

Manly Art (They can run — but they can't hide)

George Kimball

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It's amazing how a brutal sport can evoke such eloquent prose. Among the top-notch writers who have contributed novels and non-fiction assessments about the squared circle are A.J. Liebling, Joyce Carol Oates, and Norman Mailer.

Add George Kimball to the list.

Manly Art is a collection of Kimball's essays taken mostly from his blog, *The Sweet Science*, as well as other pieces crafted over his long career. The former *Boston Phoenix* and *Boston Herald* sportswriter previously published *Four Kings: Leonard, Hagler, Hearns, Duran, and the Last Great Era of Boxing* in 2008 and collaborated on other boxing titles.

It's difficult to reconcile the combative nature of boxing with the personalities Kimball seeks to humanize. These are not hard men, for the most part. They're actually quite gentle and thoughtful away from the ring. But there are demons to deal with, whether in the form of years-delayed physical ailments from an occupation in which the practitioner is constantly absorbs blows to the head (dishing out the punishment can also take a psychic toll) or financial difficulties from fortunes misspent or never achieved.

Most of the essays deal with the overarching idea of battling nature and circumstances in an attempt to either better himself financially or prove something as a man. Not all succeed. In fact, it is the failure that makes for the more empathetic reporting (and reading).

Manly Art is divided into what can be described as "rounds," including profiles of boxing's legends, run-of-the-mill palookas, managers, and various supernumeraries; movie and book reviews; spot reporting from ringside; personal commentaries about the state of the sport; and obituaries about the famous and non-household-name personalities. They may not have had the career and accomplishments of an Ali or a Holyfield (or the infamy of a Tyson), but each certainly had enough of an affect on Kimball to warrant his thoughtful attention.

In the book's foreword, the writer Carlo Rotella notes that there's a dearth of competent boxing writers these days, due to boxing's decline in relevance as well as cutbacks throughout the news industry. It's hard to conceive that just a couple of generations ago it was customary for a newspaper to employ *several* staffers cover the fights. This is all the more reason why Kimball's book is worth a look: it serves the dual purpose of offering history *and* writing lessons.

RON KAPLAN (May / June 2011)

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