

The Grace of Slaughter: A Review-Essay of Joyce Carol Oates's *On Boxing* · Gerald Early

Boxing ain't the noblest of the arts. . . .

— middleweight champion Harry Greb, whose loss to Tiger Flowers in 1926 permitted the first black ever to hold the middleweight title

God didn't make the chin to be punched.

— Ray Arcel, boxing trainer who numbered among his students the legendary Roberto Duran

At that time [Georges] Carpentier was only 14½ years old and I, 21 years old. So his first fight was with Georges Salmon at the Cafe de Paris, Maison Laffitte, and he was making good until the 11th round then he blew up. That was really because he was inexperienced on the square circle. . . . but again he was knocked down several times after the 10th round so I said to Deschamps [Carpentier's manager] to stop it. He said No. So I jumped into the ring and stopped it, picking little Georges up in my arms and took him to his corner amidst the cheers of the crowd. He was always game to the toes.

— Black American fighter Bob Scanlon recounting the beginning of his friendship with French champion Georges Carpentier

PART ONE: "THE PANTING PURSUIT OF DANGER . . ."

I

JOYCE CAROL OATES'S *On Boxing* seems a sort of culmination or at least a reexamination of several ideas she expressed in her early novel, *With Shuddering Fall* (1964). That book dealt with a character named Shar Rule

Dolphin/Doubleday : Garden City, N.Y., 1987. 118 pp., illustrated with photos by John Ranad.

(the name itself speaks volumes), who is a professional racing car driver. The similarity between a jockey, a boxer, a racing car driver, and a bull fighter regarding the nature of their individuality, the brinkmanship of their sadistic/masochistic occupations, the charged, exaggerated mythic version of their masculinity and the troubling and troubled voyeurism they incite is surely clear enough and is precisely what attracts Oates to athletics: wrath, the ambivalent, oxymoronic iconography of masculine toughness as male suffering, and the pure anxiety inherent in the ritual of male slaughter. When she wrote passages like these:

Max could feel the beauty of Shar's experience in his imagination, while Shar felt it in his very body. At a certain point the speed became his body: he was one with it.

From time to time, he had toyed with the idea that spectators did not really come to see drivers be killed, as most people thought, nor did they come—as Max told him—because they wanted to share in the skill and triumph, they came to share the speed, the danger, the occasional deaths—with exultation, maybe, but with something more than that—to force themselves into the men who represented them down on the track. . . . they gave up their identities to risk violence, but they were always cheated because the violence, when it came, could not touch them. (ellipsis mine)

One can see it is not a very far distance for her to travel to this closure:

One of the paradoxes of boxing is that the viewer inhabits a consciousness so very different from that of the boxer as to suggest a counter-world. "Free" will, "sanity," "rationality"—our characteristic modes of consciousness—are irrelevant, if not detrimental, to boxing in its most extraordinary moments. Even as he disrobes himself ceremonially in the ring the great boxer must disrobe himself of both reason and instinct's caution as he prepares to fight.

Boxing and auto-racing are not simply unintelligible; they are anti-intelligible, activities akin to vision quests on the part of the men who participate in them. (" . . . [boxing is] obliquely akin to those severe religions in

which the individual is both 'free' and 'determined' . . ." Oates writes.) They wish to find their spiritual selves by being in an activity that is relentlessly, ruthlessly physical but they wish to prove their goodness (i.e. their worth) in an activity that is so self-centered yet so self-annihilating that it can only be considered evil. George S. Bernard, a Catholic priest, argues that very point—the iniquity of being a boxer—in his *The Morality of Boxing*, and it seems a reasonable assertion because boxing poses, on a metaphysical level, such an uncomplex ethical proposition: beat your opponent until you have weakened him and then, when he is weak and helpless, beat him all the more fiercely in a contrived contest of fictive grievances that prides itself on being without mercy. The spectators are not simply a world apart, they are a morality apart; for the sports of boxing and auto-racing turn morality on its head by permitting acts to take place that are so dangerous (high-speed racing and hitting another without malice and not in self-defense) that they are banned outside of certain sacred spaces. It is not simply the thrill of "taboo breaking," as Oates states in *On Boxing*, that makes boxing attractive; it is the fact that the audience recognizes boxing as an attack, a frontal assault upon the very nature of taboo. The death of one of the participants is often wished so that the harsh justice of the taboo itself is made not intelligible but less a cause of distress, more rich as a result of having been empowered by human sacrifice. So death hovers near a certain masculine drama that for the audience may make death frightening but will also make it alluring, electric because it hovers so close to a pointless, intelligible, nearly existential, and very simple, even vulgar excellence. As another character in *With Shuddering Fall* expresses himself:

Why should anything be safe? . . . Look at them all, Shar and the other drivers—their hands all blisters and eyes burnt, cars about ready to explode or fall apart—wheels, axles, anything—but they love it all the way! A man puts in years out on the track—in ten minutes he gets that much living out of it. (ellipsis mine)

And in the later book:

If boxing is a sport it is the most tragic of all sports because more than any other human activity it consumes the very excellence it dis-

plays—its drama is this very consumption. . . . the punishment—to the body, the brain, the spirit—a man must endure to become even a moderately good boxer is inconceivable to most of us whose idea of personal risk is largely ego-related or emotional. (ellipsis mine)

Shar, like a tragic young boxer, dies young, in a literal flame of glory (his car crashes in his attempt to go too fast), consumed by the very instrument that made him great. What is it in sport generally that appeals but that universal morbidity of the instant tragedy of youth used up? (Even in less dangerous sports such as baseball one feels a great loss when a pitcher like Tom Seaver retires, the golden arm that once brought him fame now all used up by the very act, the very motion that the arm used to achieve its fame in the first place, “the unnatural act,” as former Oakland A’s pitcher Mike Norris called it. One wonders if it is only in sex and athletics that we demand the “unnatural act” as a display of skill and a presentation of excitation.) “All athletes age rapidly but none so rapidly and so visibly as the boxer,” writes Oates. Yet their rapid aging is very much akin to those illicit and disreputable members of society to whom they are constantly compared: prostitutes. And while all athletes are viewed with a certain distinct distrust and disdain which, I think, arises from the immense and intense adulation they generate, no athlete is held quite as lowly as the boxer. British novelist and former fighter Johnny Morgan, in *The Square Jungle*, constantly makes the analogy between boxers and whores. And in Roman times, as historian Michael Grant points out, gladiators were placed in the same class as women for hire. To sell one’s body in performance in order to give pleasure to others ultimately saps the body, perhaps because the body’s integrity has been denied. Perhaps the body is simply stupefied by its inability to be thrilled by the thrilling anymore.

At one point in the early novel, after a race Shar wins by performing a maneuver which kills another driver, two characters shout at each other: “Shar is filled with life!” “Shar is filled with death!” and perhaps it is this essential ambiguity which surrounds the prizefighter as much as it does the racing car driver that Oates finds so absorbing: Is he filled with life, or is he an angel of death, he who by his life says that life is impossible, that only the pursuit of death is real?

II

There is no sport that, like [boxing], promotes the spirit of aggression in the same measure, demands determination quick as lightning, educates the body for steel-like versatility. If two young people fight out a difference of opinion with their fists, it is no more brutal than if they do so with a piece of ground iron. . . . But above all, the young and healthy boy has to learn to be beaten.

— Adolf Hitler

Hitler liked boxing because it resisted rationality, because its participants were forced to resist rationality. Perhaps that is why many writers have been attracted to it as well (although this difference must be understood: that Hitler worshipped boxing for its psychotic potential in much the same way a murderer worships the purity of his mayhem; Hitler's love of boxing was simply the display of a very depraved infantile taste but it should serve as a sufficient warning to all who find boxing a seduction). Unlike football, basketball, and especially baseball, boxing cannot be understood through numbers. Its statistics mean nothing; a boxer's record tells no story of the achievements of a career. As Robert Coover showed in his brilliant baseball novel, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, baseball's story can be unfolded through the maze of the purity of its mathematics. Boxing's change of rules in the late nineteenth century, which changed it from being a bareknuckle sport of indeterminate length to a gloved sport of timed rounds and rest periods and eventually of bouts of a finite length, was the only concession that boxing made to rationality, to the science and technology of the day. Those changes made boxing more palatable to modern audiences by making it more systematic and schematic but only better to exemplify and symbolize the irrationality of the Spenserian struggle of existence. Boxing can only be understood through story: the oral tradition of eyewitnesses or the journalistic narratives of reporters. It is a misnomer to call boxing a "science." Boxing does not seek knowing, a truth in its action. It does not seek to explain nature in the way baseball and football can and do. It is, in fact, an action that is meant to be nature itself. Boxing is always seeking its text (like Ishmael Reed's "jes grew") and the ambiguity of the magnitude of its tales. Boxing is anti-science. It is our ancient epic sung to honor a

