Picture a time before September 11, 2001. Before Columbine. Before Oklahoma City. Before Jonestown. Before Watergate and Kent State. Before Vietnam. Before assassins took Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King. Before Watts. Before Dallas, November 22, 1963. Before "The Bay of Pigs".

The summer of 1960. Camelot.

John F. Kennedy and the warmth and confidence his personality projected quickly are converting millions of American voters via the medium of television. The following November, they would defeat Richard Nixon in his quest for the presidency.

At the Polo Grounds one June evening, Floyd Patterson makes boxing history with one dramatic and devastating left hook.

And across the Atlantic in Rome, an 18-year-old from Louisville, Kentucky, named Cassius Clay is about to burst forth for the first time on the world stage.

Then, he was only a light-heavyweight. But, as he inevitably won the gold medal, unfortunate Olympic opponents wilted under his slashing, two-fisted attacks. Moving about on feathery feet, young Clay suddenly would dart in with a barrage then, before his bewildered foe could respond, be gone.

He would call it "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee." With it, little more than three years later, he would puncture the aura of invincibility of Sonny Liston…the mammoth, malevolent world heavyweight champion.

In the innocence of "The Eternal City," that Brigadoon-like summer of '60 and the succeeding 42 months, Clay would bubble and sparkle. He would fill the nation's sports pages with bombastic doggerel verse that predicted his opponents' demise.

And they fell.

After only 19 professional fights, Clay entered a Miami Beach ring a 7-1 underdog to the massive, surly Liston. "Sonny's fate will be round eight!" seemed so preposterous that bets were made not only on the seemingly inevitable outcome, but whether Clay actually would appear.

But by then, he no longer was the lean, callow youth of Rome.

Dempsey looked as if he'd just stepped out of a back alley. Louis, like some stolid jungle cat. Marciano, as if he'd just dropped his pick and shovel and left the cement mixer.

By the middle 1960's, Cassius Clay looked like he had just stepped off a pinnacle from

Olympus. At 6-3, his still-growing, seemingly golden, body carried 210 supple pounds.

Liston never had a chance; neither did any other heavyweight of the decade.

By 1964, when the exuberant Clay had adopted the Islamic faith…taking the name Muhammad Ali, his skills had become honed like jet-age instruments.

Louis' left jab was like a wrecking ball crashing into the side of a building. Ali's was like a laser beam.

In the mid-'60's, Ali was like no fighter in history. His sleek, wondrous body would swerve and dart about the ring on mercurial legs. Watching him was like being an audience to Toscanini.

He was Nureyev in boxing togs. His mind, arms and legs worked as though to some unearthly symphony. It was as if Gershwin had choreographed his movements. He was as classic to the eye as is "Rhapsody in Blue" to the ear. Stunned opponents looked like they had encountered an alien being.

Ali went through 15-round fights virtually without being hit. He moved with such delicacy, his blows seemed like strokes from a painter…but with the results of a bar-brawler.

But Ali was much more than merely "a fighter." The prize ring was but a lake in his quest for the oceans beyond. No athlete so completely was a synthesis of his time as Ali.

When Blacks rose in Watts and Newark…when thousands of America's young people shouted against a war they termed as immoral, refusing to become a part of it, there was Ali.

When his religious choice was met with repulsion, he replied, "I am America, too…but the part you don't want to see. I'm free; I don't have to be what you want me to be."

During his first championship reign, 1964-'67, his courage openly was questioned. The answer should have been seen during a spring day in Houston, 1967. It was then that Ali refused military induction for religious reasons.

The Hawks immediately, and gladly, proclaimed epithets against him. Ali responded: "I don't have any quarrel with those Viet Cong."

That sentence triggered the greatest brush-fire response in America since the events of

Dec. 7, 1941. Yet Ali stood firm. His boxing license was revoked for three-plus years. He continued to stand firm. Intimidation, whether from Liston or The System, found an invulnerable target in Ali.

Then, grudgingly, it was over. His license was returned. As always, he had prevailed. Once more, he could pursue the craft that he had elevated to a mesmerizing art-form.

