



Each year during the holiday season, I publish a “top forty” list of what I consider to be the best books on boxing. That list, updated to accommodate recently published titles, follows. Some of these books are now out of print. But with the proliferation of online services like Abebooks.com and Amazon.com, all of them can be found.

*Beyond Glory* by David Margolick (Alfred A. Knopf) -- This book focuses on the two fights between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling. In the process, it recreates the racial climate of the 1930s, puts the fighters in historical perspective, and conveys the incredible importance of their ring encounters. Margolick shows in dramatic fashion how Louis stirred passions and revived interest in boxing long before he beat James Braddock to become heavyweight champion. He captures the demeaning racial stereotyping of The Brown Bomber by the establishment press (including those who were seeking to be kind). And he documents in painstaking fashion, contrary to future revisionism, the degree to which Schmeling took part in various Nazi propaganda activities and supported Hitler after defeating Louis in 1936.

*John L. Sullivan and His America* by Michael Isenberg (University of Illinois Press) Isenberg mined the mother lode of Sullivan material and crafted a work that's superb in explaining the fighter as a social phenomenon and placing him in the context of his times.

*Sound and Fury* by Dave Kindred (Free Press): The lives of Muhammad Ali and Howard Cosell intertwined. Kindred explores the ugly underside of Ali's early adherence to Nation of Islam

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Written by Thomas Hauser

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doctrine and provides an intimate look at The Greatest in his declining years. He also paints a revealing portrait of Howard Cosell, turning the broadcast commentator from caricature and bluster into flesh and blood.

*America on the Ropes* by Wayne Rozen (Casey Press) -- This might be the best coffee-table photo book ever devoted to a single fight. Jack Johnson is still a vibrant figure in American history, but James Jeffries has been largely forgotten except as an appendage to Papa Jack. This book gives both men their due and, in so doing, restores Jeffries' life and lustre. The photographs are extraordinary and arranged perfectly with the text.

*Heroes Without A Country* by Donald McRae (Ecco Press) -- This is a beautifully written book about Joe Louis and Jesse Owens, two icons who changed America. McRae makes old stories seem fresh and new, and his exhaustive research brings new material to light. He is also the author of *Dark Trade*, a look at the modern boxing scene.

*The Sweet Science* by A. J. Liebling (Penguin) -- Eighteen articles from the 1950s and early '60s by the legendary dean of boxing writers. Liebling set the standard to which others aspire. A collection of his later articles has been published under the title *A Neutral Corner*.

*The Hardest Game: McIlvanney On Boxing* by Hugh McIlvanney (Contemporary Books) -- McIlvanney is the British equivalent of Liebling. He's not just a boxing writer. He's a writer who writes very well, among other things, about boxing.

*Rocky Marciano* by Russell Sullivan (University of Illinois Press) -- An honest penetrating look at Marciano in the context of his times, as a person and as a fighter. What's particularly interesting is how often the unbeaten Marciano verged on defeat and his questionable ring tactics.

*Cinderella Man* by Jeremy Schaap (Houghton Mifflin Company) -- Schaap does a fine job chronicling the rise of James Braddock to the heavyweight championship at the height of The Great Depression. He also succeeds particularly well in painting a wonderful portrait of Max Baer and explaining just how important the heavyweight title was seventy years ago.

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*Sweet William* by Andrew O'Toole (University of Illinois Press) -- A solid biography of light-heavyweight great Billy Conn. The two Louis-Conn fights are the highlight of O'Toole's work, but he also does a nice job of recounting the endless dysfunctional family struggles that plagued Conn throughout his life and the boxer's sad decline into pugilistic dementia.

*In the Ring with Bob Fitzsimmons* by Adam Pollack (Win by KO Publications) – Pollack has also authored biographies of John L. Sullivan, James Corbett, and James Jeffries. The books are heavily researched and rely almost exclusively on primary sources. Serious students of boxing will enjoy them.

*The Last Great Fight* by Joe Layden (St. Martin's Press) – This book is primarily about James "Buster" Douglas's historic upset of Mike Tyson. The saga of Iron Mike has gotten old, but Layden brings new material and fresh insights into the relationships among Douglas, his father (Billy Douglas), manager John Johnson, and co-trainers J. D. McCauley and John Russell. He also gives a particularly good account of the fight itself and how Douglas overcame the fear that paralyzed many of Tyson's opponents.

