

Kimball and Schulian Talk Fightwriting, Part 2

Written by The Sweet Science
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American writers have always been fascinated by the ring—by the primal contest inside the ropes and the crazy carnival world outside them. From back-alley gyms and smoke-filled arenas to star-studded casinos and exotic locales, they have chronicled unforgettable stories about determination and dissipation, great champions and punch-drunk has-beens, colorful entourages and outrageous promoters, and, inevitably along the way, have written incisively about race, class, and spectacle in America. Like baseball, boxing has a vivid culture and language all its own, one that has proven irresistible to career sportswriters and literary essayists alike.

This gritty and glittering anthology gathers a century of the very best writing about the fights. Here are Jack London on the immortal Jack Johnson; H. L. Mencken and Irvin S. Cobb on Jack Dempsey vs. Georges Carpentier, the first “Fight of the Century” that captivated the world in the 1920s; Richard Wright on Joe Louis’s historic first-round knockout of Max Schmeling; A. J. Liebling’s brilliantly comic portrait of a manager who really identifies with his fighter; Jimmy Cannon on Archie Moore, the greatest fighter of the 1950s; James Baldwin and Gay Talese on Floyd Patterson’s epic tilt with Sonny Liston; George Plimpton on Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X; Norman Mailer on the Rumble in the Jungle; Mark Kram on the Thrilla in Manila; Pete Hamill on legendary trainer and manager Cus D’Amato; Mark Kriegel on Oscar De la Hoya; and David Remnick and Joyce Carol Oates on Mike Tyson. National Book Award-winning novelist Colum McCann (*Let the Great World Spin*) offers a foreword.

One thing we discover is that Ali was not the only eloquent fighter. The book includes a stunning piece of writing by Gene Tunney about his fights with Jack Dempsey. And David Remnick hails Archie Moore for his monologues “worthy of Molly Bloom or the Duke of Gloucester.” How important is a fighter’s personality—or articulateness—to his career? Do fighters still have personalities?

Kimball: I never met Gene Tunney. One’s inclination is always to be skeptical about boxer-authored pieces, but I think in this case it’s safe to say that Gene wrote every word of his account of the Dempsey fights—and that if anybody did touch up his prose it was probably somebody like George Bernard Shaw or Thornton Wilder, which is OK by me. Tunney’s son Jay recently published an entire book on Gene’s friendship with Bernard Shaw, which included the startling (to me, anyway) revelation that when Tunney got married, Thornton Wilder accompanied the couple on their European honeymoon. He and Gene went mountain climbing together in the Alps. I did know Archie Moore, who was every bit as articulate and intellectual and absolutely spellbinding as Remnick says he was. If anything, I think that in comparing him to Molly Bloom and Gloucester, David might be selling Arch a bit short. But no, a fighter needn’t necessarily be articulate, at least in the conventional sense, to be a great fighter, or for that matter even a great interview. Sonny Liston communicated mainly in grunts, but he had an enormously complicated personality. I mentioned the time Liebling, who had never met him before, visited Sonny’s training camp before the first Patterson fight and wrote a wonderful

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account of it. It ended up with Joe as the butt of a Liston practical joke—Sonny pretended to explode in a temper tantrum, hit one of his handlers so hard that he dislodged teeth before shooting another, and then pointed the pistol at a terrified Liebling. What Liebling probably never knew about that visit was that after Liston’s workout and before the fun and games began, Sonny

called his press agent Harold Conrad over to his side of the rec room and said “Ask your fat friend there if he’d like a cup of tea.”

You’re going to tell me a guy like that was inarticulate? Or take Roberto Duran. Because he didn’t speak English, or at least

pretended he didn’t, the complexity of the man largely eluded even most of the people who wrote about him, but when you listen to somebody like Ruben Blades, who knew him better than any boxing writer, deconstruct Duran, you recognize how much of Duran’s public image is really just a caricature. I think Leonard Gardner’s account of the first Leonard fight and Vic Ziegel’s

portrait of Duran in New York, which are both in *At the Fights*, are important in that respect—they humanize a man who was mostly described in flat-out stereotypical fashion, even by people who covered his whole career.

