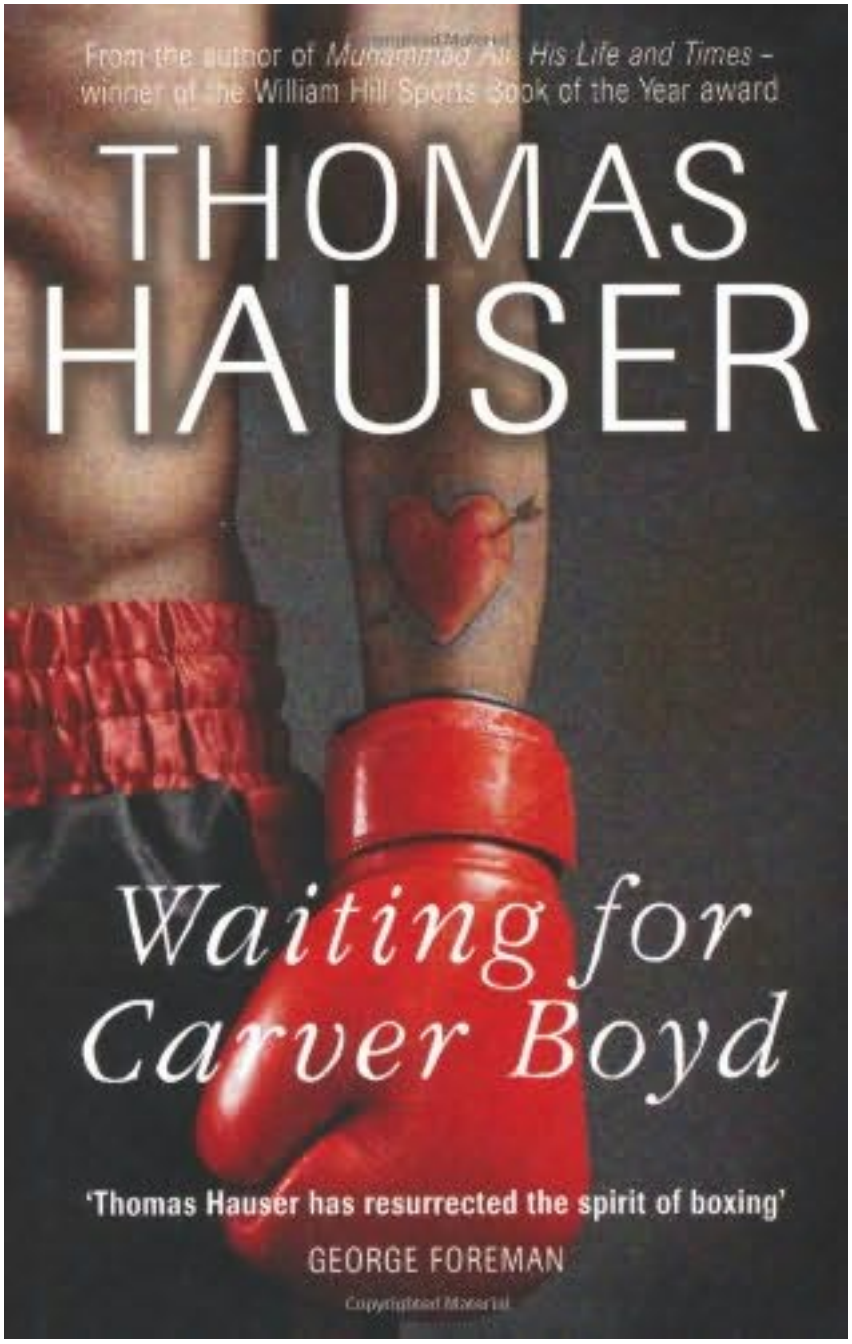

Soulville by Mike Spector is the latest in a long line of novels to explore the world of boxing. The book is set in the 1970s, when Bennie Briscoe, Willie Monroe, Cyclone Hart, Kitten Hayward, and Bobby "Boogaloo" Watts were carving their names into boxing lore. Spector calls it "the golden age of Philadelphia middleweights."

Nick Ceratto (Spector's narrator) is a young photographer for the Philadelphia Journal. A chance assignment takes him to Champs Gym. The street maps say that the gym in located in North Philly. The regulars say that it's in Soulville.

“Soulville’s not a neighborhood,” Spector writes. “At least not the kind of neighborhood you know. Soulville is wherever a Philly fighter steps in the ring at the gym on an ordinary afternoon and fights like a world title is on the line, whenever you and a pretty girl slow dance to Smokey Robinson. It’s the guys on the corner, standing around a fire on a cold night, sharing a bottle of Thunderbird. Soulville’s an attitude. It’s a state of mind.”

Boxing, like Soulville, is a world where, in Spector’s words, the extremes of life come together, break apart, and re-connect in a continuous pattern of survival. A place where hopes and dreams collide regularly with nightmares and diasappointment.

Spector recreates that world well. His characters are nicely drawn with good back stories. The atmosphere, camaraderie, and work ethic of a boxing gym are realistically portrayed. The fight scenes are terrific.

A Greek chorus of characters offers insights throughout the book:

* “Boxing evens things out. Once you’re in that ring, it’s just you and the other guy. Don’t matter what his color or religion is. Ain’t no bullshit. It either is or it ain’t. Most of life ain’t that simple.”

* “The pros is a whole lot different than the amateurs. When you’re in that ring and some animal is right on top of you, slobberin’ and blowin’ snot and throwin’ elbows, you’re gonna wonder what the hell you’re doin’ there. The basics are gonna be the last thing you’ll be thinkin’ about. But the basics are the only thing that you got; the only thing that can save you.”