*The Killings of Stanley Ketchel* by James Carlos Blake (William Morrow & Company) -- The life of Stanley Ketchel written as pulp fiction. Blake plays fast and loose with the truth and mixes fact with fantasy in this historical novel. But he writes well and weaves a good tale about boxing and the underside of America at the dawn of the twentieth century.

*Ringside: A Treasury of Boxing Reportage and Sparring With Hemingway* by Budd Schulberg (Ivan R. Dee, Inc.) -- If Schulberg had never written another sentence, he'd have a place in boxing history for the words, "I could of been a contender." These collections of his articles cover seventy years of boxing lore. You might also take a look at Schulberg's novel *The Harder They Fall*

*The Fireside Book of Boxing*, edited by W. C. Heinz (Simon & Schuster) -- One of the grandest

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collections of boxing writing between the covers of a single book. This has been reissued in an updated form by Sport Classic Books. But the original 1961 hardcover has a special feel with unique artwork. Heinz also wrote a very good novel entitled *The Professional*

*The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* by Elliot Gorn (Cornell University Press) -- The title says it all. Gorn puts boxing's early days in their proper social and political context.

*Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* by Geoffrey C. Ward (Alfred A. Knopf) -- This is the companion volume to the PBS documentary by Ken Burns. It's well-written, meticulously researched, and the standard against which future Johnson biographies will be judged.

*Jack Dempsey* by Randy Roberts (Grove Press) -- Three decades after it was first published, this work remains the most reliable source of information about the Manassa Mauler. Roberts is also the author of *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (another fine biography of the most controversial champion in boxing history) and *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man* (a valuable addition to the literature on Louis).

*Champion: Joe Louis, Black Hero In White America* by Chris Mead (Charles Scribner's Sons) -- At the time it was written, this was the most thorough of the Joe Louis biographies. Mead's work serves as a reminder of why the Brown Bomber was so important.

*Black Is Best: The Riddle of Cassius Clay* by Jack Olsen (G. P. Putnam's Sons) -- This is an old one; vintage 1967. But it's a great look at the young Muhammad Ali.

*Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* by Mike Marqusee (Verso Books) -- Muhammad Ali as seen through a decidedly left-wing political lens. Marqusee writes intelligently and understands the larger implications of the Ali phenomenon.

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*At The Fights: American Writers on Boxing* compiled by George Kimball and John Schulian (Library of America) – This collection has fifty pieces representing what its overseers call “the very best writing about the fights.” More selections from the first half of the twentieth century would have been welcome. Be that as it may, *At The Fights* belongs in the honors class of boxing anthologies.

Schulian is also the author of *Writers' Fighters*, an anthology of his own best work.

*In This Corner* by Peter Heller (Da Capo Press) -- One of boxing's first oral histories, chronicling the lives of forty-two world champions.

*Two Ton* by Joseph Monninger (Steerforth Press) -- A short evocatively written book keyed to the 1939 heavyweight championship bout between Joe Louis and Tony Galento. On the plus side; there's some very good writing and an excellent recreation of the fight itself. *Two Ton* captures the spirit of Tony Galento well. On the negative side of the ledger, there are times when Monninger opts for poetic license and hyperbole over accuracy.

*Only In America: The Life and Crimes of Don King* by Jack Newfield (William Morrow & Company) -- Give the devil his due. Don King is one of the smartest, most charismatic, hardest-working men on the planet. Jack Newfield recorded the good and the bad, mostly the bad, in exhaustive detail.

*Fear & Fire: The Inside Story of Mike Tyson* by Jose Torres (Warner Books) -- In 1989, when Tyson was at his peak and beginning to publicly unravel, there was a spate of books about the young champion. This was the best of them.

*Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing In American Society* by Jeffrey T. Sammons (University of Illinois Press) -- Extensively researched and well-written; a valuable historical document.

*Rope Burns* by F. X. Toole (Ecco Press) -- Six short stories, the first five of which are very good. The author is at his best when he describes the behind-the-scenes maneuvering that infests boxing. The book has been re-released under the title *Million Dollar Baby* to take advantage of the movie publicity.

*Ghosts of Manila* by Mark Kram (Harper Collins) -- Whether or not you agree with Kram's thesis, which seeks to elevate Joe Frazier and diminish Muhammad Ali, this work is an interesting read.

