

FAT CITY AND FAT CITY: AN APPRECIATION

Written by George Kimball
Wednesday, 16 September 2009 19:00

By almost any criterion imaginable, Leonard Gardner's *FAT CITY* is one of the two or three very best boxing novels ever written. That it rates among the Top Ten is pretty much beyond dispute.

The 1972 screen version is also considered a classic of the genre and would appear on almost any Top Ten list of boxing films, which makes it unique. Name another book that appears on both lists.

THE HARDER THEY FALL -- maybe. It would be on both of mine, but it should also be noted that when Budd Schulberg, who had written the 1947 novel, reviewed the Hollywood version in 1956, he all but warned moviegoers to save their money, so dissatisfied was he with the liberties Tinseltown had taken with his book.

Leonard Gardner had no such reservations about John Huston's treatment of *FAT CITY*. The author in fact shared the screenwriting credit with the director, and it is to the latter's credit that so much of the book's original dialogue and storyline was preserved intact in the movie. One could make a reasonable case that *FAT CITY* was such a critical success as a film precisely because it so closely reflected the language and cadences of Gardner's book.

They have in a sense become inextricably intertwined. I couldn't tell you how many times I've re-read *FAT CITY*, but I can tell you that for the past 37 years it's impossible to get through that first chapter without starting to hum Kris Kristofferson's "Help Me Make It Through The Night," which accompanies the hung-over Stacy Keach's shuffling introduction in the film.

FAT CITY is one of those films that has continued to grow in stature over the years, and on September 18, Film Forum in New York inaugurates a two-week run.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The opening night 7:30 screening of *FAT CITY* was introduced by journalist/author/screenwriter Pete Hamill and TSS columnist George Kimball. See <http://www.filmforum.org/films/fatcity.html> for further information about the Film Forum retrospective.)

Leonard Gardner was a graduate student in creative writing at San Francisco State when he began the novel in the mid-1960s. He learned the lore of boxing from his father, a lifetime devotee of the sport, had fought as an amateur in his native Stockton, and spent considerable time in the same gyms frequented by the pugilistic dramatis personae -- journeyman middleweight Billy Tully, welterweight prospect Ernie Munger, and Ruben Luna, the Hispanic gym owner who manages them both -- of the book.

The book opens with Tully, a once-promising local star who had bottomed out once he hit national-level competition, plotting a comeback -- for the worst of reasons, but one that could immediately be appreciated by anyone who's spent much time around professional boxers.

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Tully, who had retired from the ring because he wasn't confident that he had it any more, had surprised himself by knocking out a guy with one punch in a barroom fight the night before, which he immediately interpreted as a sign that perhaps he may have been precipitate in hanging up his gloves.

The novel took four years from beginning to completion. At one point it was twice the length of the compact, stripped-down (183 pages in the copy I'm looking at) version in which it was eventually published. Gardner had in the meantime published short stories in a number of literary magazines (including THE PARIS REVIEW, in 1965), and while his New York agent, Robert Lescher, encouraged the novel, he didn't push its author.

"I never showed [Lescher] any of the book until I felt it was ready," recalled Gardner.

"I spent a lot of time cutting, editing, rewriting, polishing."

The result was a book so utterly perfect that for forty years it has served as a source of discouragement to many a young writer. A dozen years ago the award-winning novelist and playwright Denis Johnson recalled his FAT CITY phase in an appreciation published in SALON:

"Between the ages of 19 and 25 I studied Leonard Gardner's book so closely that I began to fear I'd never be able to write anything but a pale imitation." (Johnson's eventual solution was to ban FAT CITY from his house.)

Gardner recalls that despite his meticulous to the writing process, it never occurred to him that he might have just written a great book.

"I was pretty happy with it," he said a few nights ago from his California home. "I thought it was a pretty good story, but the truth is, I spent all that time with it because I wanted to be sure it wasn't going to be rejected. I wanted it to be a book I was sure would be published."