* “Andrew was angry, the politeness gone. Moishe knew there was a dark side. Always is. That wasn’t necessarily bad. In fact, Moishe thought it was a place that Andrew would ultimately need to get comfortable with if he had half a chance of becoming a champion.”

* “The crowd? It’s like they ain’t even there. You hear them when you first in the ring, but it’s kinda like the ocean in Atlantic City. When you first step out on the boardwalk, you hear them waves hittin’ the shore. But after a while, you stop hearin’ them. You know they there; you just don’t hear them no more.”

* “Some say a man’s life ain’t nothing mo’ than a ‘cumulation of all his days, from the time he born to the time he die. I say that ain’t how it is. A man’s life, most time, come down to a moment – one single moment – a moment where everything come together and give him a chance to find out exactly who he is. What he do in that moment define him for the rest of his life.”

Where boxing is concerned, Spector gets it. Soulville has both soul and heart.

* * *

The First Black Boxing Champions (McFarland & Company) is a collection of fifteen biographical essays; each one about a different boxer who plied his trade sometime between

the early-1800s and the 1920s. As Colleen Aycock and Mark Scott (the book's editors) note in the introductory pages, "These men were foot soldiers in the war against racism. They created opportunity and developed sportsmanship. Ultimately, history needs to credit them for paving the way for other black athletes and performers in the twentieth century."

With fifteen different authors, the writing and scholarship range from good to not-so-good. That said; The First Black Boxing Champions fills a niche in the history of the sweet science.

* * *

The Sweetest Thing by Mischa Merz (Seven Stories Press) recounts the author's experiences as a forty-something amateur boxer.

Merz starts off on solid ground, noting, "The increased acceptance of female athletes in many different sports has given women the freedom to be tough and mean and ruthless."

But after a promising start, The Sweetest Thing fails to live up to its promise and falls short of an honest evaluation of where women's boxing stands today.

The most interesting passages concern former super-middleweight Ann Wolfe (whose name is misspelled throughout the book). Merz describes Wolfe as going through life "in what looked to be continuous staredown mode."

"I can hit," she quotes Wolfe as saying. "I can hit hard. I hit like a man, and I'm gonna hurt you. When you get in that ring with me, you better have your soul right, because I'm gonna destroy you. I'll have no conscience about what I'll do to you. I'm trying to survive, and I'll destroy anything I come in contact with before it destroys me. I'm a natural killer. You gonna bully me? My parents died when I was a kid. I lived on the streets, eating out of trash cans. I lived with killers. How you gonna bully me in a boxing ring?"

Bernard Hopkins couldn't have said it better.

* * *

"Call it boxing, prizefighting, the sweet science, the fight game. By any name, it is the best friend a writer ever had. Boxing has given us compelling, improbably lustrous writing, rich in the humanity that thrives even though death's shadow hangs over everyone who steps into the ring. It can stir the poet in a writer who doesn't realize he has poetry in him."

Those thoughts are from John Schulian in an introduction to At The Fights: American Writers on Boxing (Library of America); an anthology lovingly crafted together by Schulian and George Kimball.

At The Fights has fifty pieces that represent 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.

* * *

The press release that came in the mail with An Accidental Sportswriter by Robert Lipsyte (Ecco) begins with the thought, “Lipsyte is not a sports fan. He never was.” It then references him as “one of the most important and provocative sportswriters of our time.”

I’ve known Lipsyte and enjoyed his writing for decades. The second part of his publisher’s declaration sounds accurate to me.

As a young reporter, Lipsyte covered sports for the New York Times. Later, he authored SportsWorld: An American Dreamland; one of the first books to seriously examine the role of sports in contemporary American culture.

I won’t tell you that An Accidental Sportswriter is a boxing book, because It isn’t. It’s a memoir that has two chapters on Muhammad Ali, who Lipsyte calls “the single most important sporting lens through which I learned about politics, religion, race, and hero worship. The Ali story,” Lipsyte writes, “was a magic carpet, although the ride was not always smooth.”

But the Ali material is just part of an overall narrative that chronicles the likes of Billie Jean King, Mickey Mantle, and Howard Cosell, and explores issues as diverse as the use of performance enhancing drugs in sports and the plight of gay athletes in what Lipsyte calls America’s “jock culture.”

“In some ways,” he writes, “sports have replaced westerns and jocks have replaced gunslingers in our national imagination, not necessarily to our advantage.”

Lipsyte has a gift for putting sports in their social, political, and economic context. But my favorite passage in An Accidental Sportswriter is free of that weight. It recounts a chance meeting in 1967 between the author and the legendary Joe DiMaggio.

DiMaggio had been known throughout his career with the New York Yankees for “gliding effortlessly” in the outfield and “drifting” to just the right place at just the right time to catch fly balls.

“That’s an outfielder’s sky,” DiMaggio told Lipsyte as the two men looked upward.

“And then,” Lipsyte recounts, “as if he were Michelangelo describing the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he talked about the roof of his world; about the danger of losing balls in the clouds as easily as in the sun, about smog and shadows and smoke, about the line of the ball, rising or looping, about the spin. I was mesmerized. I barely breathed, afraid to break the spell. I suddenly understood that he hadn’t just ‘drifted’ after all; that he was a scholar, that he had prepared for every kind of sky, patch of blue, burst of sun. He always knew where he was going to meet the ball.”

Poetry like that leads me to the conclusion that, despite his protestations, Lipsyte is a sports fan after all.

Thomas Hauser can be reached by email at thauser@rcn.com. His most recent book ("Waiting For Carver Boyd") was published by JR Books and can be purchased at http://www.amazon.com. Hauser says that Waiting for Carver Boyd is "the best pure boxing writing I've ever done."

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