*The Prizefighter and the Playwright* by Jay Tunney (Firefly Books) is a son's tribute to his father. Jay Tunney writes nicely and understands boxing. This book details the former heavyweight champion's ring career, marriage, and relationships with Nobel-prize-winning playwright George Bernard Shaw.

*The Greatest Boxing Stories Ever Told* edited by Jeff Silverman (Lyons Press) -- This is a pretty good mix of fact and fiction from Jack London and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to Jimmy Cannon and Frank Deford.

*Boxiana* by Pierce Egan (Nicol Island Publishing) -- This one is for purists and scholars. The most significant writing on boxing in the first half of the nineteenth century was written by Egan and collected in five volumes entitled *Boxiana*. Nicol Island (a small Canadian publisher) is in the process of republishing these volumes in complete and unrevised editions.

*Four Kings* by George Kimball (McBooks Press) -- Kimball recounts the epic nine battles contested among Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvin Hagler, Thomas Hearns, and Roberto Duran between 1980 and 1989. It was a special time for boxing fans and more special for those who, like Kimball, experienced the drama firsthand from the inside.

*The Lion and the Eagle* by Iain Manson (SportsBooks Ltd) -- A dramatic recreation of the historic 1860 fight between the English champion, Tom Sayers, and his American challenger, John C. Heenan. Manson sets the scene on both sides of the Atlantic. In reconstructing the life of each fighter, he gives readers a full sense of time and place. For more on the same

encounter, *The Great Prize Fight* by Alan Lloyd (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan) is an excellent read.

*Muhammad Ali: The Making of An Icon* by Michael Ezra (Temple University Press) – Ezra explores the changing perception of Ali as a moral force with primary emphasis on the commercial interests that have swirled around him over the past fifty years. The end result is a work of scholarship that breaks new ground; particularly with regard to the years 1960 through 1966, when Ali was guided by a group of wealthy white Kentuckians known as the Louisville Sponsoring Group.

*Sweet Thunder: The Life and Times of Sugar Ray Robinson* by Wil Haygood (Alfred A. Knopf) – This is the first biography to fully explain Robinson's legacy in the ring and his importance out of it. Haygood researches thoroughly and writes well, placing Sugar Ray in the context of Harlem and America in the 1940s and '50s. The six wars between Robinson and Jake LaMotta are particularly well told.

*Shelby's Folly* by Jason Kelly - Jack Dempsey vs. Tommy Gibbons is the only championship bout that's remembered more for the site than the fight itself. Shelby, Montana, was one of the most improbable and ill-considered venues ever to host a major championship fight. Kelly explains who, what, how, when, and why.

*The Fixer* by Steve Bunce -- Bunce mixes real-life people and events into his plot in a way that makes the narrative stronger. Events move from London to Las Vegas to Atlantic City, back to London, and finally to Blackpool, recreating the boxing scene every step of the way.

*Liston and Ali* by Bob Mee -- There are hundreds of books about Muhammad Ali, but very little good writing about Sonny Liston. This is very good writing about Liston, who is portrayed as a full flesh-and-blood figure rather than a cardboard cutout from the past.

*James J. Corbett* by Armond Fields – Corbett was onstage for thirty-nine of his sixty-six years and worked hard to develop his craft as a performer. This book is as much about Corbett the actor as it is about Corbett the fighter. Fields also offers readers an engaging look at the San Francisco that Corbett grew up in as well as Corbett's personal life.

**Editor's Note:** Thomas Hauser has authored twenty-two books about boxing that are excellent reading during the holiday season and every other time of year:

*Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*

*Waiting for Carver Boyd*

*Mark Twain Remembers*

*The Black Lights*

*Boxing Is . . .*

*An Unforgiving Sport*

*The Boxing Scene*

*The Greatest Sport of All*

*The Lost Legacy of Muhammad Ali*

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*Knockout*

*I Don't Believe It But I Know It's True*

*Chaos, Corruption, Courage, Glory*

*Muhammad Ali: Memories*

*Muhammad Ali: In Perspective*

*A Beautiful Sickness*

*A Year At The Fights*

*The View From Ringside*

*Brutal Artistry*

*Muhammad Ali & Company*

*The Legend of Muhammad Ali*

*BOX: The Face of Boxing*

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*Winks and Daggers*

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