misty past of slaves and warrior-kings and the personification of brute force.

There is an obvious similarity between Oates's *On Boxing* and Roland Barthes's famous essay, "The World of Wrestling," indeed, a series of similarities of such a strong nature that one might say that Barthes's essay begat Oates's book, not simply inspired it, but actually provided the method and language to make it possible. To say this is to pay tribute to Oates's work, to its savvy and cunning, by acknowledging that it can be placed side-by-side with Barthes's paradigmatic essay. Oates's book is the first on the sport of boxing (and there have been many written of various quality) which has, consciously I believe, emulated Barthes or a Barthes-like approach: the photos, which comment on and supplement the text without pulling the reader into the worlds of biography or history, into individual personalities or social movements, are certainly something that Barthes would have done had he written a book on boxing. The photos suggest a pure world of boxing inhabited only by boxers. ". . . boxing is not a metaphor for life but a unique, closed, self-referential world . . ." writes Oates. Naturally, in one sense, this is a fiction: for the boxer's world is something quite else than a world of himself and others like him or simply the world of his exploits (and to talk of a boxer occupying a "world" brings to mind the question Amiri Baraka asked many years ago about the title of a jazz musician's album; does the boxer really have a world or does he simply occupy a very traditional and related room in a masculine complex? Is he next door to the gloried discipline of the marine or perhaps the psychosis of the street corner gang leader?) Oates so powerfully evokes this world, this fiction, that the work does not explicate or justify boxing in the end but actually *summons* it forth. Oates wishes to do for boxing and the boxer what Barthes says the wrestler himself does for wrestling and for himself (which may explain why there have been fewer books written on professional wrestling than on professional boxing): make boxing an intelligible spectacle. In this regard, Oates is the true deconstructionist; Barthes is simply a reporter describing a sport that deconstructs itself. Of course, boxing can be deconstructed like wrestling, like any combat sport (when will someone tackle Bruce Lee and Mas Oyama's *This is Karate?*); indeed, boxing is a sport that makes its need and its enticement to be deconstructed, to be decoded in some wizardly fashion, so

obvious as to be nearly one of its conceits. “That no other sport can elicit such *theoretical* anxiety,” writes Oates, “lies at the heart of boxing’s fascination for the writer” (emphasis hers).

Barthes writes (in one of the few instances in his essay that he mentions boxing) that “a boxing-match is a story which is constructed before the eyes of the spectator.” Oates writes: “Each boxing match is a story—a unique and highly condensed drama without words.” Barthes argues that “wrestling is the spectacle of excess,” that that is, in fact, its virtue. Oates says that boxing is excess because it violates the taboo against violence, that as a public spectacle “it is akin to pornography” (pornographic films and stage acts I assume she means), which, I might add, means that it is, for Oates, one of the theaters in a complex of entertainments of excess. But it is the naturalism of pornography and boxing that in some sense makes them inferior to professional wrestling as excess. As Barthes writes: “[In wrestling] it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself.” It is the literalness of boxing and pornography that makes them imperfect because it is that literalness, which is so much, in one sense, the expression of the innocence of the child’s literalness turned to the willful immorality of the adult’s reductionism, that ultimately deadens the senses. Real blood generously displayed reduces the ability to be awed by the sight of blood just as real sex copiously produced reduces the ability to appreciate the act of sex. It is this naturalism that tends to reduce every fight to being exactly every other fight that boxing as a social phenomenon tries to overcome by insisting that the fighter become a personality. (Naturalism is the horror of anonymity in modern society.) Boxing is, like wrestling, about showmanship. And the greatest showman and boxer in the history of the sport was Muhammad Ali, who made fights something other than what they were; he made them, for both the blacks and whites who watched them, the metaphors they wished the fights to be, principally the battle of good against evil. It is not an accident that boxing’s greatest showman was heavily influenced by a professional wrestler, Gorgeous George. Ali made boxing deal with the one moral issue that fascinates Americans: is a black man good or evil, which is the same as asking if he is real or not? Oates’s and Barthes’s discussions reach a certain critical juncture when they discuss almost in complementary fashion the very essence of sport and naturalistic expression. First, Barthes:

Wrestling is the only sport which gives such an externalized image of torture. But here again, only the image is involved in the game, and the spectator does not wish for the actual suffering of the contestant; he only enjoys the perfection of an iconography.

And Oates responds:

Unlike pornography (and professional wrestling) boxing is altogether real: the blood shed, the damage suffered, the pain (usually suppressed or sublimated) are unfeigned. Not for hemophobics, boxing is a sport in which blood becomes quickly irrelevant. The experienced viewer understands that a boxer's bleeding face is probably the least of his worries.

Ali, like the good wrestler, made the audience care about his injuries: first, the issue of whether he could stand pain when he was unpopular and then, later, the issue of whether he was absorbing too much pain when he was popular. Ali made the moral relevance of injuries an issue, perhaps the only fighter in the history of the sport to do so without having to die in the ring. One remembers his fight with Bob Foster because it was the first time he was ever cut across the brow in the ring. The first Norton bout stands out because he suffered a broken jaw, the first Frazier fight because he was knocked down. It is the very fact that professional wrestling does not demand the realism of boxing that makes it a protest against violence. Showing violence as fakery, as parody, as comedy reveals wrestling's inner wish to say that violence is utterly impossible as a real act, utterly unbearable. Of course, wrestling is only this protest *theoretically* and in actual fact a good many wrestlers are injured every year. Even faked violence can be dangerous which makes the contemplation of real violence all the more frightening. Finally, Barthes argues that "in wrestling . . . Defeat is not a conventional sign, abandoned as soon as it is understood; it is not an outcome, but quite the contrary, it is a duration, a display, it takes up the ancient myths of public Suffering and Humiliation." And Oates makes nearly an identical observation about boxing: "Boxing is about being hit rather than it is about hitting, just as it is about feeling pain, if not devastating psychological paralysis, more than it is about winning." What is interesting here is that both assert that boxing and wrestling, symbolic vio-

lence and naturalistic violence, are not really competitive ventures in the sense that we normally think professional sport is: they are both elaborate statements about withstanding, not necessarily to overcome, but simply for the reality of enduring. Boxing and wrestling, we learn from Oates and Barthes, are the only activities in modern American and European societies that give us the enactment, the drama of shame without guilt.

Despite being a text that I think in many challenging ways carries on a dialogue with Barthes's essay, *On Boxing* occupies its own space. It is, to be sure, not the first non-fiction book on the sport to be written by a prominent literary person (although it is the first, to my knowledge, to have been written by a woman). But it is clearly not intended to present the author as George Plimpton (*Shadow-Box*): the bumbling, well-meaning journalist who cannot get out of the way of the stage; nor is it in the guise of Norman Mailer (*The Fight* and other works), the hot male predator, haunted by Hemingway, trying desperately to make the act of writing a book a blood sport. The book is neither bumbling innocence, sham egoism, nor hot competitive drive. The book is, at last, not Liebling (*The Sweet Science*), the worldly-wise intellectual in the low-life jungle. It does not slum or try to show boxing as being picturesque. It celebrates neither inadvertence nor its own prowess. *On Boxing* is a cool book. It is a book about the audience, about the voyeur and what he or she sees at a boxing match and how he or she is, in effect, what he or she sees.

During the past two or three years, quite a few books on boxing have been published, including the autobiographies of Angelo Dundee (his first) and Jake LaMotta (his second), biographies of Joe Louis, Jack Johnson, and Sugar Ray Leonard, a history of bareknuckle prizefighting in America, and an inside look at boxing as a business. It is not my contention that Oates's book is the best of the lot. Which book is the best has a great deal to do with what the reader wishes to know about boxing and the format he or she finds most stimulating. I do believe that *On Boxing* is a quite sophisticated book, possibly one of the most sophisticated books to have been published on the sport. It is the most critically alert.

