When “Rope Burns,” the late Jerry Boyd’s wonderful collection of boxing fiction (written under the California cornerman’s *nom de guerre*, F.X. Toole) was published back in 2000, I wrote a 1700 word review, exactly one sentence of which was devoted to the third of the six stories included in Boyd’s book:

“Likewise, the gripping drama of "Million $$$ Baby," the tale of the rise and fall of a hillbillyish female fighter and her old Irish trainer, begins to build not as Maggie Fitzgerald is fighting her way to the top, but after she has lost her final fight.”

Hey, how was *I* supposed to know?

Jerry Boyd died in 2002, in time to enjoy the adulation which accompanied the publication of his first and only book, but three years before a film based upon two stories from “Rope Burns” would win Oscars in four of the six most important categories at the 77th Academy Awards Sunday night.

In addition to being named 2004’s best film, “Million Dollar Baby” is also being hailed in some circles as the best boxing movie ever made – which, in some respects, it may well be. On another front, it has also been dismissed for its trivialized-for-the-masses Hollywood version of the sport, a criticism which is not entirely unfounded.

Although most early reviewers conscientiously skirted the *denouement* in an effort to avoid spoiling its inherent drama for audiences, subsequent attacks from the right which have labeled ”Million Dollar Bay” “propaganda for assisted suicide” have rendered that moot. Whether he’s seen the film or not, a person would by now had to have spent the past four months in a cave not to know how it turns out.

And while the Rush Limbaugh crowd has been savaging director Clint Eastwood for the film’s allegedly political bent, some of our more squeamish friends on the left have simultaneously recoiled in horror from “Million Dollar Baby” on the grounds that it glamorizes a brutal pursuit, to wit: boxing itself.

Be that as it may, Boyd’s publishers have now leapt back on the bandwagon by re-issuing “Rope Burns,” except that the book has now been re-titled “Million Dollar Baby: Tales from the Corner.” If nothing else, this may serve to inform future discussions of the film, because up until now most reviews I’ve seen appear to have been written by people who have either never read “Rope Burns,” never seen a boxing match, or, in most cases, both.

The gritty West Coast gym milieu Boyd captured so well in the pages of his book is what comes across best in the film. Ironically, the character portrayed by Morgan Freeman (who must have spent a lot of time hanging around Don Turner to so perfectly acquire his mannerisms) doesn’t even exist in the “Million $$$ Baby” story. Scrap was imported from “Frozen Water,” another tale

in the book, which was skillfully grafted onto and intertwined with the title story in Paul Haggis' script.

But anybody who's spent much time around boxing is bound to have problems with "Million Dollar Baby," because so much of it just doesn't ring true.

For one thing, the fight scenes themselves are probably *too* good. If women boxers (and we mean Hillary Swank *and* Maggie's opponents) actually fought this well, everybody would be flocking to watch them.

Maggie Fitzgerald's meteoric rise through the ranks is depicted as a pastiche of knockouts. Each and every one of them is accompanied by the act of Eastwood's Frankie Dunn sliding a stool into the ring. Then, instead of going to a neutral corner, Maggie sits down and watches while her opponent is counted out.

Now, anyone who knows the first thing about boxing is bound to wince at the absurdity of this, but apparently some Hollywood type thought it necessary to prepare the audience so that the climactic stool-in-the-ring wouldn't be criticized as a *deus ex machina* contrivance. (The only other fathomable explanation would be that each and every one of Maggie's knockouts occurred just before the bell ended a round, a proposition so far-fetched that it's even more preposterous than what is depicted.)

In the book, the arch-villain opponent (portrayed by Lucia Rijker in the movie) sucker-punches our heroine just after the bell, catching not only Maggie but Frankie (who has just put the stool in the corner) by surprise. This was a perfectly reasonable explanation, but apparently the filmmakers thought audiences wouldn't buy it in the absence of all the heavy-handed foreshadowing.

Presumably for dramatic effect, the notion of Maggie's "title" quest as Frankie's Holy Grail has also been introduced into the story. Jerry Boyd would have laughed out loud. The idea is supposed to be that in decades of developing boxers in the gym, actually taking a fighter to a world championship is the one thing that has always eluded Frankie, and that Maggie offers him the hope of fulfilling that lifelong dream. It comes across as the tritest of clichés, and a silly one at that.

The truth of the matter is that on today's landscape women's titles are even more plentiful than men's. "Championships" are cheap and so easily come-by that they don't have much relevance even to the women who win them, and while a fight against Billy "The Blue Bear" Astrakhov on HBO was big enough for the book, that Frankie Dunn (or Jerry Boyd) would have attached much importance to any belt involved is a dubious proposition indeed.

For all its unrealistic flaws, "Million Dollar Baby" is a terrific film, and if one movie-goer in ten is inspired to buy and read "Rope Burns" (or, in its new incarnation, "Million Dollar Baby," the book) it will have served an even greater purpose. The real pity is that Jerry Boyd wasn't around to enjoy Oscar night.