

A Fitting Tribute to Vikki LaMotta

Written by Aaron Tallent

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At first thought, Knockout by the late Vikki LaMotta and Thomas Hauser conjures up images of a nude, motorcycle-bound Anika Rodman on the cover of Worse Than He Says He Is: White Girls Don't Bounce.

I know, I know. Don't judge a book by its cover. But athlete spouse's autobiographies historically have given us little reason not to. In Anika's case, her book was a direct response to Dennis Rodman's Bad As I Wanna Be, which also featured its author sitting naked on his own motorcycle. Often, these authors only have a book deal because a publisher wants dirt on the ex, and the narrative is often a ghostwritten hatchet job. Most are also written out of desperation, as the spouse usually has a reputation to defend and bills to pay.

LaMotta, the ex-wife of former middleweight champion Jake LaMotta, did not fall into these categories for several reasons. A stunning beauty, she married Jake when she was 16 years old with a baby on the way and had two more children with him. As his wife, she saw him win the middleweight title and saw him through his subsequent self-destruction. He did not make it easy for her and beat her frequently even after she left him.

Her first date after divorcing Jake in 1957 was with Johnny Carson. Her first boyfriend was mob boss Sam Giancana. She married again in 1962 to a singer named Tony Foster and had one child with him, but the marriage would not last.

In the late 1970s, she worked closely with Martin Scorsese and Robert DeNiro in the making of Raging Bull. Not only was she trying to help them achieve accuracy, she was simply trying to keep Jake from sullyng her name. After the movie was released, she posed for Playboy at the age of 51. The success from that allowed her to launch Vikki LaMotta Cosmetics, which enabled her to remain financially stable until her death in January of 2005.

While the book was released earlier this year, it was finished almost two decades ago. In the book's introduction, Hauser explains that he and LaMotta worked on her life story in 1986 and 1987, and that she "was painfully honest about some of the horrifying experiences that she endured." When the finished book received a publishing offer, LaMotta balked, uncomfortable with how the revelations would settle with her family and friends. "Maybe after I'm gone," she told Hauser.

After LaMotta's death, her son, Harrison Foster, called Hauser seeking a copy of the manuscript. After reading it and absorbing many untold stories about his mother, he contacted Hauser and asked him to reconsider publishing the book as a tribute to her.

Harrison was the only son between LaMotta and Foster. The children of Vikki and Jake had already seen one parent tell his life story. When Jake LaMotta first published Raging Bull in 1970, it received minimal attention. As far as writing goes, the book is downright mediocre, but Jake's unapologetic storytelling and guttural prose have since turned the book into a must-read

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piece of boxing history. Part of the book's draw is its seemingly brutal honesty, as Jake admits to raping women, beating his wives, stealing, and believing that he had murdered a man for more than ten years. While the movie depicts Jake's spiritual redemption, the filmmakers were not necessarily sure it ever happened. Paul Schrader, who co-wrote the screenplay once said, "I don't think Jake was redeemed in life as he was in the film." After reading about Jake's vile acts for more than 200 pages, one could care less about his redemption; however, you cannot help but appreciate his truthfulness.

In Knockout, LaMotta counters that Raging Bull did not portray her, or Jake, accurately. She said some parts of the book give Jake too much glorification and that some parts – believe it or not – make him look worse. Raging Bull was coauthored by Joseph Carter and Pete Savage, but as she put it, "Jake supplied the raw data; Pete embellished it; Joseph Carter did most of the work." She blames Savage for most of the book's inaccuracies. In Raging Bull, Savage is a major part of Jake and Vikki's lives. According to Vikki, she met Savage one time during her marriage with Jake.

While there is some clarification, the book is not a "she said" companion piece to Raging Bull. LaMotta spends two pages discussing the discrepancies in the section of Knockout that focuses on the making of the Raging Bull movie. Her involvement in the production drastically increased after she received a first draft of a screenplay from Savage that included a scene where Jake hypnotized her and forced her to perform oral sex on one of his friends.

During the preproduction, she worked closely with Scorsese, DeNiro, and Cathy Moriarty, who played her in the film, to provide historical background. One of the book's most memorable scenes involves her describing the sexual tension when DeNiro visited her home in Miami in his preparation for the role.

The book does focus a great deal on Jake and Raging Bull because it obviously represents a major portion of LaMotta's life. However, she also spent a great deal of time with Frank Sinatra, and provides interesting insights on his turn-on-a-dime meanness. She also dated Giancana and describes him as treating her much more gently than Jake.

But the dynamic with her parents and children is just as interesting as her dealings with celebrities and mobsters, especially when LaMotta discusses posing for Playboy. Still a knockout at the age of 51, she received the offer to pose after the release of Raging Bull, and finally did after much deliberation and discussion with her children.

Hauser, a superb writer who has authored more than 30 books, including Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times, emphasizes these points of LaMotta's life that were important to her, along with those that interest the general public. The narrative reads as if LaMotta is discussing her life in detail, and not as if Hauser has slickly made due with raw information.

When discussing Playboy, LaMotta stated that, "writing this book makes me feel far more exposed than being photographed naked." Considering the book's vulnerable charm, it is no surprise that she did not want to publish it while she was living. In the end, the delay in its release may prove to be a blessing to her memory. If it had been published in the late 1980s, it

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would have likely been perceived as nothing more than a capitalization on the success of Raging Bull. But now, LaMotta's life story will receive the attention and appreciation that it deserves.

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