Does amateur boxing teach young people anything besides how to land a jarring punch? Is boxing even a sport, like basketball? And why do boxers embrace the sweet agony of prizefighting at all?

Former Golden Gloves title contender Peter Wood explores the unseen world of gym rats and bad apples, and how pain forges athletic beauty, in his new memoir, A Clenched Fist—The Making of a Golden Gloves Champion.

The book recalls Peter's experiences coaching graceless, troubled, inner-city kids to be warriors.

"I teach kids to fight," he says. "Without their realizing it, I sculpt their suffering into beauty. I chisel their anger and fear into confidence and power."

A literary blend of Rocky and Up the Down Staircase, A Clenched Fist follows two teens as they try to navigate the merciless gauntlet of training, sparring and proving themselves in the ring. Both boys, and Wood, have demons lurking—but only one boy finds the courage to win.

What explains this boxing obsession? "Essentially, boxing transports us back to what we were before we became civilized," the author believes. "Boxers are our civilized cavemen."

A Clenched Fist differs from all other boxing books because its backdrop is the amateur competition known as the New York City Golden Gloves tournament. The book brings the intriguing subculture of amateur boxing up close. Like a hook to the jaw.

"Show me a boxer and I'll show you an unhappy childhood," he writes.

Fist will also shock, surprise and delight readers with boxing trivia, such as the "Jack Johnson Kiss" that's passed down to every generation; speculation about why so few boxers die of cancer; the many similarities between boxers, monks and whores; and even Mike Tyson's rumored bisexuality.

Recently TSS spoke to Peter Wood.

Tell us about your book.

A Clenched Fist covers my first year of coaching in the bizarre underbelly of amateur boxing. It's about very troubled teens who want to be a New York City Golden Gloves champion, but who has the right stuff?

Why did you write the book?

Two reasons. First, to explore my belief that boxing is more of a religion or philosophy than a sport. Second, I'm not even sure boxing is a sport. You play a sport. You play baseball, football, soccer, but you don't play boxing. In fact, it's the opposite of playing: it's fighting!

Who is the audience for your book?

A Clenched Fist will appeal to sports fans as well as to regular folks. Readers will identify with a troubled teen who veers off into rocky turf but manages to find the guts to achieve glory.

You were a pretty good amateur boxer yourself, right?

I was the middleweight finalist in the 1971 New York Golden Gloves Tournament. I also boxed for the U.S. in Montreal and was 1st alternate in the Maccabian Games in Tel Aviv. My record was 34-1. Yeah, I was decent, but I was no Mark Breland, Alex Ramos or Howard Davis.

Did any specific events in your life inspire you to write this book?

My stepfather's violent tongue inspired me. His tongue was like Sonny Liston's fist. Painful. I couldn't outthink him, but I could outdo him physically. I could fight. Fighting was my art.

Why does boxing, ugly as it can be sometimes, continue to mesmerize us?

Boxing is every base instinct displayed in an elevated ring from which one person leaves deified, the other diminished. Honor, treachery, dreams won and lost...it's all there. We're drawn to boxing because it's the closest thing to legal assault and battery. It's the Roman Coliseum, here and now.

The media certainly is having a love affair with boxing these days—even MMA.

The New York Times reviewed 5 new boxing books last year; Million Dollar Baby won 4 Academy Awards; Cinderella Man grossed $100 million; PBS aired Ken Burns' documentary about Jack Johnson, Unforgivable Blackness; and Rocky Balboa keeps coming back. Boxing has a rich, colorful history. MMA doesn't.

Your real parents were artists, weren't they?

My real dad was a professional songwriter. He wrote some big hits: "My One and Only Love," "Till Then" and "Shoo Fly Pie & Apple Pan Dowdy." And my mom is an accomplished oil painter.

Your background is not a typical boxer's background.

No. I think I became a boxer in order to balance myself out. I'm still trying to figure it all out. Boxing is stupid. I hate it. I love it. I hate it. I love it.

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It's this brutal honesty which makes Wood's A Clenched Fist a must read.

Wood writes, "I'm the new boxing coach. I already know the kids—fools, lost souls, loners and losers.

Boxing is stupid.

I hate boxing. I hated boxing the day I laced up my first pair of brown Everlast gloves at eight years old. I hated it 14 years later when I quit. But boxing saved my life. Boxing was the blood-sucking leech that fed upon my anger, my hurt, my hate, and my fear. Boxing purified me.

That's why I love it.

In two days I'll be introducing this sport to a generation of angry, hurt, and hateful boys. What's wrong with me?

Boxing is insane."

Other subjects Wood tackles:

§ Why do boxers fight, and what do they really want to achieve?

§ What is it like to train for and compete in a prestigious amateur tournament?

§ How does amateur boxing differ from the pros?

§ The history of the venerable Golden Gloves Tournament, first staged in 1927.

§ How does boxing purge athletes of their anger and create magic?

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Whether Wood "loves" or "hates" boxing, a reader will love A Clenched Fist. It is packed with abounding energy, honesty, and astute observations. Did I mention excellent writing? Wood has certainly learned a lot about himself, and life, from boxing. Boxing was his Harvard and Yale. Pick up A Clenched Fist and read it—it's a first round knockout!

Other endorsements for A Clenched Fist:

"Wood, a former amateur fighter, jabs and punches his words. His paragraphs are quick flurries and each chapter is an exciting, hard-fought round. A Clenched Fist is a definite knockout!"

—Alex Ramos, 4-Time NYC Golden Gloves Champion; Founder of Retired Boxers Foundation

"Wood writes like I used to fight—with blood, guts and courage."

—Vito Antuofermo, 1970 NYC Golden Gloves Champion; 1978 Middleweight World Champion

"A Clenched Fist is a raw, vivid and rare glimpse into a fighter's heart, mind and soul. It's impossible to read this book unmoved. It's like sitting ringside and getting your shirt splattered with warm blood. Don't miss it!"

—Gerry Cooney, 2-Time NYC Golden Gloves Champion; Founder of F.I.S.T., an organization that helps former fighters.

"A Clenched Fist is a sick and beautiful book—just like boxing is a sick and beautiful sport. I couldn't put it down."

—Mark Breland, 5-Time NYC Golden Gloves Champion; 1984 Olympic Gold Medal winner; WBA World Champion

"Wood, as a middleweight, hit his opponents on the head with punches; now he hits the reader in the brain with words. Fist is an exciting, insightful and inspiring book about the courageous men and women who step into the ring to prove themselves."

—Bert Sugar, Internationally acclaimed boxing writer; Former Editor-Publisher of The Ring

"If Peter Wood was as good a boxer then as he is a writer now, we'd be watching his old championship fights on ESPN Classic. He throws a sweet sentence and can knock you out with a paragraph."

—Robert Lipsyte, Author of The Contender

About the author:

Peter Wood's previous works include the autobiography Confessions of a Fighter; columns in The New York Times, Commonweal, The Ring and Boxing Illustrated.