

Norman Mailer, Hitler and Sonny Liston

Written by Robert Ecksel

Tuesday, 13 February 2007 19:00

"I respect most boxers because they're violent people who learned to discipline themselves ... a good boxer is an artist ... Boxing is existential — some fights are better than others." – Norman Mailer

I just finished Norman Mailer's new novel, "The Castle in the Forest," his fictional account of the conception, early years, and adolescence of Nazi Dybbuk Adolf Hitler, and the reader in me couldn't be more satisfied. If you're interested in writing, history, good versus evil, you might want to give America's senior Man of Letters' new book a try. While reading "The Castle in the Forest," while reading Mailer, I couldn't help but be reminded how lucky boxing is to have had a writer of his stature turn his attention, lavish his prose, on our complex sport.

Norman Mailer's "The Fight" (1975) is a classic of its form, whatever that form is, because it is as genre busting now as when it was first written. "The Fight" gives an insider's account of the Ali/Foreman "Rumble in the Jungle" and is a romp of a read from the first page to the last. If you want to ride shotgun alongside Ali, with Norman Mailer as your talisman and guide, check out Mailer's "The Fight."

Two of Mailer's early boxing essays were included in a collection of his work called "The Presidential Papers" (1963), and one of those essays contains a memorable description of Sonny Liston before his first fight with Floyd Patterson in 1962. I've been thinking about Liston more than usual these days. With every latest Tyson nosedive, Sonny Liston comes more to life.

Mailer, with about 100 members of the press, visited Liston at Aurora Downs, a racetrack 35 miles west of Chicago, where the challenger's temporary training camp had been set up. The press was ferried to Aurora Downs by a small fleet of limos—those were the days—"down a blacktop road" where there was a "quick view of a grandstand and part of a small abandoned racetrack... It was there," wrote Mailer, "Liston had jumped rope to the sound of Night Train, performing with such hypnotic, suspended rage that the reporters gave most of their space to describe this talent."

The press crowded into the clubhouse restaurant, "a cold, chilly room, perhaps a hundred feet long, roped off at the rear to give privacy to Liston's quarters, and the surfaces all seemed made of picture-window glass, chromium, linoleum, and pastel plastic like Formica." In a room like that, the only hope of warmth was likely to come from Sonny Liston, or from one of his volatile handlers.

The junket had been arranged to generate copy, but also to provide witnesses, eyewitnesses, expert witnesses, to the selection of gloves—"Everlast vs. Frager"—for the fight between Liston and Patterson at Comiskey Park.

Because Mailer is small in size if not in stature, he had to stand on a chair to get a good view

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of the action, which was just starting to heat up the cold room. Mailer saw a “thin man in a green sweater, with a long, hungry nose and a pocked angry skin still alive from an adolescence where one hot boil had doubtless burst upon another,” who “was now screaming at everyone in sight.” He was screaming at Cus D’Amato, Patterson’s manager/promoter, he was screaming at Nick Florio, who along with his brother Dan was working Floyd’s corner for the Liston bout, and he was screaming at Joe Triner of the Illinois State Athletic Commission.

The man in the green sweater doing all that screaming was Jack Nilon, “Liston’s manager or adviser,” who’d been brought onto Liston’s team by “various beneficent forces in Philadelphia who decided Sonny,” the ex-con, “needed rehabilitation in his front window as much as in his heart.” Which sounds good on the face of it, but “How Nilon could scream!” Some men scream to be heard over the din of reason, but Nilon screamed for other reasons: “It turned out, bang-bang,” wrote Mailer, “that the new gloves for Liston were a fraction over eight ounces,” and “Nilon was having none of that.”

The Commission guy, Triner, looked sick to his soul and said, “They weighed eight ounces at the Commission’s office today.”

Nilon screamed, “Don’t give me none of that. They got to weigh in right here. How do I know what kind of scale you use?”

“What do we want to cheat you on a quarter of an ounce for?” asked Triner, hoping to defuse the situation.

“Just to get Sonny upset,” screamed Nilon again. “Just to get Sonny upset.”

Mailer wrote that Nilon’s last outburst was “as if he were pouring boiling oil.”

Then Liston appeared—and he was a sight for sore eyes. Mailer wrote that Liston “was wearing a dark-blue sweat suit, and he moved with the languid pleasure of somebody who is getting the taste out of every step. First his heel went down, then his toe. He could not have enjoyed it more if he had been walking barefoot through a field. One could watch him picking the mood out of his fingertips and toes. His handlers separated before him. He was a Presence.”

Liston asked, “What the hell’s going on?”

As Liston glanced around the room, Mailer looked into his eyes: “From the advance publicity one had expected to look into two cracks of dead glass, halfway between reptile and sleepy lizard,” but they were actually “dark, brimming, eloquent... You did not feel you were looking at someone attractive, you felt you were looking at a creation.”

While waiting for an answer as to what the hell was going on, Liston “pulled on one of the gloves, worked his fist about on it, and slapped the glove down on the table. ‘It still don’t fit,’ he cried out in an angry voice of a child. Everybody moved back a little.”

Liston’s cutman, “another dragon, Pollino... a lean Italian with an angry cropped-up face,”

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screamed at whoever would listen, "He's not going in the ring with gloves over regulation weight."

D'Amato pointed out that the scales weren't official, the official scales were at the commission, where the gloves were weighed earlier in the day.

Pollino looked hard at D'Amato and screamed, "Wha' do you call the official scale? There is no official scale. I'll bet you a thousand dollars they're more than eight ounces."

Nilon had something he wanted to scream at the commissioners: "Why do you bother my fighter like this? Why don't you go over to Patterson's camp and bother him the day before the fight? What's he doing? Sleeping? He doesn't have a hundred reporters looking down his throat."

Sonny Liston was getting restless. "I don't want to stand much more of this," he said in a voice Mailer described as "the child's voice he used for display of temper."

"This is the sort of thing gives reporters a chance to ask stupid questions." Liston paused. "Just stupid questions, that's all."

Mailer wrote that Liston's mood was changing: "His mood could shift as rapidly as the panoramic scenes in a family film. Suddenly he was mild, now he was mild. He tapped the gloves on the table, and said in a gentle voice, 'Oh, they're all right. Let's use them.' Then lightly, sadly, he chuckled, and added in his richest voice, 'I'm gonna hit him so hard that extra quarter of an ounce isn't gonna be any more than an extra quarter of an ounce he's being hit with.'"

Sonny Liston got that right.