The stories continue after the bell and not all the pieces in *At the Fights* are heroic. “Nowhere to Run,” the piece you wrote, John, profiles the sad later years of Johnny Bratton. And the book ends with Carlo Rotella’s elegiac account of fifty-two-year-old Larry Holmes going ten rounds with 310- pound Butterbean Esch. Why do boxing’s life lessons always seem so much sadder than any others? Does watching the lives of ex-boxers affect writers who cover boxing?

Kimball: You ought to be either his PR man or Butterbean’s dietitian. Esch weighed 334 when he fought Holmes—and that was really svelte, for him. (The Bean weighed more than 400 pounds for the last two fights before he hung up

his gloves.) I’ve heard Pete Hamill say more than once—I’m sure he’s quoting someone, though I’m not sure who—“There are really only two boxing stories—the one about the fighter on the way up, and the one about the fighter on the way down.” In the case of Holmes and Butterbean, both guys sort of fell into the latter category, and Carlo was able to mine that encounter for the pathos it represented. You can count on the fingers of one hand the boxers who are able to retire at the top of their game, on their own terms. Gene Tunney was one, Rocky Marciano another, and if he can keep resisting his impulses, Joe Calzaghe may turn out to be in that company. If there’s one thing you learn if you hang around boxing long enough, it’s that they’re all going to lose, sooner or later,

and when they retire it’s almost a corollary that they’re going to come back. The subtitle of Bill Barich’s story in *At the Fights*, “Never Say Never,” was “Ray Mancini’s last fight,” but of course it wasn’t his last fight. Four years later, Boom Boom tried to come back—twice—and he lost both times. Bob Arum once told me “Never fall in love with a fighter; he’ll eventually break your heart.” Writers who haven’t been inured by boxing sometimes need to learn that lesson the hard way, but when you’ve been around the block a few times, as John and I and most of the writers represented in this book have, you learn to maintain a certain emotional detachment, simply because you know there’s only one way this story is going to come out in the end. I think Rotella subtly gets to the heart of this, or at least to the heart of Holmes, in “Champion at Twilight,” by

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playing Larry off Butterbean. Without belaboring the obvious, you've got this guy who is strong as an ox but can't fight a lick, and for ten years he's been packaged as a self-parody and trotted around the country like the bearded lady in a circus, making other people rich because people will pay money, basically, to gawk at him. In the other corner you've got a guy who held the heavyweight championship for seven unbroken years, beat Muhammad Ali, and was about as financially secure as they ever are when they get out of this game, but as Carlo shows in this piece, Larry Holmes feels even more ill-used by boxing than Butterbean does.

Schulian: The way I see it, melancholy is as much a part of boxing as hands raised in victory. It's there in the scar tissue over fighters' eyes and the mumbled words of guys who stayed in the ring too long and the endless stories of thieving promoters and managers. A lot of the writers who were my heroes—Bill Heinz, Jimmy Cannon, and Mark Kram in particular—drew prose portraits of these lost souls that had the same effect on me as blues in the night. They taught me to remember the people that boxing too often forgets or never thinks of in the first place. For my story about Johnny Bratton, an old welterweight champion, I had no idea what I'd find when I went looking for him, but it wasn't anywhere near as heartbreaking as what I found. He was as far gone as any ex-fighter I've met. And yet the street was the best society could do for him. Worse, the hotel where he slept in the lobby was going to be gentrified, so one more door was going to be slammed shut. My story was a distress signal. I wrote it and never saw the footloose Bratton again. But I know that he lived another fourteen years, and that he was said to have spent the last of them in a retirement home. I like to think he died in a bed with clean sheets.

What are your favorite pieces in the book?

Kimball: My favorite pieces in the book? Come on, man. Which of your children is your favorite?

