Gorn, Elliott J. (ed.), *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ.* Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995. Pp. 200. Notes, index. $24.95.

Boxing is almost always in disrepute, usually for a variety of legitimate reasons, but lately even a few knowing coves have soured on the sweet science. Long-time boxing aficionado Pete Hamill, for instance, recently offered this scathing denunciation of the sport: "Every month, in this era of multimillion-dollar purses, of cable television and pay-per-view, prizefights are legally fixed through match-making. There are bogus champions in every weight division. Brave kids make Faustian bargains to get title shots and are then robbed and exploited by rapacious promoters. When their brains are mauled or their eyes beaten into blindness, they are treated like derelicts, mocked and abandoned. In this country, old dogs are treated better than old prizefighters" (Hamill, "Blood on Their Hands," *Esquire,* June 1996, p. 94). To a large extent, the type of situation Hamill describes has existed for a long time. That is, professional prizefighting's current predicament should be viewed as part of a long history rather than as a break from tradition.

Perhaps part of the reason boxing seems to be in such cultural disfavor is that the current dominant heavyweight (despite what the alphabet soup of sanctioning bodies say, despite losing to Evander Holyfield) is Mike Tyson. A Cus D'Amato protege who in 1986 became the youngest heavyweight champion in history, a nearly invincible prizefighter with awesome power, a self-aware student of boxing history, and a convicted rapist, Tyson emanates what has been described as "weird magnetism." For many, though, he signifies little more than brute, exaggerated, primitive power. Outside the ring, Tyson does not command much respect, nor does he appear to be a man of integrity or principle. If boxing champions are our symbolic expressions or magnifications of ideal masculinity, Tyson arguably represents some of the worst qualities of contemporary American manhood and culture. To make matters worse, comparisons between Mike Tyson and Muhammad Ali—the last great prizefighter to capture comparable worldwide popular and media attention—merely accentuates the apparent depravity of boxing at the moment. In the 1960s and 1970s, Ali was a transcendent, nearly mythic figure. "Muhammad Ali was at once an emblem of that era and a shaper of it," writes Elliott Gorn in the introduction to *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ.* "It was not only Ali's political and social commitments that mattered, but also his personal style—he was outrageous, yet deadly serious, the prophetic trickster, the sacred clown who helped define the times" (p. xiii). Like all controversial figures, Ali represented dramatically different things to different constituencies, but he certainly represented exemplary qualities for millions of people all over the world. All of which leaves many lamenting: Where have you gone, Muhammad Ali?

One of the best places Ali can be found is in the pages of *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ.* A collection of seven essays—not including Gorn's introduction, Robert Lipsyte's prologue, and Elizabeth Alexander's lyric epilogue—*Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ* offers superb readings (from some of the most respected professors of pugilism in the business) of the former fighter and

his political, cultural, and historical significance. "The essays in this volume try to explain what it meant to be there in the 1960s and 1970s," Gorn explains; they try "to explore why Ali looms in our collective memory" (p. xv). Drawn from papers given at a 1992 symposium—which the former champ attended-at Miami (Ohio) University, *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ* amounts to 10 rounds of sparring with incredibly rich, vibrant, important material.

The essayists in *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ* engage their subjects with clarity and rigor, Michael Oriard examines Ali as a mass-mediated, multi-dimensional hero. Randy Roberts traces the politics and economics of televised boxing and Ali's fortuitous and symbiotic relationship with television. Othello Harris discusses Ali's contribution to the revolt of black athletes in the 1960s. Gerald Early offers a close, contextualized reading of Ali's autobiography, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (1975), and argues that it embodies Ali's politics and political image. David Wiggins considers Ali's religious convictions, his membership in the Nation of Islam, and his spiritual odyssey. Thomas Hietala uses Ali's life and career as a lens through which to view American society and politics during the 1960s and 1970s. And Jeffrey Sammons offers a meditation on Ali as a protest symbol during the 1960s.

As these synopses suggest, virtually al of the essays in *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ* are more concerned with Ali as a cultural text and the multiple things he meant—and continues to mean—than they are with the man himself and his sensational prizefighting career. Clearly, *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ* is not intended to be a substitute for a biography of Ali. Rather, it is most productively read and understood as an extraordinarily valuable and passionate collection of commentaries on Ali the cultural icon. Not surprisingly, some of the contributors to *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ* connect more solidly than others. Moreover, although all of the essays are critically alert and incisive, there is an unmistakable hagiographic quality to the collection. This is, I suppose, to be expected considering that many of the contributors view Ali as someone who represents their generation well, as someone who links them to their formative years.

It is not insignificant that *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ* is dedicated to Ali, or that the book's royalties are being donated to a charity chosen by Ali and his wife, Lonnie Ali. Finally, *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ* is a slim volume that could use two more chapters. One chapter should engage more explicitly the ways in which Ali illuminates and/or problematizes the complicated relationship between gender and race. (To his credit, Gorn acknowledges that the collection slights this topic.) Another chapter should address the controversy surrounding Ali's current medical condition. (Parkinson's syndrome is not mentioned in the book's index.) After all, what has become of the man—his remarkable courage seems to have cost him dearly—is an important part of the ongoing Ali narrative. By ignoring the price Ali has apparently paid for his heroics in the ring, *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ* effectively sanitizes boxing, denies the view of the sport Hamill provides, and re-positions boxing as "The Noble Art."

For a brief moment last summer at the Olympics, many people turned their lonely eyes to Muhammad Ali. Standing before 80,000 spectators in Atlanta,

and millions more around the world thanks to television, Ali illuminated the night. "His hands trembled with the curse of Parkinson's syndrome," wrote John Schulian in *Sports Illustrated*, "but his hold on the crowd was as strong and sure as ever" (Schulian, "Protecting the Investment," *Sports Illustrated*, July 29, 1996, p. 112). Yes, nostalgia comes easy and romance is cheap, but powerful stories and heroes endure, usually for good reasons. It is difficult to imagine that we—sport historians, cultural critics, and citizens of the world—will ever forget why Ali retains the power to captivate us, why his story is intricately bound up with our history But in that unlikely event *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ* will be there to remind us.

—Daniel Nathan
University of Iowa