



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. Taken together, they offer a compelling look at the sweet science from bare-knuckle days to the present. 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. More recently, Christopher Klein has put together a meticulously researched and engaging read in *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan* (Lyons Press).

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 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.

Holiday Reading, 2013

Written by Thomas Hauser

Thursday, 12 December 2013 00:00

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 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.

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

Holiday Reading, 2013

Written by Thomas Hauser

Thursday, 12 December 2013 00:00

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, James Jeffries, Marvin Hart, Tommy Burns, and Jack Johnson. 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 best 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*

One Punch from the Promised Land by John Florio and Ouisie Shapiro (Lyons Press) – The

Holiday Reading, 2013

Written by Thomas Hauser

Thursday, 12 December 2013 00:00

authors do a good job of recounting the saga of Leon and Michael Spinks. The world of abject poverty that they came from is recreated in detail and with feeling. The writing flows nicely, Leon's erratic personality is explored, and the big fights are well-told.

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 Johnson: Rebel

Sojourner

by Theresa

Runstedtler (University of California Press), which focuses on the international reaction to Johnson, is a nice supplement.

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 (Free

Press), another fine biography of the most controversial champion in boxing history, and

Joe Louis: Hard Times Man

(Yale University Press), 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.

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. In a similar vein,

Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties

by Mike Marqusee (Verso Books) looks at Ali through a decidedly left-wing political lens.

At The Fights: American Writers on Boxing compiled by George Kimball and John Schulian

Holiday Reading, 2013

Written by Thomas Hauser
Thursday, 12 December 2013 00:00

(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.

The Big Fight by Sugar Ray Leonard with Michael Arkush (Viking) -- There's a growing belief among those who seriously study boxing that Sugar Ray Leonard is the best fighter of the past fifty years. Two themes run throughout *The Big Fight*. The first centers on Leonard's illustrious ring exploits. The second details a life spiraling out of control in a haze of fame, alcohol, and drugs. The book is an interesting passageway into the mind of a great fighter.

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. More recently, Tyson has had his say in *Undisputed Truth* (Blue Rider Press), a compelling memoir written with Larry Sloman.

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 was re-released under the title *Million Dollar Baby* to take advantage of tie-in 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 relationship 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.

Classic Boxing Stories edited by Paul D. Staudohar (Skyhorse Publishing) is an expanded version of a similar book published previously by Chicago Review Press and is also a good read.

Ray Arcel by Donald Dewey (McFarland and Company) - The image of Ray Arcel that exists today is that of a sage old trainer who knew the science of boxing and was a gentleman. Dewey explores Arcel's life in detail and has an appreciation of boxing and boxing history. The writing is a bit ponderous at times, but the book is intelligent and insightful.

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.

Holiday Reading, 2013

Written by Thomas Hauser

Thursday, 12 December 2013 00:00

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 (University of Nebraska Press) - 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.

At The Fights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing by Howard Schatz (Sports Illustrated Books) – Monet captured the essence of water lilies better than a photograph. The same can be said of Schatz's computer-styled images of boxers. Light and shadow are distorted to show movement. The images convey strength and power, motion and emotion. It's a monumental book in more ways than one, printed on heavy glossy 14-by-11-inch stock with faithful photographic reproductions and splendid production values.

Liston and Ali by Bob Mee (Mainstream Publishing) - 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 (McFarland and Company) – 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.

The Longest Fight by William Gildae (Farrar Straus and Giroux) - Joe Gans receded long ago into a seldom-visited corner of boxing history. This book is keyed to the historic first fight between Gans and Battling Nelson, which took place in Goldfield, Nevada, in 1906. Gildae brings Gans to life, crafting a sense of time and place that will enhance any reader's appreciation his subject.

Holiday Reading, 2013

Written by Thomas Hauser

Thursday, 12 December 2013 00:00

The Good Son: The Life of Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini by Mark Kriegel (Free Press) - Kriegel is a good researcher and a good writer. Th

e Good Son

treats Ray Mancini with respect but acknowledges his flaws. It also conveys an admirable understanding of the sport and business of boxing. This isn't just a book about Mancini. It's a look into a fighter's soul.

Editor's Note: Thomas Hauser has authored twenty-four 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*, *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*, *Winks and Daggers*, *And the New*, and *Straight Writes and Jabs*.

Thomas Hauser can be reached by email at thauser@rcn.com. His most recent book (*And the New: An Inside Look at Another Year in Boxing*) was just published by the University of Arkansas Press.

[WATCH RELATED VIDEOS ON BOXINGCHANNEL.TV](http://BOXINGCHANNEL.TV)

[Comment on this article](#)

Radam G says:

Nice stuff. Nuff said! Holla!