
HAUSER, THOMAS. *A Year at the Fights*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003. Pp. ix+272. No notes or index. \$19.95

A very good case can be made that Thomas Hauser is America's best living boxing writer. His *oeuvre* is both prodigious and prolific. Various books on Muhammad Ali (see for example *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* [1991], *Muhammad Ali Memories* [1992] and *Muhammad Ali and Company* [1998]) are superbly crafted. They position Hauser as a fine essayist and storyteller who, at one and the same time, loves boxing but is buffeted and bruised by a sport that never escapes from its quagmire of scandal, disarray, disorder and criminality. Just as novelist Charles Dickens railed at the social ills of Victorian England Hauser uses his pugilistic pulpit to proselytize on the cultural canvas of the sweet science, a sport replete with so many positive and negative connotations.

The Boxing Collector's News claims that Hauser is so good that he is a modern-day A.G. Liebling. Liebling (1904-1963) was a stellar writer and columnist for the *New Yorker* from 1935 to 1963. His best writing was so good that it was glorious literature. This reviewer would hesitate to categorize Hauser as Liebling's equal. What is irrefutable is that Liebling and Hauser share a common genius of seeing, in boxing, a prism by which larger social landscapes are penetrated, interpreted and given a singular voice so that readers are made to feel that they are players involved in the action of the boxing arena rather than being mere passive spectators.

A Year at the Fights contains the articles that Hauser authored about professional boxing in 2001 and early 2002. A major attraction of this Hauser collection is its thematic variety. The six clusters of articles are nicely packaged into what Hauser calls rounds (that is chapters). Round one is on "Fight and Fighters," round two is "non-Combatants," round three is "A Case Study," round four is the "New York State Athletic Commission," round five is "Issues and Answers," and the final chapter is "Curiosities."

In round one Hauser opens his book with a delightful interview with the grand old man of British boxing Henry Cooper. Cooper is an English icon because of one great shining moment in a fight with Cassius Clay. It was June 18, 1963, and Clay fought Henry Cooper at Wembley Stadium in London with 55,000 fans in attendance. Clay's youth, speed and punching power overwhelmed Cooper. By round three Cooper was bloodied, and Clay's prediction of a fifth-round knockout victory seemed prescient. Then suddenly Cooper unleashed an uppercut, and Clay was literally flattened. However, the bell sounded and with this respite plus some adroit trickery from Clay's trainer Angelo Dundee, enough time was salvaged for Clay to clear his head and regroup. In round five Cooper's eye was further cut open, and the fight had to be stopped. Hauser concluded his Cooper interview with a charming anecdote about Cooper receiving his knighthood from Queen Elizabeth: "The Queen said to me, 'You had a long career, didn't you, Mr. Cooper?' I told her, 'I did, ma'am; seventeen years.' Then she shook hands with me. And according to the etiquette, when the Queen shakes hands with you, you know it's over. You don't keep talking to her" (p. 8).

And then just fourteen pages later Hauser shows another facet of professional boxing. On one hand we have had the macho niceness of the sixty-six-year-old boxer Sir Henry Cooper reminiscing on a career of forty wins, fourteen losses, one draw and a forty-year-long marriage. Then Hauser describes the night of June 26, 2001. It is on the nine-hundred-foot aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Intrepid*. While decommissioned in 1974, it was opened as a New York museum in 1982 and when Hauser was on board the deck was reconfigured to be a one-of-a-kind boxing locale. Beethaven Scotland fought George "Khalid" Jones. Hauser's picture is all about light and shade: about a wonderful setting—"There was a patriotic picnic-like atmosphere. Red, white, and blue ring ropes cordoned off the red, white, and blue ring canvas. Everything sparkled. The sky was perfect, almost surreal, backdrop for the fighters; aquamarine at first; after that, dark with just enough haze to resemble a black velvet curtain" (p. 22) and a horrific denouement—"Scotland took a beating. . . . Six days later, he died. His courage carried him too far" (p. 23).

Other columns discuss the corruption that is endemic within professional boxing and, of considerable relevance for social historians, the symbolic connections between the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the heart and soul of professional boxing that is, of course, violence. Hauser writes of fans, families, financiers, promoters, broadcasters and journalists. It is heartening to see what Hauser has to say about scribe Hugh McIlvanney, the noted British sportswriter. Hauser quite simply addresses McIlvanney as "a patron saint for boxing writers" (p. 81).

A Year of the Fights is much more than a compilation of "old" newspaper columns. The material is full of rich brush strokes that enables readers to come to grips with the

enigma of an activity that, while viscerally engaging, is contaminated by an excess of malevolent characters. There are also vignettes that stand on their own as fascinating fragments of sports history. Take, for example, the essay on the history of the Everlast Company (pp. 263-266). In Hauser's words, "Boxing, like many sports, is founded on tradition" (p. 263).

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