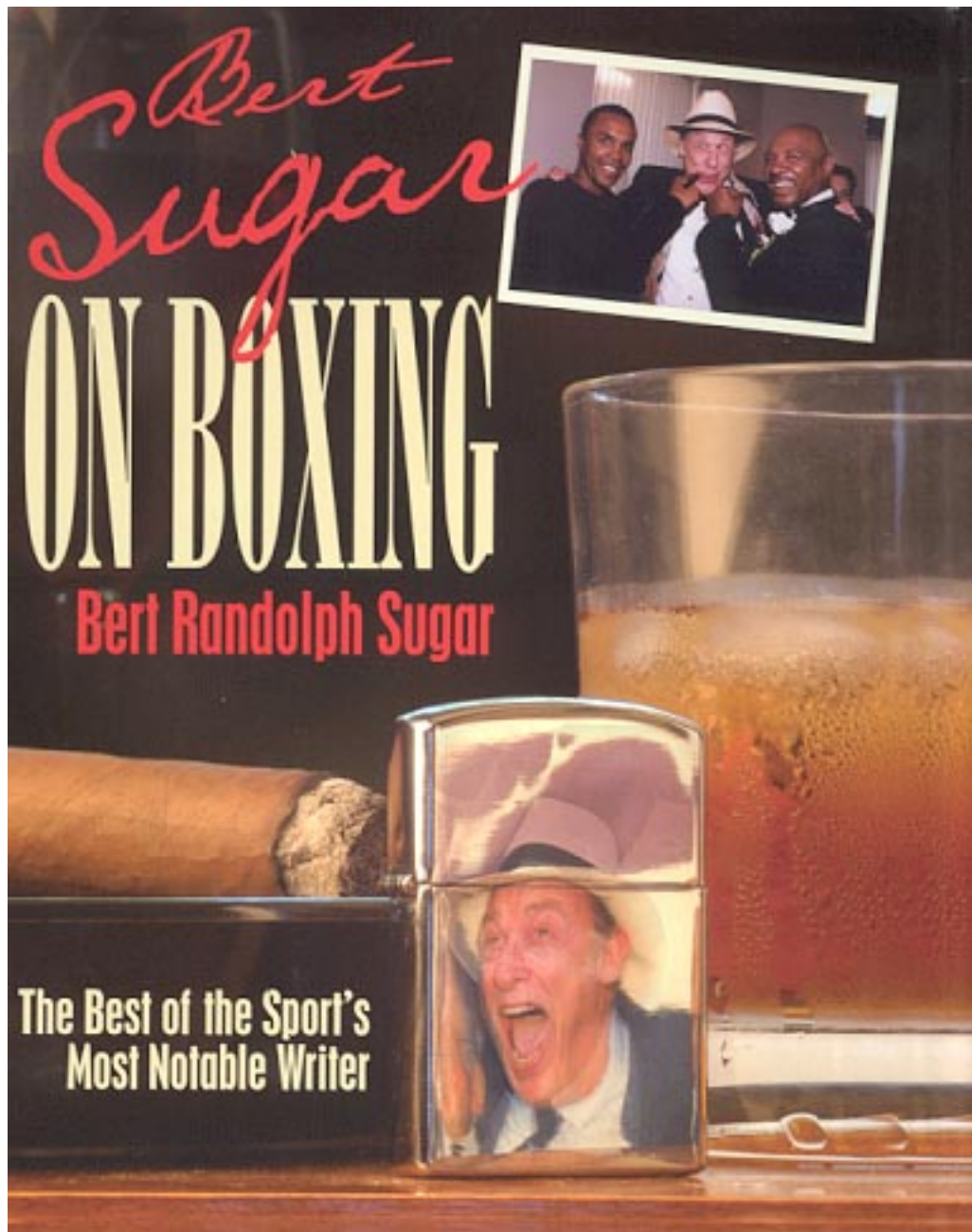


Bert Sugar: An Appreciation

Written by Paul Beston, Special to TSS
Tuesday, 27 March 2012 08:49



Bert Sugar's fame was an accumulative thing: when boxing was in its last heyday, during the 1980s, far fewer people would have been able to identify him than could do so at the time of his death. Part of that has to do, of course, with the rise of cable television and the Internet. Back in the eighties, there were few outlets to see or hear Sugar; you had to read him. By the last decade of his life, he was a fixture on ESPN's *Ringside* series as well as innumerable sports documentaries.

Sugar, who died March 25 at 74, was widely known as one of boxing's "foremost historians," a title that less flamboyant and more scholarly types—like those who labor for the stalwart [Intern](#)

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[ational Boxing Research Organization](#)

—might dispute. He was a brilliant aggregator of the game’s history, a gifted retailer of its lore, without being much interested in parsing legends from facts. But he certainly knew boxing and loved it—just as he loved language, stories, Americana, and the American characters that boxing possessed in greater variety than any sport. (He

[lamented](#)

the younger generation’s fascination with computers and healthy living—not because they should drink more, he said, but because they should listen more, especially if they wanted to be writers. And one place to listen was in bars.)

Combine all of this with his performative persona—he was called “Runyonesque” too many times to count—and you had an ambassador for boxing who fit his sport, and who stood out all the more in an age of corporate sportscasters.

