



Gene Tunney had four children. One of them, Jay Tunney, has written an intriguing book.

The Prizefighter and the Playwright details the relationship between the former heavyweight champion and the Nobel-prize-winning playwright George Bernard Shaw. It would be more accurately titled The Prizefighter, the Heiress, and the Playwright, since Tunney's courtship of and marriage to Polly Lauder is given equal play.

Tunney was born in 1897 and turned pro at age eighteen. The only loss in his 77-bout career came at the hands of Harry Greb. Thereafter, he defeated Greb twice and emerged victorious over Jack Dempsey in two of the most-storied heavyweight championship fights of all time. He

## Literary Notes: From Thomas Hauser

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Wednesday, 19 January 2011 06:55

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retired from ring in 1928 and stayed retired; the first man to achieve that dual distinction.

“What is boxing?” Tunney once asked before answering his own question: “The ability to coordinate mind and muscle at a critical moment; that is all.” But in a more reflective vein, he added, “The prize ring is a terrifying place. You’re on a platform glaring with bright light. All around, you see the dim expanse of the crowd. Faces nearby are clearly lighted by the glare. You see expressions of frantic excitement, emotions produced by sympathetic reaction, fear, the lust for battle, rage, gloating, savagery, mouths open and yelling. You hear the roar. It’s the howl of the mob for blood.”

Tunney never graduated from high school. But he read prolifically to pass the boredom of training camp and as a road to self-improvement. His tastes leaned toward the classical. That became fodder for the sporting press prior to his 1926 challenge of Dempsey.

A reporter named Brian Bell was assigned by the Associated Press to interview Tunney at his training camp in Speculator, New York. Instead of writing the typical pre-fight piece, he crafted an in-depth feature story about a fighter who read classical works.

Bell’s article ran in newspapers across the country. But rather than lift opinions of the challenger, it subjected him to derision.

Paul Gallico of the New York Daily News opined, “I think Tunney has hurt his own game with his cultural nonsense. It is a fine thing that he has educated himself to the point where he no longer says ‘dese’ and ‘dem’ and ‘dose’ and where he can tell one book from another and indicate some familiarity with their contents. But the man who steps into the ring with Dempsey with nothing but his hands as weapons needs to be a fighter and nothing but. He will have to have a natural viciousness and nastiness well up in him that will transcend rules and reason, that will make him want to commit murder with his two hands. I don’t think that Master Tunney, who likes first editions and works of art, has it in him.”

Writers were sent to quiz Tunney on his knowledge of the classics in the hope of tripping him up.

A Chicago policeman named Mike Trant, who hung out with Dempsey, famously told the champion, “The fight’s in the bag, Jack. The [expletive lost in the haze of history] is up there reading a book.”

Jay Tunney writes, “Once he realized he was being made a laughingstock, Gene agonized over it, worrying that he was too sensitive, yet unable to put it behind him. In telling the truth, in trying to be himself, he had been held up to ridicule.”

Later, the fighter himself noted, “It never occurred to me that a habit of reading could be seen as a stunt or a joke. Wasn’t reading something we wanted to champion?”

But to a degree, Tunney poured fuel on the fire. He maintained that he spent the day after winning the title from Dempsey studying Meditations by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

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And according to his son, the fighter claimed he was late leaving the rented house that he lived in prior to the second Dempsey bout because he was re-reading the last two chapters of *Of Human Bondage* by Somerset Maugham.

“Sorry,” Gene reportedly said. “I lost track of time. Had to finish Maugham, you know; the last few pages. It’s his best.”

Whatever he did or didn’t read, Tunney faced his greatest ring challenge later that night. He was knocked down in the seventh round and climbed off the canvas to prevail in boxing’s historic “long count” fight.

“A knockdown is a fighter’s ultimate crisis,” Jay Tunney writes; “the instant in battle when he has to prove he’s a general in the ring. Whether a boxer can physically and mentally handle those seconds on the canvas determines not only who wins the fight but often marks the rest of his career.”

Tunney began actively courting Polly Lauder after beating Dempsey for the second time. He was thirty years old, one of seven children born into a poor Irish-Catholic family in New York. She was ten years younger and had grown up in Greenwich, Connecticut, surrounded by maids, butlers, cooks, gardeners, chauffeurs, and governesses.

Lauder was a society girl, an heiress. Percy Rockefeller lived on the estate next door. Tunney’s mother was of a class that would have been hired to scrub the floors in the Lauder home. When Mary Tunney first saw the mansion that Polly lived in, she told her son that she was glad she didn’t have to clean it.

Tunney’s engagement to Polly Lauder was announced on August 8, 1928, two weeks after his last fight and one week after he officially retired from boxing. They were married in Rome on October 3rd of that year.

