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The noble art of self-defense. Famously, that's what boxing is known as; however, the question remains as to how often boxing has been used in actual self-defense, and how far boxing as a noble art would suffice when confronted with an opponent whose goal is to win at all costs, without regard for honor or rules. The history of boxing, like the history of many other sports, has been recorded in numerous ways and from different perspectives – from *An Illustrated History Of Boxing* (Fleischer et al), via *On Boxing* (Joyce Carol Oats), to *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport* (Allen Bodner), and published in various forms – from modest paperbacks to grandiose coffee-table books, such as the Muhammad Ali book from Taschen Publishers, GOAT ("champ's edition" at £ 9000.00). Boxing's cultural history, on the other hand, is a completely different thing than the history of boxing, which Kasia Boddy points out in her powerful, beautifully illustrated *Boxing: A Cultural History* (Reaktion Books). Boxing has always been around, says Boddy, citing Plato comparing a Socratic debate with a boxing match. And Boddy's story does indeed commence in ancient Greece, and, appropriately, it's concluded in the United States, with Mike Tyson and hip hop, conceptual art's glove fetishism and the enduring appeal of sweaty gyms. We sent Kasia Boddy's book halfway around the globe to Australia and Wendy Varney. Her penetrating and empathetic reading has resulted in a well-written, interesting and very positive review.

Unboxing the Culture of Boxing

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*Kasia Boddy***Boxing: A Cultural History**

478 ges, pb., ill.

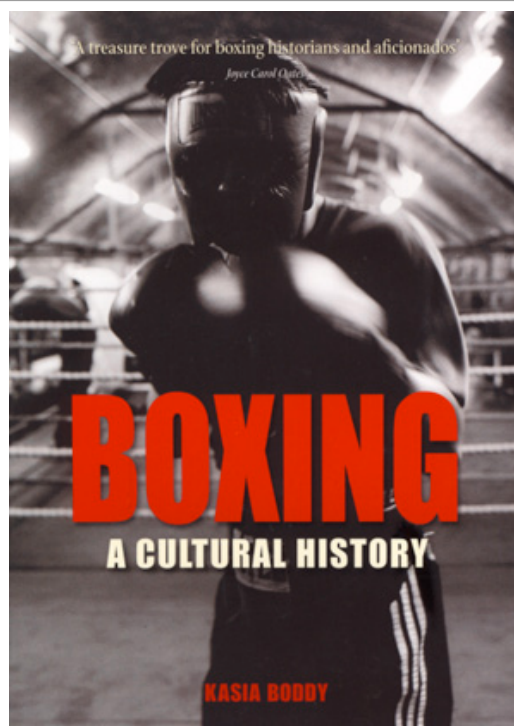
London: Reaktion Books 2009

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Boxing entails one of sport's greatest contradictions. On one hand, no sporting body is surely fitter, more comprehensively toned and attuned and better of reflexes than the body of the serious boxer, making it a source of pride and the object of respect. On the other hand, few sporting bodies emerge as battered and as scarred as the body of the elite boxer who has had one fight too many, at which point the body once respected may be pitied, shunned or regarded with disparage.

And so it was with some intrigue about this relationship between boxing and the bodies of boxers and how culture might be intertwined in that relationship, that I picked up Kasia Boddy's book. After all, with the author's surname, the body would surely not be ignored. The book did not disappoint. At 478 pages, it is a veritable tome that dealt with matters beyond my initial interest and roused new interests, being a treasure trove of other relevant topics.

Boddy points out that a history of the culture of boxing, which her account is, differs from a history of boxing. That is not to ignore obvious connections for cultural celebrations of boxing and interpretations of the sport intermingle with the social circumstances of groups and individuals whose backgrounds and spectrum of opportunities largely influence who takes up the sport of boxing, why they take it and why ultimately others do not. Nor should cultural



historians ignore the importance of the context of engagement and the extent and potential of the hopes and expectations of those involved. To her credit, Boddy does not.

The culture of boxing interacts heavily with wider social assumptions about gender, race and class. Arguably, no sport has stronger implications along all three lines. Add connection with ethnicity and this is a rich mix indeed. Little wonder it has given rise to such a large book.

Although Boddy insists it cannot be comprehensive, given the vastness of the cultural landscapes of boxing and the daunting scope for social analysis, she nonetheless performs a remarkable task in throwing a thorough eye over a multitude of media and eras, each with their own take and idiosyncrasies and often with a variety of sometimes conflicting approaches.

She starts with ancient Greece where the sport is reflected in ceramic remnants and in literature, showing not only widespread enjoyment of boxing but social comment. In *Odyssey*, “we find the first instance of spectators as villains in a boxing story: unwilling to fight themselves, but vicariously enjoying the risks someone else will run, and gambling on the outcome” (p. 11).

