talent, courage, and integrity nonetheless prevail. His *Ali* is the

heftier and more ambitious of the two, befitting its prodigious subject—the most famous athlete of all time, until recent years the most highly paid athlete of all time. An authorized biography, it would appear to be definitive, and is certainly exhaustive; Hauser spent thousands of hours with his subject, as well as approximately two hundred other people, and was given access to Ali's medical records. The text arranges these testimonies into a chronological history in which (is this New Age biography?) the author's voice alternates with, but rarely comments upon, still less criticizes, what these others have said. Compassionate, intelligent, fair-minded, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* might have benefited from further editing and paraphrase. Specific subjects (an imminent fight, financial deals, Ali's marital problems, Ali's health problems, the Nation of Islam, et al.) become lost in a welter of words; frequently, it is difficult to locate dates, even for important fights. And no ring record of Ali in the appendix!—a baffling omission, as if Ali's performance as an athlete were not the primary reason for the book.

As it happens, Hauser's succinct commentary on the Ali phenomenon and his shrewd analysis of the boxing world, including Don King's role in it, in his earlier book, *The Black Lights*, can provide, for the reader of the biography, a kind of companion gloss; the books are helpfully read in tandem. It is a remark of Ali's, in 1967, that gives *The Black Lights* its ominous title:

They say when you get hit and hurt bad you see black lights—the black lights of unconsciousness. But I don't know nothing about that. I've had twenty-eight fights and twenty-eight wins. I ain't never been stopped.

Muhammad Ali, born Cassius Marcellus Clay in Louisville, Kentucky, on January 17, 1942, grandson of a slave, began boxing at the age of twelve, and, by eighteen, had fought 108 amateur bouts. How is it possible that the young man who, in his twenties, would astonish the world not just with the brilliance of his boxing but the sharpness of his wit seems to have been a dull-average student in high school who graduated 376th out of a class of 391? In 1966, his score on a mental aptitude test was an Army IQ of 78, well below military qualification. In 1975, Ali confessed to a reporter that he “can't read too good” and had not read ten pages of all the material written about him. I remember the television interview in which, asked what else he might have done with his life, Ali paused, for several seconds, clearly not knowing how to reply. All he'd ever known, he said finally, was boxing.

Mental aptitude tests cannot measure genius except in certain narrow ranges, and the genius of the body, the play of lightning-swift reflexes coupled with unwavering precision and confidence, eludes comprehension. All great boxers possess this genius, which scrupulous training hones, but can never create. “Styles make fights,” as Ali's great trainer Angelo Dundee says, and “style” was young Ali's trademark. Yet even after early wins over such veterans as Archie Moore and Henry Cooper, the idiosyncrasies of Ali's style aroused skepticism in boxing experts. After winning the Olympic gold medal in 1960, Ali was described by A.J. Leibling as “skittering...like a pebble over water.” Everyone could see that this brash young boxer held his hands too low; he leaned away from punches instead of properly slipping them; his jab was light and flicking; he seemed to be perpetually on the brink of disaster. As a seven-to-one underdog in his first title fight with Sonny Liston, the twenty-two-year-old challenger astounded the experts with his performance, which was like none other they had ever seen in the heavyweight division; he so out-boxed and demoralized Liston that Liston “quit on his stool” after the sixth round. A new era in boxing had begun, like a new music.

Ali rode the crest of a new wave of athletes—competitors who were both big and fast.... Ali had a combination of size and speed that had never been seen in a fighter before, along with incredible will and courage. He also brought a new style to boxing. Jack Dempsey changed fisticuffs from a kind of constipated science where fighters fought in a tense defensive style to a wild sensual assault. Ali revolutionized boxing the way black basketball players have changed basketball today. He changed what happened in the ring, and elevated it to a level that was previously unknown.

(Larry Merchant, quoted in *Muhammad Ali*)

In the context of contemporary boxing—the sport is in one of its periodic slumps—there is nothing more instructive and rejuvenating than to see again these old, early fights of Ali’s, when, as his happy boast had it, he floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee and threw punches faster than opponents could see—like the “mystery” right to the temple of Liston that felled him, in the first minute of the first round of their rematch. These early fights, the most brilliant being against Cleveland Williams, in 1966, predate by a decade the long, grueling, punishing fights of Ali’s later career, whose accumulative effects hurt Ali irrevocably, resulting in what doctors call, carefully, his “Parkinsonianism”—to distinguish it from Parkinson’s disease. There is a true visceral shock in observing a heavyweight with the grace, agility, swiftness of hands and feet, defensive skills, and ring cunning of a middleweight Ray Robinson, or a lightweight Willie Pep—like all great athletes, Ali has to be seen to be believed.