“His old friends thought he was a snob for marrying rich and moving uptown with the Protestant Yankees,” Jay Tunney notes. “Some of the uptown crowd felt he should go back to the docks. He was near the golden circle of America’s power establishment, but also outside of it; a man between two worlds and part of neither one.”

Be that as it may; the marriage lasted until Tunney’s death in 1978 and appears to have been a happy one. Polly lived till the remarkable age of one hundred.

After Tunney retired from boxing, he lived what his son calls “a lifetime of grappling with balancing his past ring celebrity against his personal interests of reading, music, the arts, and, later, business. Boxing was his key to meeting the people he wanted to meet.”

George Bernard Shaw was interested in boxing and had sparred a bit as a young man. “There is no sport,” he wrote, “which brings out the difference in character more dramatically than boxing.” Indeed, Shaw’s first published novel – *Cashel Byron’s Profession* (published in 1886) – centered on a boxer who wins a championship and courts a young aristocratic woman.

## Literary Notes: From Thomas Hauser

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Furthering the coincidental parallels between Cashel Byron and Tunney, Shaw had written in that book, "The prizefighter is no more what the spectators imagine him to be than the lady with the wand and the star in the pantomime is really a fairy queen."

Tunney had approached Shaw through the playwright's agent in October 1926 to inquire about playing the lead in a proposed stage version of Cashel Byron's *Profession*. Shaw declined to pursue the project. They met for the first time in December 1928 at a luncheon hosted by Shaw at his London home. A vacation in Brioni (a cluster of Islands in the Adriatic Sea) the following year solidified their friendship, although the vacation was tinged with unwanted drama. An infected abscess on Polly's appendix turned gangrenous and brought her to the edge of death.

The former champion and the playwright enjoyed their relationship. For Tunney, it also validated his self-image and intellectual view of himself.

"I think of Shaw as the most considerate person I have ever known," he said years later. "He was helpful, directing me on questions of literature, music, art, thought. He was patient with me. No period of my life was more valuable than the long walks we took together on Brioni. It was like a matriculation in a cosmic school. He was the teacher; I was the pupil."

Shaw, for his part, fondly recalled a film of the second Tunney-Dempsey fight that he had watched and noted. "I never saw anything so wonderful as Tunney's dance round the ring when he got up with Dempsey rushing after him and slogging wildly until Gene suddenly stopped and countered with a biff that made poor Jack believe he was going to die."

Yet Shaw's fondness for Tunney stopped short of uncritical admiration. In 1932, the former champion authored his autobiography (*A Man Must Fight*) and proudly presented a copy to his intellectual mentor. Shaw read the book and responded with a letter that read in part, "Just as one prayer meeting is very like another, one fight is very like another. At a certain point, I wanted to skip to Dempsey."

Jay Tunney writes nicely and he understands boxing (which he calls "the most punishing and individual of all sporting contests"). He's on solid ground when he highlights the courage that the public demands of fighters and "the conditioned grace of an athlete." In his hands, the Tunney-Lauder courtship and marriage are lovingly recreated. And the book offers an interesting portrait of George Bernard Shaw, although too much of the Tunney-Shaw material is tedious social-diary trivia.

The book draws heavily on interviews, letters, photographs, and other documentation within the Tunney family; material that has been unavailable to other writers. That's a strength, but it also raises questions of credibility.

*The Prizefighter and the Playwright* is a son's homage to his parents. It gives the impression that Gene and Polly Tunney lived a fairy tale life.

As previously noted, the Tunneys had four children (the eldest of whom served as a United States Senator from 1965 to 1977). There is no mention in the book of their daughter, Joan

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Tunney Wilkinson, who was committed to a facility for the criminally insane after murdering her husband in 1970. Depending on which contemporaneous newspaper account one reads, the victim's head was shattered by a club or severed by a meat cleaver.

It would appear as though some demons lurked in the happy Tunney home.

That said; it's fitting to close on a positive note.

After Tunney's death, Jim Murray wrote, "He was the best advertisement his sport ever had. He could outbox, outthink, outspeed any fighter of his day."

And summing up, Jay Tunney says of his father, "He was fighting for a life beyond the ring. He was fighting to be a respectable gentleman. He had grown up believing in his imagination and aspiring to be someone more than what was expected for him."

Thomas Hauser can be reached by email at [thausen@rcn.com](mailto:thausen@rcn.com) . His most recent book ("Waiting For Carver Boyd") was published by JR Books and can be purchased at <http://www.amazon.co.uk/> or <http://www.abebooks.com>.

Hauser says that Waiting for Carver Boyd is "the best pure boxing writing I've ever done."

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