Lescher submitted the manuscript to a number of publishers, and in short order had achieved the result every writer dreams of: Two houses who each wanted it.

"In the end Lescher said he probably could have gotten a bit more money out of Random House, but he felt Farrar, Straus would be more committed in what it would do for the book," said Gardner.

The 1969 critics were almost unanimous in hailing the book as a triumph, and before the year was out Gardner's novel had been nominated for a National Book Award, along with Kurt Vonnegut's SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE and Joyce Carol Oates' THEM. (Oates won.) The Kansas City Star was moved to note that "probably there isn't a living novelist who, if he were honest with himself, would not be proud to have written FAT CITY. That's how good it is."

Joan Didion wrote that "FAT CITY affected me more than any new fiction I have read in a long while." Another female admirer wrote Gardner a letter telling him how much she had enjoyed the book, "but if it was any darker, I think I'd kill myself."

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David Milch, who taught creative writing at Yale before moving to Hollywood to create "NYPD Blue" and "Deadwood," regularly made FAT CITY a staple of his writing classes. Forty years after FAT CITY's publication, Gardner was honored by the Boxing Writers Association of America with the A.J. Liebling Award, along with fellow recipients Larry Merchant and the late John Lardner.

The success of the book predictably brought Hollywood calling, and producer Ray Stark secured the film rights. It would be nice to say "and the rest is history," but as is so often the case with these tangled tales of cinema, the journey from perfect book to perfect film appears to have been the result of a series of happy accidents.

FAT CITY in the hands of another director might have been a very different film. Stark had at one point hired Monte Hellman (TWO-LANE BLACKTOP), who eventually backed out of the deal for a more lucrative assignment. Mark Rydell (CINDERELLA LIBERTY) was offered the project, but wavered so long that Stark eventually turned to the 64 year-old Huston.

Besides maintaining his allegiance to Gardner's work in refusing to "go Hollywood" with the film, another Huston stamp on the movie came when he insisted, against the producer's wishes, on retaining cinematographer Conrad Hall's noir recreation of the interior skid-row barroom scenes. Stark felt the dark scenes would render the film unsuitable for drive-ins (not an insignificant consideration in 1972), wanted to fire Hall and re-shoot the scenes. Huston told the producer, in effect, "if he goes, I go." If it was a bluff, it worked.

Now imagine FAT CITY with Marlon Brando with all that scar tissue above his eyes instead of Stacy Keach. Huston initially wanted Brando to play Tully, but interpreted his vacillation as a lack of interest, and when Brando wound up taking the eponymous role in THE GODFATHER, the director turned to the relatively unknown Keach.

Would Margot Kidder have delivered an Academy Award-nominated performance had she and not Susan Tyrell (who did earn a nomination) been cast as Oma, the philosophical barfly who takes up with Tully?

And one thing we know for sure. Had someone other than Huston been the director, we don't know who would have played Earl, Tully's rival for Oma's affections, but we can tell you with absolute certainty that it wouldn't have been Curtis Cokes.

Huston had been living in Ireland since 1964, and once he took on the project he invited Gardner to his estate in Galway. It was a pretty heady experience for the young writer.

"I'd already written a first draft of the screenplay, and what we did over there was go through it bit by bit," recalled Gardner. "Huston spent most of his time painting, so he only wanted to address one scene per day. Sometimes I could rewrite a scene overnight, sometimes I couldn't, but we'd move on to the next one."

Huston had boxed himself in his youth. His first published short story had a boxing tale called "Fool," which H.L. Mencken published in his AMERICAN MERCURY in 1929. Though

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authenticity was important, Huston didn't define FAT CITY as a boxing movie at all.

"It's about life running down the sink without being able to pull the plug to stop it," was the director's description.

"But his boxing background was reassuring to me," recalled Gardner. "He knew the sport and he understood it. Particularly back then every time Hollywood got near boxing they seemed to turn to the same schlock clichés, but there was no danger of that with him.

