

Boxing Noir

Written by Springs Toledo
Monday, 18 November 2013 17:31



Adam Berlin's "*Both Members of the Club*"

When the grandfathers of today's hand-wringers were running around with their hats pulled down over their ears hollering that boxing was in its last days, W.C. Heinz published a novel.

The Professional is the story of Eddie Brown, a middleweight with dreams dashed at the end of a fist that was not his own. It is considered by many the greatest boxing novel ever written. I suppose it is. The writing is stripped-down, like a fighter at his weigh-in; hyperfocused, like a man at the end of the line. Heinz added nothing to spare anyone's feelings, including his own. The sudden heartbreak that closes the novel was such that even he couldn't bear to read it again.

Prize fighting, he said without saying, is the ballad of every man and being thus, it isn't going anywhere.

Heinz was one of those boxing "experts" who would wince at the term. He slipped only once in the 334-page edition that I read. Speaking through narrator Frank Hughes, Heinz says that Ezzard Charles "wasn't the complete fighter and that showed in his fights." Out came the pen when I saw that. I wrote "forgot Baroudi" at the margin. Heinz's mistake is the all-too common mistake of overstressing the 1950s version of Charles. The fact is, Charles was as complete a fighter who ever lived in the 1940s—blasting contenders and ex-champions out of their boots and whipping Charley Burley on his own turf before graduating from high school, and then whipping him again, which was unheard of. Charles's blitzkrieg ended the moment Sam Baroudi died at his hands in 1948. The fire was gone after that and the fans and the historians forgot it ever was.

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But I forgave Heinz his oversight, and not just because good Christian Ezzard would insist. I forgave him because he was gifted. “When you want to beat another man,” his narrator says to his fighter, “you try to beat him, literally.” He continues:

You don't try to hit behind the runner, or work the pitcher for a walk or break a curve over the corner of the plate. These are the refinements of civilization ... I like most of the refinements of civilization, but I have to believe that of all games—if that's what we're talking about—yours goes the deepest and, going deepest, goes the furthest toward the truth.

Those words were published in 1958. Today, author Adam Berlin is continuing the tradition of boxing noir. He is exploring the truth of our pre-grave existence; of what Thoreau called “quiet desperation.” Berlin finds traces of it in blinking yellow parking lots, in money changing hands, in the timeless ring. His writing, like Heinz's, is stripped down. Unlike Heinz's, it is not bound by the refinements of previous generations. Berlin, in other words, doesn't blush. The truth he seeks is ruthless truth, and he does so ruthlessly. He teaches writing courses at John Jay College in Manhattan and I have a feeling his more sheltered students get wide-eyed real quick.

Both Members of the Club (Texas Review Press) was published earlier this month. It won the 2012 Clay Reynolds Novella Prize and by page five I could see why. I read it inside of a day. “Pretty soon you'll be a body they use to build other fighters' records,” Sam tells friend and fighter Billy Carlyle (and Ezzard Charles and every other over-the-hill-fighter that ever stumbled out of the ring):

“They'll pay you to bleed and lose and the fans will love watching you because every time you fight your eyes will open up and start gushing and they'll be getting their money's worth.”

□□□ *Sam's sitting all the way forward. She catches herself, sits back in the booth.*

□□□ *“You done?” Billy says.*

□□□ *They're looking at each other, eyes to eyes, a blinking game, one eye with stitches.*

□□□ *“You done?” he says again.*

Wizened Heinz is in these pages, half-illuminated on 33rd and Seventh in New York City, in the dim corridors of Madison Square Garden, in Paris in a gym in Berlin's description of “the pull” that happens when the hooks explode and sweat flies and everything is working right. And Heinz isn't alone. What Heinz was to the word, George Bellows was to the brushstroke. The title of Berlin's novellais spun from Bellows'

Both Members of This Club

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(1909), a masterpiece of realism first exhibited, properly, in an old warehouse on West 35th

Street. The angst depicted in the painting is bigger than the ring. Berlin trains his eye on that. When Sam swears off attending any more of Billy's fights because he's losing—and bleeding, Berlin's narrator reminds her that boxing is merely a reflection of their own quiet desperation without the complications. "There's blood in everything," he says.

Billy can touch the scar tissue over his eyes though he's in denial about what it means. The narrator and Sam wear their scars inside and hide them from Billy, who emerges (as fighters usually do in literature) as the innocent. When he fights, Billy's eyes spring leaks. Berlin asks the reader to look again as he paints with slashing strokes every bit as suggestive as Bellows: The friendship that the three characters had clung to since childhood—itsself a mass of scar tissue—likewise springs leaks.

Bellows' masterpiece is a translucent screen on Berlin's literary stage. But does it bless or haunt? The figure at left looks to me like a homage to the straining loser; especially so given that his opponent is almost certainly the great Joe Gans. His face, partially obscured, is distorted with pain and red with desperation. His arms splay upwards in an effort to ward off the inevitable blows coming his way. And isn't that, ultimately, every one of us?

Berlin has written a first-rate novella about that which puts our backs to the ropes and knocks us and our illusions down and sometimes —out. Like Billy Carlyle, the best of us will go down swinging, but we're all headed in the same direction.

Here's to the losers, Berlin says without saying, bless us all.

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