PART TWO: “. . . IS THE PURSUIT OF LIFE ITSELF.”

III

To be a man, the male must be able to face the threat of masculinity within himself by facing it in others like himself.

— Walter Ong

You no longer have to come from the ghetto to know how to fight. People with a good upbringing are now learning to box. They're looking at it as an art, rather than as a kill-or-be-killed type of thing.

— Michael Olajide, middleweight contender

Any man with a good trade isn't about to get knocked on his butt to make a dollar.

— boxing promoter Chris Dundee

“The referee makes boxing possible.” This statement alone may be worth the price of admission, the price of the book. There are, in essence, two types of statements in *On Boxing*: those like the above that are brilliant and unquestionable and those like the following: “[Boxing] is the only human activity in which rage can be transposed without equivocation into art,” which are brilliant but debatable. Oates’s accomplished analysis of the role of the referee explains not only why a fight is bearable but why a fight is actually taking place. The fight is an act of hope, a plea that warring sides, through the active presence of a disinterested but compassionate non-combatant, can be reconciled not only to each other but to the restless, self-destructive nature within ourselves. Prizefighting is about man’s preoccupation with trying to live in an adversative Eden, a world that loves and hates him, made by a God that both comforts and ignores. As Oates writes: “. . . love commingled with hate is more powerful than love. Or hate.” With the presence of the referee, modern prizefighting is the irrationality of pure force confronting the humane conscience of the modern world.

The second quotation is a bit problematic; the rage in boxing, after all, is not genuine but rather fictive, and the viewer hardly knows its source or

its objective. The boxer himself may not know either. It is the fact that rage in boxing is completely fake in the enactment of the contest itself that makes this statement troublesome. Boxing seems to say that the articulation of real rage in our society is utterly impossible unless, of course, it is utterly pointless which is what the contrivance of the boxing match means. The true art form of rage is the duel of which boxing is the modern rationalization: why fight to the death for honor when one can fight to the maiming for money? And suddenly the burden of masculine expendability as sport and performance fell upon the lower classes. The possible art forms of rage (with equivocation) are revolution or rebellion which are about the only worthwhile vessels for the obsessions of the poor. Of course, boxing has always been popular — television ratings tell us that — but cover articles such as the one in the British fashion magazine, *The Face* and Oates's own piece on Bellows's boxing pictures in *Art and Antiques* lead us to believe that it is fashionable (in other words, hip) in the way that Michael Olajide says it is, although few middle-class persons in their right minds are going to perform such a sport for a living. And if it is fashionable, can the rage (pun intended) possibly be real? On the whole, *On Boxing* is a series of tableaux that offers perhaps some of the most stunning surfaces imaginable about boxing. There are penetrating discussions on machismo, on boxing as the sport that is not a sport, on time and the prize ring.

But while I find Oates's book impressive, it does have its weaknesses. The section on writers and prizefighting, for instance, does not mention one black writer. And it must be remembered that blacks have had an enormous influence on American popular culture through the sport of prizefighting. To be sure, no major black writer has written a full-length treatise, fiction or non-fiction, on boxing, but there have been several important essays produced by the likes of Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, Richard Wright, Jervis Anderson, Larry Neal, and others. Also, two of the most important scenes in all of American literature which involve fights were written by blacks: Frederick Douglass's fight with Covey, the slavebreaker, in the 1845 edition of Douglass's *Narrative*, and the battle royal scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. It would have been of some interest to hear what Oates had to say about them. Such a discussion would have given statements like "the history of boxing — of fighting — in America is very much one with the history of the black man in America," a bit more validity.

Generally, the writing about race is the least persuasive in the book and might have been jettisoned without hurting the work as a whole. Ethnicity and boxing, ethnicity and American sports is simply too complex a topic to be handled well in the short space that Oates gives herself. I think her refusal to see boxing as a metaphor hurts her discussion here as well. At some point in American social and political history Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali (the three most important blacks of the twentieth century) ceased to be men in the American mind (both black and white), they even ceased to be fighters in the ordinary sense and became something quite legendary but also something specifically inhuman. Once blacks became a force in boxing, the sport automatically became a metaphor. Indeed, what is race in America but the Melvillian doubloon hammered in our consciousness that bedevils us endlessly and turns anything it shines upon into a metaphor as well.