"And just as he was an 'actors' director' because he gave his cast an extraordinarily free hand in interpreting scenes, I guess you could say he was a 'writer's director,' too. He knew what was good about the book and didn't want to screw it up by changing a lot of things.

"And I'd like to think that I have a pretty good cinematic sense myself," added Gardner, who would later enjoy success writing for film and television (in a five-year run at NYPD BLUE). "I could visualize the way certain things would work on the screen, and he retained most of that -- though I'm not so vain that I'd have argued for keeping something Huston didn't think would work once he'd explained it."

Thirty-seven years on, the casting of FAT CITY seems a work of genius, but in 1972 it was very much a crapshoot. Keach had previously had featured roles in two films, both of which had essentially been cast out of the same New York saloon -- the Lion's Head -- over the previous year and a half: After starring (with James Earl Jones and Harris Yulin) in the film version of John Barth's END OF THE ROAD, he played Doc Holliday (to Yulin's Wyatt Earp and Faye Dunaway's Big-Nose Kate) in DOC, for which Pete Hamill wrote the screenplay. Young and relatively unfamiliar to film audiences (though not to viewers of SEA HUNT, where since the age of nine he had occasionally appeared with his father, Lloyd Bridges), both Jeff Bridges (Munger) and Susan Tyrell had recently appeared in what would also become cult films -- Bridges in Larry McMurtry's THE LAST PICTURE SHOW, Tyrell in Richard Farina's BEEN DOWN SO LONG IT LOOKS LIKE UP TO ME.

Prior his portrayal of Ruben Luna in FAT CITY, Providence-born Nicolas Colasanto (who would become familiar as "Coach" on CHEERS) had played both cops and robbers in television bit roles, but his film resume was almost nonexistent. Candy Clark (Ernie's girlfriend/wife Faye) had never appeared in a movie before.

Neither, of course, had Curtis Cokes. Remarkably, in a film in which more than a dozen boxers and former boxers appear, the former welterweight champion played Earl, a character who isn't a fighter at all. Cokes, who had lost his welterweight title to Jose Napoles a few years earlier, had fought out of Texas for most of his career, but in 1971, nearing the end of the line, he had lost fights in San Francisco and Sacramento. We had always assumed that he must have stumbled into a casting call around this time, but the actual story is even more interesting.

"What happened is that Huston was back east for a fight in New York," said Leonard Gardner. "He was sitting at ringside, and a well-dressed black gentleman a few seats away in the same section caught his eye. According to Huston, he was already thinking, 'This is what I want Earl

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to look like' before he even struck up a conversation. I'm sure he must still have had to go through the formality of an audition, but Huston claimed he'd actually decided he wanted this guy to play Earl before he even realized he was Curtis Cokes."

Cokes fought three times in South Africa, winning two, in the year after FAT CITY came out. His first screen role also proved to be his last. He has been a successful trainer (Reggie Johnson, Kirk Johnson, Ike Ibeabuchi) back in Dallas for the past quarter-century.

In Gardner's book, Tully is a middleweight, Munger a welterweight, but for the movie it was more important that opponents approximate the sizes of Keach and Bridges, who were both light-heavyweights in 1972.

Argentine light-heavyweight Gregorio Peralta had been the first choice to play Arcadio Lucero, the fading former main-eventer brought to Stockton from Mexico as the opponent for Tully's comeback fight. In 1970 Peralta had fought George Foreman to a decision at Madison Square Garden, and both Gardner and Ray Stark were in the audience for their 1971 rematch at the Oakland Coliseum. Peralta was approached about the role, but his manager, who felt there was money yet to be made with Gregorio in the ring, didn't like the idea of putting his career on hold for several months.

The inspired choice of Sixto Rodriguez was Gardner's idea. The former California light-heavyweight champion, Rodriguez was by then retired, having finished with a record of 28-13-3. A useful boxer, Sixto had wins over Bobo Olson and Eddie Cotton, but the close of his career seemed to mirror that of Lucero's in the book: He had just six wins in his last 20 fights, most of them on the road.