” *Spectators continue to play a strong though sometimes differing role throughout the ages. Women in particular are set as moral compasses that can either keep men on the right path or magnetically pull them astray.*

Spectators continue to play a strong though sometimes differing role throughout the ages. Women in particular are set as moral compasses that can either keep men on the right path or magnetically pull them astray. Throughout literature and films, there have been those women and even sweethearts that encouraged men to fight, with men associating boxing success with sexual prowess, or at least the most direct route to a woman’s heart. On the other hand, other books and films have put forward stories where women beseeched men, showing again the contradictions that in turn arise from the opportunities and physical risks of boxing. Boddy explains that some male fight promoters and film-makers (and most of these were men) “actively encouraged the presence of women spectators, believing that their attendance would confer respectability on movie-going and provide a strong argument in favour of legalization of prize-fighting” (p. 218) which has of course always been questioned by some who think the sport’s excesses warrant its banning. There is nothing random about the described approaches of women to boxing, with Boddy pointing out that there was an increasing trend for women to attend boxing matches after 1920, at a time when women were winning new freedoms and were seen in a less delicate manner more generally in the West. By then women were also contributing to media portrayals of boxing, suggesting a more active role in cultural representations.

Of course, women are not just spectators, reviewers, enticers and moral crusaders. They too can be boxers, leading to one of the more controversial areas of the sport as well as challenging the overwhelmingly masculine perceptions of it. Among the numerous fascinating illustrations in Boddy’s book are several visual representations of women boxers, some beskirted but nevertheless going hell for leather at each other, and others standing almost still but for their protruding hands knocking their opponents off-balance (pp. 162-163). These representations, from the late 1800s to more modern versions, include drawings, stereoscopic photos and the modern photo form.

One important shift within the sport, dealt with by Boddy, is its Americanisation, a phenomenon that is hardly surprising, given the burgeoning importance of American culture generally at about the same time that this shift was occurring. Of course that has only become stronger in the meantime.

Leading on from this trend, perhaps the most interesting part of the book for me was Boddy’s dealing with celebrity boxers and the degree to which fighters have had to develop personalities as well as skills in the modern era. Not surprisingly, she has devoted considerable time to Muhammad Ali who fits this mould and indeed largely contributed to it. “His fondness for extravagant bragging and prophesy?singled him out as an entertaining performer” and he was dubbed “Poet and Pedagogue” by the writer A.J. Liebling (pp. 326-27).

Always more than a boxer once he had become famous, Ali was many different things to many different people, with cultural forms allowing the myriad of interpretations to take hold, sometimes simultaneously. His draft refusal and subsequent imprisonment, along with the withdrawal of his boxing title, made him a hero to anti-war activists, while his pride and attainments endeared him to the burgeoning Black activist movement in the 1960s. Yet eventually his conviction was overturned and the medal he claimed to have thrown in a river in disgust was re-awarded in 1996, by which time few appeared to have any qualms with Ali’s political views, such as they were at that time. Suffering from Parkinson’s Disease, apparently resulting from his boxing, he had become everybody’s hero, which in turn suggests that as a role model he had been neutered and that he was, at least at one stage, more a celebrity than a voice for challenge and change.

But the postmodern boxer who had proclaimed being his own man had become a voice of the establishment in December 2001, moving further into the ideological camp of the day with involvement in a film urging US Muslims to support George W. Bush’s war effort. In 2005 Bush awarded him the Presidential Medal. Whatever controversies persisted about boxing, political leaders and their keepers recognized the benefits of media and celebrityhood to bring populations solidly behind their international and military policies. Ironically, even the most contentious of


participants within the most contentious of sports was now being used for the most conservative purposes.

Ali himself was subject of a great many media representations discussed in this wonderful book that opens up dialogue on so many aspects of the sport and how it interacts with and is represented within all forms of culture. The exploration of these representations of Ali provide fitting testimony to fairly subtle claims made earlier through the book. They also justified my initial intrigue about the dialectics of the bodies of those who box. In much of his career, Ali represented the boxing body splendid, not only fit but resistant, challenging the place of the Afro-American in US society and backed up initially by his own interpretations of himself and his actions.


Nowadays he is all too much a reminder of the price that boxing bodies pay. While, unquestioningly, boxers choose to box and they often show laudable commitment to long-term goals that are inspiring in these days of focus on instant gratification, we cannot disregard the framework within which those choices and commitments are made. All too often it is a diminished framework of social opportunity and the lure is all the stronger for the social vacuum against which boxing opportunities flash their beacon of enticement. Certainly this is the stuff of social history rather than cultural history. Even so, I felt class could have played a slightly stronger role in Boddy's analysis.

The book nonetheless remains a remarkable feat. Film buffs will appreciate the vivid analysis of films about boxing, literature lovers might be surprised at the depth and extent to which generations of writers have included boxers in their stories, often reflecting their own fascination with the sport. Boxing lovers will relish all parts of the book. Academics in the area of Cultural Studies and the History and Sociology of Sport will find plenty here to whet their appetites. Last but not least those of us who find such a paradox centred around the body in the sport of boxing will have evidence galore here to support their claim of such a conundrum.

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