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Mixed Martial Arts: Waiting, Brawling, and Transcendence

A Review of Kerry Howley's *Thrown*

The worst part of judo tournaments isn't being thrown to the mat, getting choked, or having an arm wrenched by someone trying to break it. The worst part is waiting. It's the hours leading up to the fight. Because in that spectacle, which I know well from more than a decade of competition, you forget you're in anything at all, even your body. I knew this only vaguely then; I knew I felt different during a good fight because I did not feel anything at all until after it was over, unlike during a bad fight, during which I'd think not only of what to do next but of the fact that I was thinking in the first place. I know this much more specifically now, after reading Kerry Howley's *Thrown* (Sarabande Books, 2014), a brilliant book-length essay about mixed martial arts fighters and what it's like to watch them.

In a feat of journalism, Howley spent a few years with two MMA fighters, both from Iowa. Actual fights, in caged-in octagons, are rare. Mostly the fighters are in gyms training or in living rooms watching TV, in hotel rooms pining for food or in other miscellaneous dude-hangout spots. And then, every few months (if they're lucky), they march into cages and pummel other men with a mix of jiu-jitsu, boxing, Muay Thai, and other fighting arts. This is the prime opportunity for what the book's narrator calls "ecstatic experience." She discovered this feeling after wandering out of a conference on phenomenology and into a fight's audience, where she watched Sean Huffman "play fat slobberknocker to another man's catlike technical prowess," and she, in turn, felt "as if someone had oil-slicked my synapses, such that thoughts could whip and whistle their way across the mind without the friction I'd come to experience as thought itself." Howley decides to follow Sean, who's not quite a has-been, and to make sure she has another shot at transcendence, she also joins up-and-coming Erik Koch. In joining their entourages, she becomes for each man, in MMA parlance, a *spacetaker*. "As hipsters have glasses, and priests collars, and cops mustaches," she explains, "fighters have us."

That “us” is difficult. It includes the narrator—whose name, we learn, is not Kerry but Kit Howley—but maybe not the writer. I’m hesitant to say anything about genre, since I’m always trying to justify my own choices in writing nonfiction, a genre whose name its writers often point out is a negation and not much of a definition. But I will say this: *Thrown* is not fiction. Everything that doesn’t pertain to the narrator in the book is true; it is factual. The narrator, on the other hand, is a mix of facts and interpretation. She reveals herself about a quarter of the way in, justifying her existence by saying she’s a construct—just like all other narrators. She comes from her author, who “has never known a real person who saw herself with even passable clarity; never known a storyteller who could tell of a trip to the supermarket without self-gratifying sins of omission.” Anything put on the page is a translation of the real world, and I get the sense that using Kit Howley instead of Kerry Howley as a narrator allowed Kerry Howley, the real-life author, to more accurately tell the real-world story she wanted to tell. The contrasts created by her narrator—the space between her hyper-intellectual philosophical studies and the fighters’ uncomplicated fighting ethos, in particular—are very, very real, even if they aren’t exactly unadulterated fact.

But the narrator’s status in the real world matters far less than what a fun storyteller she is. Her academic tone, with its self-serious mentions of Schopenhauer and Heidegger, tumbles from page to page much like rolling fighters, never satisfied with a position, always trying to gain some advantage over—what, exactly? Over her subjects, it seems at first, but then it’s really over herself, over all the people who are *not* fighters and who do not quite understand the ecstatic experience because they are not the source of it, despite feeling it while they’re there, waiting and watching the spectacle.

Howley’s descriptions of spectacular fights are spectacular. Her sentences bring me right back to my days fighting in my martial art of choice (albeit one that’s less brutal and more clothed than what happens when all the martial arts are taken together). Sean finds himself trapped between the legs of his opponent, “shoving his bloody eye into the other man’s chest,” and the pair becomes “jellyfish jockeying.” Such exacting detail, often in careful and unexpected metaphors, makes MMA ferociously beautiful, a physical phenomenon whose pleasure the fighter doesn’t even realize at the moment of feeling it.

And then there’s the rest of the time, the time spent outside of the ecstasy-inducing octagon. “Time is a fighter’s enemy,” Kit tells us, “and all the classic time-passers available to you and me—drinking, eating, drug-taking—are not available to the fighting class.” So the fighter waits

obsessively, whittling down his awareness of the world until fighting is all there is and doing things like losing thirty-five pounds in a couple of days (Erik) or fighting after kidney failure (Sean) becomes possible. This time waiting is when the fighter is concerned with willpower and self-discipline and all of those sports things that are usually reduced to the cliché of “wanting it” but in *Thrown* are far removed from the dull conventions of sports writing. There is no fantasy here, only bodies. These bodies balloon and fizzle, faces split open. But the tension is less in the moment of face-splitting as it is in the moment of getting the face down to fighting weight, of navigating the in-between time when real life—Sean may have a son; Erik may have alienated himself from his brother, the person who introduced him to MMA—threatens to distract the fighter from the surreal ideal he’s after of having a body do exactly what he wants without being aware that any of it is happening. That Howley can capture this part of the fighting life so vividly is testament to her strength as a writer and reporter, and also to her narrator’s strength as a storyteller and construct.

If that construct named Kit is a spacemaker, then the fighters could be called timetakers. They are always waiting, taking up time, because that’s how a fighter emerges, finally, in the actual fight, that brief period of pure id when time stops for the fighter, and, if he’s successful, for his audience. It’s the moment right before getting thrown into that world, when you exist not relative to everything else but only to yourself; you just are. But each fighter will eventually be thrown, or arm-barred, or punched, and the fight ends; time resumes and the fighters resume taking it, the narrator resumes taking up space, and space-time is sutured back together like an eyebrow after a fight.