After those barren 42 months, how would it be for him in the ring? So-called experts boasted, “Nobody can be away from boxing that long and come back as before.”

But Ali had been away only in body; his spirit had remained to haunt those who dared lay claim to his throne.

On an October evening in Atlanta, Ali again worked his magic. He bridged those countless lost moments with a show of artistry that confounded the world.

First, there was Jerry Quarry. Then, Oscar Bonavena. And finally, “The Fight of Champions”. The true “Fight of the Century”. March 8, 1971. Joe Frazier. The physical clash of two ideologies in America.

For 14 rounds, Ali matched his skills and magic against a seeming machine. Then, with less than two minutes remaining, the public gasped as Ali again displayed the dormant courage that lay just beneath the surface. Like the rest of the proverbial iceberg beyond the tip.

Frazier’s killer-left hook dumped him on the canvas, and everyone left him for dead…led again by those who had been affronted by his choice not to ascribe to the doctrine that his country is inevitably right, regardless of the issue.

But Ali defied the naysayers and finished the momentous fight on his two feet…only to hear the decision against him. He became “the loser, but still champion.”

Undaunted, he began a quest to regain his lost crown. But on another March day, in 1973, there was another mountain. Ken Norton astonishingly broke Ali’s jaw, and the newspapers said: “End of the Ali Legend”.

Yet, 18 months later…once again disdained as a hopeless underdog, Ali used his magic to perform still another miracle. A young brute of a man named George Foreman – with python-like arms – incredibly became the victim.

Their confrontation would occur in a ring pitched under an African canopy, as if in a setting to celebrate the Renaissance of a world thought irretrievable.

Once again, Ali had found the light.

Soon, there would be “The Thrilla in Manila”, his tortuous third encounter with Frazier. In “the nearest thing to death,” Ali again would absorb Frazier’s terrible punishment…yet find something deep in the sanctums of his soul to stave disaster.

At the end of the 14th round, his crusade finally ended; Eddie Futch, in Frazier’s corner, humanely disdained possible victory and allowed his battered gladiator to return no more.

Ali, still a champion, would collapse.

As he had long before walked through the door to boxing immortality, his mortality as champion became increasingly apparent during the following two-plus years.

No longer was he the butterfly who stung like a bee. Now he was a tarantula who waited, plotted and struck. On leaden legs. His bouts assumed a disturbing pattern: he would concede the early rounds, only to grasp victories in the closing ones.

Then, on a February evening in 1978, before the glaring lights of television cameras, the nation and world watched an inferior alley fighter, Leon Spinks, finally push Ali from his precarious tightrope posture.

It was as if the violin somehow had turned on Heifetz. Still, the music was not quite ended. Not yet.

Ali desperately brutalized his aging body for one last aria; even he had to realize that it was to be his final performance in boxing's center stage. Pinza or Pavarotti straining one last time at The Met or Carnegie Hall.

Precisely six months after being dethroned, Ali called upon his final resources to combat the irrevocable sands of time. However, instead of the dazzling, unearthly speed and coordination, he reached back into his store-house of experience to smother the fire of youth against him in the ring.

Guile, more than skill, was the key ingredient for Ali's successful final bow. He now could retire as boxing's once-and-future king.

But Lancelot could only resist the call of the joust for a fortnight. Though Camelot long ago had crumbled, he entered the arena determined to resurrect the glory. He boasted of accomplishing another miracle…the kind he so often had performed.

And, for breathless moments, as he stood to face the foe, the court watched…transfixed by the magniloquence of his latest crusade. Hoping that he could somehow, if only for this final, fleeting evening, create at least the illusion of Camelot.

But neither Lancelot's flesh nor magic could smite down this foe, Larry Holmes…or his inevitable one, time. Ali didn't even depart across his shield. Tragically, he was led away.

However, the splendor of what he had created in countless arenas, across two tumultuous decades, inevitably will transcend the momentary tarnish of a single Las Vegas evening.

His masterpieces in the ring, like the classic works of Gershwin, Picasso and Hemingway, are recorded for posterity.

And, like those works, provide indelible evidence of genius.

(Hal Pritzker's boxing-oriented romance novel Every Summer *is available through Advantage*

Books.)