Schulian: I'll give you three favorites: Mark Kram's piece on the Thrilla in Manila is, to my thinking, perfect. I've long considered Kram one of the great stylists in Sports Illustrated's history, and this is his masterpiece. His language and imagery are rich and vibrant, and there's a full-blooded quality to the emotion he obviously felt as he watched Ali and Frazier wreak havoc on each other. They had all come of age together, and now the writer was watching the fighters turn each other into old men who never should have fought again after this. There's never been a story about a fight that was as powerful or moved me as profoundly. My other favorites are character studies of the kind of rogues who could find only one sport that would have anything to do with them—boxing. John Lardner's "Down Great Purple Valleys" begins with the single greatest lede in journalism history: "Stanley Ketchel was twenty-four years old when he was fatally shot in the back by the common-law husband of the lady who was cooking his breakfast." Red Smith called it "the single greatest novel ever written in one sentence." And the amazing thing is, the story just keeps getting better and better as Lardner unspools the short, crazy life of this go-to-hell middleweight. Fueled by booze and opium, wild about the ladies, and armed with a punch that once flattened Jack Johnson, Ketchel dwelled on the outer edge of boxing's margins, and he paid for it. But, oh, what an unforgettable character. Bummy Davis, the "Brownsville Bum" immortalized by W. C. Heinz, was a different breed of cat, but just as wild and fearless and self-destructive and utterly mesmerizing. What separates the two of them is the circumstances

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of Davis's death. Where the womanizing Ketchel gets played for a sap, Davis, who was a thumb-in-the-eye fighter, stands tall when armed robbers stick up the joint where he's tending bar. One of the robbers calls Davis a "punch-drunk bum" and Davis starts swinging and the robbers start shooting. They're still shooting when he chases them out the door with a bullet in him, and he stays after them until he falls on the sidewalk and dies in the rain. When Heinz paints the picture for us, it's not mere sportswriting. It's writing.

While most of the pieces in the book focus on fights or fighters, some of the most colorful characters are those behind the fighters, as in Pete Hamill's poignant profile of Cus D'Amato. Does everyone involved in boxing have a story? Who do you find are the most memorable non-fighter characters in the book?

Schulian: You better believe they all have stories. Take Wilson Mizner, whom John Lardner described as "a wit and literary con man." Mizner managed Stanley Ketchel for a spell, sprinkling bon mots along the way. He found Ketchel in bed with a blonde, a brunette, and a handsome quantity of opium. Asked what he did, Mizner said, "What did I do? What could I do? I told them to move over." Not exactly a milk-and-cookies anecdote, but boxing isn't a milk-and-cookies sport. Don King was probably smart and guileful enough to succeed at anything he tried, but boxing was the perfect place for his—how to put this?—ethically challenged ways. King wasn't the least bit shy about how he shortchanged fighters and screwed over business partners, but he had that finger-in-a-wall-socket hairdo and that Daddy Warbucks cackle and that way of speechifying like a cross between Shakespeare and Redd Foxx. Big rings and a big cigar, too. A big man physically, or was it just the hair that made him seem towering? It doesn't matter. You couldn't take your eyes off the son of a bitch. He always sent writers away with great material, grand pronouncements and bastardized words—afoxanado, trickeration, Caucasianism—that still crack me up. Mike Lupica captured King perfectly, not just who he was, but who he might have been. My other favorite character in the book is the antithesis of King, a gentleman trainer named Ray Arcel. He was courtly, dignified, soft-spoken, honest. And loyal. He trained Roberto Duran for free and Duran repaid him by quitting against Sugar Ray Leonard. Broke Arcel's heart. But Arcel didn't quit on Duran. He stayed with the guy after that disgrace in New Orleans. Fighters get tossed on the discard pile all the time, but Ray Arcel was too good a man to do that. Once you read Jerry Izenberg's piece about him, you'll understand just how profoundly he could affect your life.

Please feel free to order the book here: <http://bit.ly/hJtvkD>

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