

mostly positive personal experience with the pickup game. The deeper problem is that it often conflates normative commitments and claims with more descriptive, dispassionate analyses of mere cultural practices. It seems to me, in other words, that the relationship between basketball as an ethical style and basketball as a cultural practice is a more complicated and multifaceted than it otherwise may appear in much of this volume.

This latter set of observations and comments is not intended to dismiss this book, nor to minimize Mc Laughlin's accomplishment. Quite the contrary, it is precisely because of the scope of the claims in *Give and Go*, the clarity and erudition of its formulations, and the originality of many of its observations and interpretations that I am pushing and probing. Like a great basketball run, this book has gotten my competitive and analytical juices flowing—and that, for me, is the highest order of praise a fellow researcher, writer, and player can offer.

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### **Boxing: A Cultural History**

*Kasia Boddy*

London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2008.

References, illustrations, index. 478 pp.  
\$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781861893697

In *Boxing: A Cultural History*, Kasia Boddy, a lecturer in the Department of English at University College in London, gives us an encyclopedic survey of the ring in art and literature. This is a big, beauti-

ful book. Reaktion Publishers printed it on high-quality, oversized paper to accommodate 150 illustrations, and these images are an integral part of the book's purpose.

Boddy surveys the manly art's long history, from its origins in ancient Mediterranean cultures through its golden moments in the twentieth century. Along the way she cites (in over sixty pages of double-column footnotes) a wide range of materials and quotes from every conceivable literary source that mentions "the sweet science," as pugilism has been known. Beyond the literati, Boddy takes us not only through boxing paintings, photographs, films, and sculptures, but also through the backgrounds and thoughts of the artists who created these works.

Readers interested in play will be especially interested in Boddy's discussion of boxing and youth culture. She gives us a strong few pages on the entrance of boxing and rough sports into the Victorian middle class through both the public schools and such popular boys' novels as *Tom Brown's School Days*. She returns briefly to the theme of amateur and youth boxing in her discussion of the twentieth century.

Boddy is especially good in uncovering the genealogy of boxing literature and art. With deep knowledge of her sources, she discusses artistic depictions of the ring across the centuries. For example, George Bellows was one of the earliest painters of boxing scenes in America, and he took considerable risk in depicting such a disreputable subject at the beginning of the twentieth century. Boddy contrasts Bellows with the late-eighteenth-century English painter William Hogarth, setting

them both in the intellectual conventions and constrictions of their respective times: “Both Hogarth and Bellows co-opted low-life activities such as boxing to epitomize ‘the real’ in their propaganda battles against the artificiality of established conventions. Hogarth set low against high, down-to-earth Englishness against continental neoclassicism; Bellows set low against middle, American virility against Victorian sentimentality and the ‘genteel tradition,’ John L. Sullivan against Louisa May Alcott” (p. 119).

For all of Boddy’s learnedness, there are occasional bloopers here. On the very first page of the introduction, she identifies the American historian Garry Wills as a sportswriter, not his trade though he has written some smart reviews of sports books. It is not so much the occasional error, though, as the larger perspective that is a bit limited. For example, Boddy describes the old bare-knuckle prize ring rules by quoting George Bernard Shaw, who wrote long after the demise of the old rules that a round “terminated by the fall of one of the combatants . . . and was followed by an interval of half a minute for recuperation” (p. 145). It is a perfectly apt description, but why is Shaw the authority here? John Broughton’s code, first promulgated in the middle of the eighteenth century, or the early nineteenth century’s “Rules of the London Prize Ring” are readily available.

We get Shaw because Boddy, trained in art and literary criticism, is mostly interested in famous creators of culture, canonical figures. There is nothing wrong with this. For whatever reason, boxing has attracted more great writers and artists than any other sport, and their depic-

tions of the ring are worthy of aesthetic and linguistic analysis. But what is missing here is boxing itself. One could read Boddy’s book and not have much idea of what a boxing match looked and felt like from classical times to the present—at least not from the point of view of the boxers themselves, the journalists who covered them, or, in the ring’s early days, the judges who sent them to prison. The reader learns what Norman Mailer and Bob Dylan and Lord Byron said about the ring but not much about fighters and the fights themselves.

Of course a book on boxing and creative expression is a worthy project, and Boddy is a remarkably thorough scholar. But there is an irony here. Pugilism is historically a low-caste subject, a distinctly noncanonical one. Boxing seems important to Boddy less because it is inherently interesting—not interesting enough, say, for a lengthy description of a fight—more because great writers and artists took the trouble to represent it on paper or canvas or celluloid. One suspects that if the likes of Thomas Eakins had not painted the ring, if Ernest Hemmingway and his ilk had not written about it, then boxing would not rate a big beautiful book, that only the approbation of cultural elites justifies such lavish interest in the subject. I doubt that Boddy believes that; anyway, I hope not. Boxing is historically interesting not because Joyce Carol Oates and Andy Warhol thought so, but because Muhammad Ali, Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, John Broughton, Daniel Mendoza, and John Jackson made it so.

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