In a secular, yet pseudo-religious and sentimental nation like the United States, it is quite natural that sports stars emerge as “heroes”—“legends”—icons.” Who else? George Santayana described religion as “another world to live in” and no world is so set off from the disorganization and disenchantment of the quotidian than the world, or worlds, of sports. Hauser describes, in considerable detail, the transformation of the birth of Ali out of the unexpectedly stubborn and idealistic will of young Cassius Clay: how, immediately following his first victory over Liston, he declared himself a convert to the Nation of Islam (more popularly known as the Black Muslims) and “no longer a Christian.” He repudiated his “slave name” of Cassius Marcellus Clay to become Muhammad Ali (a name which, incidentally, *The New York Times*, among other censorious white publications, would not honor through the 1960s). Ali became, virtually overnight, a spokesman for black America as no other athlete, certainly not the purposefully reticent Joe Louis, had ever done—“I don’t have to be what you want me to be,” he told white America. “I’m free to be me.” Two years later, refusing to be inducted into the army to fight in Vietnam, Ali, beleaguered by reporters, uttered one of the memorable incendiary remarks of that era: “Man, I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong.”

How ingloriously white America responded to Ali: the government retaliated by overruling a judge who had granted Ali the status of conscientious objector, fined Ali \$10,000, and sentenced him to five years in prison; he was stripped of his heavyweight title and deprived of his license to box. Eventually, the US Supreme Court would overturn the conviction, and, as the tide of opinion shifted in the country, in the early 1970s as the Vietnam War wound down Ali returned triumphantly to boxing again, and regained the heavyweight title not once but twice. Years of exile during which he’d endured the angry self-righteousness of the conservative white press seemed, wonderfully, not to have embittered him. He had become a hero. He had entered myth.

Yet the elegiac title of Angelo Dundee’s chapter in Dave Anderson’s *In The Corner*³—“We Never Saw Muhammad Ali at His Best”—defines the nature of Ali’s sacrifice for his principles, and the loss to boxing. When, after the three-and-a-half-year layoff, Ali returned to the ring, he was of course no

longer the seemingly invincible boxer he'd been; he'd lost his legs, thus his primary line of defense. Like the maturing writer who learns to replace the incandescent head-on energies of youth with what is called technique, Ali would have to descend into his physical being and experience for the first time the punishment ("the nearest thing to death") that is the lot of the great boxer willing to put himself to the test. As Ali's personal physician at that time, Ferdie Pacheco, said,

[Ali] discovered something which was both very good and very bad. Very bad in that it led to the physical damage he suffered later in his career; very good in that it eventually got him back the championship. He discovered that he could take a punch.

The secret of Ali's mature success, and the secret of his tragedy: *he could take a punch.*

For the remainder of his twenty-year career, Muhammad Ali took punches, many of the kind that, delivered to a nonboxer, would kill him or her outright—from Joe Frazier in their three exhausting marathon bouts, from George Foreman, from Ken Norton, Leon Spinks, Larry Holmes. Where in his feckless youth Ali was a dazzling figure combining, say, the brashness of Hotspur and the insouciance of Lear's Fool, he became in these dark, brooding, increasingly willed fights the closest analogue boxing contains to Lear himself; or, rather, since there is no great fight without two great boxers, the title matches Ali–Frazier I (which Frazier won by a decision) and Ali–Frazier III (which Ali won, just barely, when Frazier virtually collapsed after the fourteenth round) are boxing's analogues to *King Lear*—ordeals of unfathomable human courage and resilience raised to the level of classic tragedy. These somber and terrifying boxing matches make us weep for their very futility; we seem to be in the presence of human experience too profound to be named—beyond the strategies and diminishments of language. The mystic's dark night of the soul, transmogrified as a brutal meditation of the body.

And Ali–Foreman, Zaire, 1974: the occasion of the infamous "rope-a-dope" defense, by which the thirty-two-year-old Ali exhausted his twenty-six-year-old opponent by the inspired method of, simply, and horribly, allowing him to punch himself out on Ali's body and arms. This is a fight of such a magical quality that even to watch it closely is not to see how it was done, its fairy-tale reversal in the eighth round executed. (One of Norman Mailer's most impassioned books, *The Fight*, is about this fight; watching a tape of Ali on the ropes enticing, and infuriating, and frustrating, and finally exhausting his opponent by an offense in the guise of a defense, I pondered what sly lessons of masochism Mailer absorbed from being at ringside that day, what deep-imprinted resolve to outwear all adversaries.)

