Boxing attracts writers in much the same was as politics attracts money. The list of those who have been drawn to and written about boxing resembles here and there a list of the glitterati of modern literature. Some writers sentimentalize the noble art while others adopt a realism approach, some write about it from the inside and try to put themselves in the minds of the fighters and then there are some who approach it as an outsider looking in, some brave scribes even take part and become part of their own stories while their contemporaries are happy to remain on the sidelines. For the boxing reader, perception is opened out beyond the ring and voices speak from beyond time and the grave. And then there are the match-ups: Hemingway trying to take on a retired Gene Tunney in his living room and realizing too late how out of his depth he was, Paul Gallico unwisely sparring Jack Dempsey in his prime and paying for it (although it launched his writing career) and the ubiquitous George Plimpton stepping through the ropes to go through a torrid three rounds with Archie Moore. These meetings between boxing and the intelligentsia produced, among other, “The Fight,” “Fifty Grand” and “Shadow Box.” None of these books were the best works of their authors but they stand among the best works written on boxing.

The godfather of modern boxing writing is A.J. Liebling whose book “The Sweet Science” has probably influenced every writer of boxing since 1960. “The Sweet Science,” from which this website takes its name, is a collection of Liebling’s boxing pieces from The New Yorker. Languidly written and bristling with both detail and insight, “The Sweet Science” reanimates the personalities of some of the biggest names in boxing history as Liebling covers, among others, fights involving Archie Moore, Rocky Marciano and Joe Louis. For a brief biography of Liebling, check out my first piece for this website, “Joe Liebling’s Sweet Science.” LINKKK For a longer appraisal of Liebling, check out David Remnick’s “Reporting It All,” originally published in The New Yorker.

Another writer, equally as great as Liebling, is Scotland’s Hugh McIlvanney of the UK papers The Times and, formerly, The Guardian. “McIlvanney on Boxing,” his collected columns on the noble art, stretch over three decades from the second Ali-Cooper bout in 1966 to Mike Tyson’s disqualification to Evander Holyfield in 1997. McIlvanney is a brilliant writer, concise in description and razor-accurate in observation. His prose is informative and thought-provoking without ever jarring the reader from the narrative. To read McIlvanney is to be lured into a comfort zone before being disarmed with logical, concise and constructive arguments. Over forty years, McIlvanney has won the British Press Award for “Sports Journalist of the Year” eight times, the British Sports Councils “Sports Journalist of the Year” three times, the British Press Association’s “Journalist of the Yea”’ and the Boxing Writers’ Association of America’s “Nat Fleischer Memorial Award.” Those four facts recommend McIlvanney more than anything else to a boxing reader.

Just released in a newly-expanded edition that doubles the length of the original, “On Boxing” by Joyce Carol Oates discusses and dissects both the appeal of boxing and its inherent symbolism. “On Boxing” is intelligently written and well-argued but lacks the readability of

McIlvanney or Hauser, which makes it unsuitable for light reading but persisting with it brings rewards. Oates is a fine writer and “On Boxing” is more than a fine book. The new edition contains new chapters on Mike Tyson, Muhammad Ali and Jack Johnson.

The first book I read on boxing was Geoffrey Beattie’s “On the Ropes,” a series of pieces in book form about boxing in the British city of Sheffield, specifically around the Wincobank gym run by Brendan Ingle. I believed when I first read “On the Ropes” that it was one of the best books ever written about boxing; I still do. “On the Ropes” is less concerned with the business of boxing than with the lives of the boxers who careers and lives are centered around the undercard. These fighters lose more than they win and get paid fulfilling a niche in boxing not found in any other sport – that of the professional loser. “On the Ropes’” importance in the canon of boxing literature is doubly ensured as Beattie devotes an entire chapter to the burgeoning career of Naseem Hamed back before the Prince’s ego was only beginning to threaten taking-over. In a similar vein, Beattie’s “The Shadows of Boxing” revisits the same area and subjects after the decline of Hamed; and “England After Dark,” which pre-dates both books, focuses on the night-time activities of the people of Sheffield and is, in itself, another wonderful book about England’s dark heart.