Of course, Sugar was not primarily a television personality. He was, first and last, a writer: he published hundreds, perhaps thousands of articles, and authored 80 or 100 or some such number of books—at least some of which make use, I assume, of previous writings or are adaptations of same. No crime in that. It was an honest living, and writing any book is work. (They [weren’t all](#) about boxing, [either](#).) He also edited a number of boxing magazines, most famously in 1979, when he [rescued the *Ring* from disgrace](#)

by taking over as its editor. Sugar engineered a new design and overhauled the magazine’s ratings, which regained the respect they had once enjoyed. (Alas, the *Ring*

may be headed into a new era of

[disrepute](#)

, but that’s another story.)

Reading Sugar, especially when I first encountered him as a 13-year-old, *Ring*-devouring boxing fanatic, was a delight: he injected wild figurative expressions into blow-by-blow accounts of fights, he punned tirelessly, and his writing seemed barely able to contain its glee. He was gifted at writing leads: my favorite remains the opener from his report on Mike Weaver’s [miracle victory](#)

over John Tate in 1980, in which Sugar made reference to Phineas Fogg, the protagonist of Jules Verne’s

Around the World in 80 Days

. It was an inspired metaphor for the journey Weaver had to take that night: chasing Tate for 15 rounds, mostly fruitlessly, and far behind on the judges’ cards, he landed a lethal left hook—though Sugar probably called it “bodacious”—to knock Tate out cold with less than a minute remaining in the fight.

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Though he enjoyed playing the jester, Sugar was a learned man. He had a law degree, had worked on Madison Avenue, and had done, somewhere along the line, some writing on the Civil War. I only know about that because he mentioned it to me the one time we met and enjoyed a few beers in a Manhattan bar. Though I don't recall precisely, it may have been an unfinished dissertation. He seemed to care about it.

My boxing shelf at home has a half dozen or so Sugar books. [The Great Fights](#) is a personal favorite, while

[100 Years of Boxing](#)

is a solid history—maybe not the equal of

[Saga of the Fist](#)

, but more fun to read. How his writing will be remembered is difficult to say. Last year the editors of

[At the Fights](#)

, a regal Library of America anthology of great boxing writing, omitted Sugar. That had to hurt. Sugar may not have written with the same literary weight of some of the anthology's celebrated contributors, but he had plenty of flair, and he gave pleasure to boxing readers for over 40 years, which ought to count for something.

Maybe Sugar was excluded from the anthology because of his relentless playfulness—a sense that he wasn't willing to halt the fun long enough to express something hard and bleak and true. I confess to having that frustration with his writing myself. I always wanted more from him—some acknowledgement of the pathos of boxing, not just its color and adventure. He may have come closest to doing this in a historical tour de force called “The Way Out,” which appears in [Bert Sugar on Boxing](#) :

To understand boxing one must understand its roots. From its beginnings, the sport has resonated with urban ethnicity, drawing its recruits from the tenements, the ghettos, the projects, the barrios, the ‘nabes,’ places that offered little presence and even less of a future. Many a troubled and troublesome youngster has embraced “The Sweet Science” as a way out, a social staircase out of the mean streets that formed his limited world, fighting his way, bloody hand-over-bloody hand, up the ladder of acceptance the only way he knows: with his fists.

For me, at least, the “Bert Sugar” persona, both onscreen and on the page, became somewhat confining, as personas generally do. But boxing was lucky to have him; it will surely miss him.

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And the best compliment I can pay him as a writer is this: if his Civil War work ever comes out, I'll read it.

Paul Beston is associate editor of the Manhattan Institute's City Journal.

[Comment on this article](#)

Radam G says:

Nice, nice copy! "Sweet as Sugar" -- Bert SUGAR! Through all his publications, sport television show and, of course, his everything in cyberspace, The Sugarman of Boxing Talk, who could walk that walk, will live forever and always.

Pound for pound, he was the ultimate word warrior of legit, whup-a\$\$ boxing. He wrote like he saw it, and didn't back down a bit. Harder than most pugilists' punches, his words could hit. We of the Hip Hop Nation give it up to the Sugarman of pugilistic scribbling.

BERT SUGAR could and did get on his righteous, straight-up SPIT!. Much luv! And we'll see him at the crossroad. Holla!

dino da vinci says:

My thoughts on Bert.

I met him a handful of times and spoke to him via phone on various occasions. The two things that leap out about Mr. Sugar are one, he was always dialed to "entertainment mode" and two, I can honestly say that I don't ever remember him repeating his material. And that second feat is no easy task, from knowing what you said to who, to falling in love with the material that gets you laughs. The man absolutely had range. I learned more and more about him over our many conversations and yet, he never dwelt on himself. Another cool thing about Bert was the fact that he could talk about almost anything. Always an entertaining read, and I'm not so sure that boxing was even his strongest topic.

Growing up and reading about the sport and the people that were a part of it was one thing, as they were portrayed to be figures that were larger than life. Unfortunately, now the people that I have actually crossed paths with and spent time with are leaving us. Understood that this is all part of life, but it makes the loss that much more personal. To borrow a line from Woody Allen, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work...I want to achieve it through not dying".

To all the Vernons, Angelos, Genarros, Arturos, Julios, and now Bert...we're not ready to accept losing you. May you all rest in peace.

cjosi says:

Beautifully done, Paul. Several years ago before I moved to DC, I lived in Chappaqua and Bert and I were neighbors / drinking buddies there. I learned a lot from him -- and laughed a LOT

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with him. A gentleman and an Icon. RIP