These hard-won victories began irreversible loss: progressive deterioration of Ali's kidneys, hands, reflexes, stamina. By the time of that most depressing of modern-day matches, Ali–Holmes, 1980, when Ali was thirty-eight years old, Ferdie Pacheco had long departed the Ali camp, dismissed for having advised Ali to retire; those who supported Ali's decision to fight, like the bout's promoter, Don King, had questionable motives. Judging from Hauser's information, it is a wonder that Ali survived this fight at all: the fight was, in Sylvester Stallone's words, "like watching an autopsy on a man who's still alive." (In *The Black Lights*, Hauser describes the bedlam that followed this vicious fight at Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas, where gamblers plunged in an orgy of gambling, as in a frenzy of feeding, or copulation: "Ali and Holmes had done their job.") Incredibly, Ali was allowed to fight once more, with Trevor Berbick, in December 1981, before retiring permanently.

Hauser's portrait of Ali is compassionate and unjudging: Is the man to be blamed for having been addicted

to his body's own adrenaline, or are others to be blamed for indulging him—and exploiting him? The brash rap-style egoism of young Cassius Clay underwent a considerable transformation during Ali's long public career, yet strikes us, perhaps, as altered only in tone: "Boxing was just to introduce me to the world," Ali has told his biographer. Mystically involved in the Nation of Islam, Ali sincerely believes himself an international emissary for peace, love, and understanding (he who once wreaked such violence upon his opponents!); and who is to presume to feel sorry for one who will not feel sorry for himself?

The *Black Lights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing* describes a small, self-contained arc—a few years in the career of a boxer named Billy Costello, at one time a superlightweight titleholder from Kingston, New York. Like *Muhammad Ali*, it is a sympathetic study of its primary subject, Costello, his manager Mike Jones, and their families and associates; yet, in the interstices of a compelling narrative taking us through the preparation for a successful title defense of 1984, it illuminates aspects of the boxing world generally unknown to outsiders—the routine and discipline of the boxer in training; the complex role of the fight manager; the exhausting contractual negotiations; the state of this “red-light district”—

Professional boxing is no longer worthy of civilized society. It's run by self-serving crooks, who are called promoters.... Except for the fighters, you're talking about human scum.... Professional boxing is utterly immoral. It's not capable of reformation. I now favor the abolition of professional boxing. You'll never clean it up. Mud can never be clean.

(Howard Cosell, quoted in *The Black Lights*)

Like others sympathetic with boxers, who are in fact poorly paid, nonunionized workers with no benefits in a monopolistic business without antitrust control, Hauser argues strongly for a national association to regulate the sport; a federal advisory panel to protect boxers from exploitation. His portrait of Billy Costello allows us to see why a young man will so eagerly risk injuries in the ring, which is perceived as a lifeline, and not a place of exploitation; why he will devote himself to the rigors of training in a sport in which, literally, one's entire career can end within a few seconds.

Black Lights ends dramatically, with Costello retaining his title against a thirty-seven-year-old opponent, Saoul Mamby, and with his hope of moving up in weight and making more money. Since its publication in 1986, the book has become a boxing classic; it is wonderfully readable, and, unlike *Ali*, judiciously proportioned. Yet to end the book with this victory is surely misleading, and even, to this reader, perplexing. The “black lights of unconsciousness” would be experienced by Billy Costello shortly, in a bout with a dazzlingly arrogant and idiosyncratic Ali-inspired young boxer named, at that time, “Lightning” Lonnie Smith, who would KO Costello in one of those nightmares all boxers have, before a hometown audience in Kingston. Following that devastating loss, Costello would fight the aging Alexis Arguello, one of the great lightweights of contemporary times, who would beat him savagely and end his career. To end with a tentative victory and not supply at least a coda to take us to the collapse of Billy Costello's career deprives *Black Lights* of the significance it might have had—for boxing is about failure far more than it is about success. In the words of the battered Saoul Mamby, “I'll miss it. I love boxing. Everything passed too soon.”

Letters:

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Not a Lightweight

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1.
See Gerald Early's brilliantly corrosive essays on boxing in *Tuxedo Junction: Essays on American Culture* (Ecco, 1989). ↩
2.
See Montieth Illingworth, *Mike Tyson: Money, Myth and Betrayal* (Birch Lane, 1991), p. 330. ↩
3.
See both Dave Anderson, *In the Corner: Great Boxing Trainers Talk About Their Art* (Morrow, 1991), and Ronald K. Fried, *Corner Men: Great Boxing Trainers* (Four Walls, Eight Windows, 1991). Irresistibly readable and informative books of interviews: Angelo Dundee, Eddie Futch, Ray Arcel, Charley Goldman, Lou Duva, Emanuel Steward, Kevin Rooney, et al. ↩