As would be expected for a sport with so many flamboyant personalities and real-life tales of success against the odds, biographies and autobiographies abound and although there is a lot of dross, there are some gems. At the forefront is Roger Kahn’s “A Flame of Pure Fire” which is the definitive biography not only of Jack Dempsey, but the Roaring Twenties when the Manassa Mauler reigned supreme as the heavyweight champion. The only drawback to Kahn’s book is that Kahn paints Dempsey as more of an angel than he probably was. Kahn argues convincingly that Tunney won their 1927 with the aid of the Philadelphia crimelords but at the same time disputes that Dempsey had a loaded glove for his 1919 bout against Jess Willard when evidence clearly suggests otherwise.

A subject as big and with so many differing perceptions as Muhammad Ali seems impossible be summed up in just one book but David Remnick manages it well in “King of the World.” The title, which suggests a book solely about Muhammad Ali, is misleading; “King of the World” is a thoroughly researched, exquisitely crafted and beautifully written work about the Patterson-Liston-Clay/Ali fights of the 1960s, the political background of the period and the significance in terms of ethnic identity that the three fighters represented. I doubt there are better books on Liston or Patterson, and “King of the World” competes easily with my next choice as the best book ever written on Ali. The only drawback to “King of the World” is the poor TV-movie of the same name which, although based on the book, jettisons much of the political and social commentary.

I’m currently about 10% through “Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times.” Up to now, it’s pretty good and Thomas Hauser’s oral history approach both suits his subject and reads well. Hauser won the “William Hill Sports Book of the Year Award” for this book, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and this authorized biography of Ali comes with a recommendation from Hugh McIlvanney. Nothing else is needed for a review or recommendation.

Far more revisionist and skeptical of the Ali legend was the late Mark Kram whose “Ghosts of

Manila" retells the three battles between Ali and Frazier. Kram writes wonderfully and his prose is vividly descriptive of the passions aroused by the Ali-Frazier trilogy but his continual denigration of Ali turns rapidly from focused dissection to character assassination and it's this absence of neutrality in the author that ultimately renders "Ghosts of Manila" an interesting curio rather than a definitive work in its own right.

A far more balanced reassessment of a single contest is Kevin Mitchell's "War, Baby" which recounts the 1995 fight between Nigel Benn and Gerald McClellan. Mitchell recounts the fight in great detail, using it as the springboard for an exploration of violence and the human desire to observe it. The book is also an update on McClellan's present condition and a reminder of the dangers inherent every time a fighter steps into the ring.

Davis Miller (who, in the interests of disclosure I'm currently writing an article on) is the author of three books about his childhood worshipping of Muhammad Ali and, later, Bruce Lee. Miller went on to have a close relationship with the Ali family that later soured. Of the three books, "The Tao of Muhammad Ali" and "The Tao of Bruce Lee" are the best; the third, "The Zen of Muhammad Ali" is a collection of magazine pieces and short fiction, most of which made up the previous two books. There are a few new articles in "The Zen of Muhammad Ali," and the fiction is also a new addition. Although the Ali/Miller relationship is expanded by a new essay in "The Zen of Muhammad Ali," we do not learn much else; the first two books are commendable in their own right and well worth reading.

Ralph Wiley recounts a similar narrative of a life reflected in boxing with his book "Serenity," a litany of experiences involving boxing from his many years as a sports writer. The best chapter is the chapter titled "Mike Tyson" which is written as a letter to his son. The most refreshing and engaging part of "Serenity" is Wiley's view of Mike Tyson where the author argues convincingly that early public misgivings about Iron Mike's conduct had more to do with racism than Tyson's perceived misdemeanors against his early management.

Other honorable mentions for merit in boxing writing go to "Rope Burns" by F.X. Toole, "Dark Trade" by Donald McRae, "Fighting Chance" by Derick Allsop and "Unforgivable Blackness" by Ken Burns.

There are many more books that deserve to be read and discussed and I fully intend to cover them at a later date. Right now, I've got 90% of one to finish.