
EARLY, GERALD, ED. *The Muhammad Ali Reader*. New York: Rob Weisbach Books, 1999. Pp. xx+297. Photographs. \$15.95 pb.

This wide-ranging assortment of articles by novelists and poets, essayists and journalists, and athletes, along with interviews, provides considerable insight into the political and cultural significance, as well as the boxing career, of Muhammad Ali, arguably the greatest heavyweight champion. The articles address a number of important themes, including African-American militancy, the recasting of masculinity during the 1960s, individuality and narcissism, and the several radical changes in Ali's image over the forty years since he first came to public attention.

There was no indication early in his boxing career that Ali, then known as Cassius Clay, would become a major symbol of black militancy and antiwar defiance in the late 1960s, or develop a reputation as one of the best heavyweights ever. A.J. Liebling, reporting in 1962 on Clay's first professional bout in which his opponent knocked him down in the first round, praises Clay's "blinding speed" (p. 9) but notes that constant movement might sap his strength in longer fights. He neglected body punching and seemed less impressive to Liebling than Floyd Patterson at that stage. Liebling and Tom Wolfe, writing in 1963, were both struck by Clay's flashy dress. Wolfe describes him as having an entourage of young women, whom Clay called "foxes."

Clay's compulsive bragging and penchant for writing and reciting bad poetry caused many to view him as a clown, although the behavior may have been partly a calculated attempt to publicize himself as a contender. Few thought Clay had any chance when he fought the fearsome Sonny Liston for the title in 1964. Murray Kempton, observing Clay at a Beatles press conference shortly before the bout, comments that he seemed very much like the "four mop tops"—"sweet and gay" (p. 46).

Clay's public image was immediately transformed after his shocking upset of Liston, when he announced he had joined the Nation of Islam (NOI), a black racist organization that claimed an evil scientist named Yacub had created the white "devil" race, and that a gigantic spacecraft, the "Mother Wheel," hovered above the Earth, housing numerous smaller flying craft that would one day obliterate whites in a huge conflagration. Having changed his name to Muhammad Ali, he spent the remainder of the 1960s "in a swirl of

controversy" (p. 123). Involvement in the NOI intensified the sexism George Plimpton had observed in Ali before he became champion. In a 1975 *Playboy* interview Ali declares that "in the Islamic world, the man's the boss and the woman stays in the background" (p. 149). Ali's embracing of the NOI's strongly puritanical outlook represents another major element of discontinuity in his life. However, Ali in the interview strays from the NOI's virulent anti-Semitism, describing the whites who will escape death from bombardment by the Mother Wheel's spaceships as "mainly some Jewish people who really mean right" (p. 142). Ali did not remain with the NOI under Louis Farrakhan, moving instead to mainstream Islam. Recently, however, Ali publicly made a crude anti-Semitic joke.

During the late 1960s, Ali became a symbol of rising black militancy and opposition to the Vietnam War, culminating in his refusal to be drafted into the army and the stripping of his title. Jackie Robinson, who strongly disagreed with Ali's views on black nationalism and the war, admires him "as an outspoken black man" (p. 72) whose ring excellence enhanced black self-esteem. Floyd Patterson similarly rejected Ali's political views but praises him for undermining the boxer's image as "dumb half-naked entertainer" (p. 64).

Norman Mailer focuses on Ali's need for attention, an element of continuity in his career, comparing him in 1971 to "a six-foot parrot [who] keeps screaming at you that he is the center of the stage" (p. 101). Ali also bragged about how "pretty" he was, part of the 1960s celebration of androgyny. This represented a sharp break from the "men's men" like Rocky Marciano, who waded into punches unconcerned about the potential impact on his appearance.

Ali's return to the ring after his exile opened still another new phase of his career, the focus of several articles. He was not quite the same fighter, although he was able to win the title twice more. His unorthodox style, holding his hands low and leaning back from punches, highlighted Ali's individuality throughout his career.

Several writers note that Ali, a symbol of black pride, demeaned African-American opponents of lower-class origin by drawing on racist terminology, referring to them as "gorilla," "shiftless," and worse.

The last articles focus on Ali's shocking physical deterioration in his retirement. Formerly voluble, Ali's speech is now often unintelligible. His left hand, which once jabbed with blinding speed, now shakes uncontrollably at his side. The once threatening militant was absorbed long ago into the mainstream; during the 1980s he even became a Reagan supporter.

This stimulating collection presents a balanced portrait of one of the twentieth century's most talented and charismatic athletes, an important symbol of 1960s political controversy.

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