Although he isn't given a lot of lines -- just a few snippets, in Spanish, exchanged with his cornermen and an inspector in the dressing room -- Rodriguez' haunting performance as the aging -- and ailing -- opponent is memorable one. He alights from the Greyhound bus with the cocksure walk of a matador, despite being hampered by a violent case of the runs. (In the movie the bodily function is somewhat altered; Lucero walks into the men's room and pisses blood. And this is before the fight.)

What must be attributed to a bit of prescient casting, Rosales, the opponent who breaks Ernie Munger's nose in his first amateur fight, was played by a 20 year-old Stockton amateur named Alvaro Lopez. So young that he's barely recognizable in the film, Yaqui Lopez engaged in the first of what would be 76 professional fights shortly after shooting wrapped up for FAT CITY. Lopez would go on to unsuccessfully challenge for the light-heavyweight championship on four occasions (vs. John Conteh, Matthew Saad Muhammad, and twice against Victor Galindez), and late in his career fought (against S.T. Gordon) for the cruiserweight title as well.

A couple of other, more familiar boxing types have roles in FAT CITY. Art Aragon, the original "Golden Boy," works the corner with Colasanto as the trainer Babe. Aragon, who died two years ago, was one of the more popular fighters in Los Angeles history, and was Budd Schulberg's best man at the author's third wedding. (The old trainer Al Silvani is the referee in the Tully-Lucero bout.)

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Both Aragon and Silvani appeared in many boxing movies, but a California club fighter (middleweight Billy Walker) won a speaking part as young Wes Haynes, a boxer in Ruben Luna's traveling entourage.

But in a very real sense, Stockton's legacy as a fight town makes it a co-star of FAT CITY as well. Resisting the temptation to shoot the film in more hospitable surroundings, Huston filmed it on location to capture the actual places, people, and milieu Gardner had so meticulously described in the book.

"Almost every extra you see in the film, from the entourages to the gym backdrops to the crowd scenes and what have you, came from the gyms and the boxing scene in Stockton," said Leonard. "The local promoter, Jack Cruz even gets several scenes.

"And of course a lot of the fighters back then would have moonlighted in the fields, just as Tully and Munger do together later in the book. Some of them worked as longshoremen, too.

That's right, longshoremen, as in ON THE WATERFRONT. Nearly a hundred miles inland from San Francisco Bay, Stockton is uniquely situated. Its geographic proximity to the rich farmlands of the San Joaquin Valley made it a haven for migrant workers -- field hands both black and Chicano, scuffling Okies -- and boxers. The River and a ship channel also conspired in the 19th century to make it one of California's two deep-water ports, and since the days of the Gold Rush ships bearing canned produce and lumber sailed from Stockton in such profusion that it was for a time the pirate capital of California.

"After the movie came out, I sent my mother on a cruise on a ship that sailed from Stockton to Europe," said Gardner. "When I took her down to the ship I ran into a couple of ex-fighters who were working on the docks. The same two longshoreman had been in the film, where they played the guys working Lucero's corner when he fought Billy Tully."

Gardner went on to high-profile journalistic assignments, covering Foreman-Norton in Caracas for Esquire, Ali-Chuvalo in Vancouver for Sport, and, Duran-Leonard in Montreal for Inside Sports. Gardner (b. 1933) also adapted his short story "Jesus Christ Has Returned to Earth" for the film "Valentino Returns," and created nearly two dozen episodes of NYPD Blue, but his first novel turned out to be the only one he would write. Although he has dropped hints from time to time of another, forty years have elapsed since his masterpiece. From time to time you wonder whether looking back at FAT CITY had the same effect on its author it did on the young Denis Johnson.

Gardner, who gets asked about it a lot, has developed a stock response: "Sometimes," he says, "you only get to win one championship."