Some minor quarrels: 1) Her statement that “the bare knuckle era . . . was far less dangerous for fighters” is simply not true. Fewer punches were thrown under London Prize Ring Rules but the wrestling, cross buttocks, gouging, spiking, scratching, biting, pulling, and poking left the old bruisers more disfigured than modern fighters usually are. Besides, it must be remembered that audiences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a good deal more bloodthirsty than audiences today (after all, for a good part of their history, bareknucklers had to compete against public executions as a form of popular entertainment), the fights were a great deal longer, and medical care for injured fighters was quite primitive, to say the least. 2) Her assertion that “boxing is contrary to nature” does not take into account the fact that virtually *all* sports are contrary to nature. Boxing is not special in this regard: running a 26-mile marathon, balancing oneself on an elevated balance beam, or not flinching while trying to hit a 95-mph fastball are all acts that are contrary to nature. 3) “Baseball, football, basketball—these quintessentially American pastimes are recognizably sports because they involve play; they are games. One *plays* football, one doesn’t *play* boxing,” writes Oates (emphasis hers). There are two responses to this: on the one hand, certain sports, like football, have a certain limited *playing* sphere. Professional football player Curtis Greer put it this way in explaining why he chooses to continue to play despite a bad knee: “It’s not like baseball, basketball, golf, or tennis, a sport that you can continue as a recreation once you retire. When you leave football, you

just can't go up to the rec center and get into a game." So the play element in all sports cannot be characterized in the same way. Moreover, there are several different types of boxing: sparring, exhibition matches, as well as competitive fighting for titles and the like. Some non-serious boxing does involve an element of play. Sometimes sparring is serious and sometimes there are other things going on. Exhibition matches are almost never serious. So to say that one cannot play boxing is not quite true; it depends on how competitive the participants wish the bout to be and precisely what is at stake. I remember as a child a game played among black boys called "slap-to-the-head" in which both participants, laughing most of the time, would, with open hands, cuff each other lightly on the head to see who had the fastest hands. It seemed a more physical demonstration of "the dozens," for it was considered in quite bad form ("You're nothing but a chump!") if one got angry at being shown up at this. Yet it was a purposeful display of one's boxing abilities.

Her criticism of the arguments for the abolition of boxing are sometimes telling but ultimately not as compelling as other parts of the book. Doubtless, no sport compromises the humanity of its participants as much as boxing and it is hard, in the end, to overcome the frightening and bitter impact of that truth. Oates's position, if I might be so bold as to attempt a summary, is that of distressed ambivalence about boxing as a sort of tragic romantic rite of male expendability, a position that I have a great deal of sympathy for as I once occupied it myself. But, finally, I believe it a bit too disingenuous, too self-consciously self-defensive, a strategically convenient stalking ground. There is a tendency, when one occupies this position, to assume that the whole business of boxing, to borrow Richard D. Altick's words, will cause "a delicious *frisson* rather than a shudder." She likens the arguments concerning the existence of boxing to those over the morality of abortion, an apt analogy but an incomplete one, for the arguments about boxing can, with profit, be likened to other important historical debates as well: to debates over slavery before the Civil War, over prostitution during the white slavery/reformist era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, over Prohibition during both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, debates which greatly shaped our national character.

On Boxing is a book with an incredible amount of intense energy, compassionate yet relentlessly scrutinizing. One is often moved by passages

because the author herself is moved. Boxing is, at last, not only our national sport of utter heartbreak but of how *sometimes* heartbreak is heroically endured by the boxer and even by the audience. Oates tells her part of the story of grace through slaughter (is boxing Puritan, as Oates suggests?) with astonishing compulsion and an extraordinary sense of humane concern. To be sure, Oates's book does not have the investigative detail and narrative exactitude of Barney Nagler's *James Norris and the Decline of Boxing* or Thomas Hauser's *The Black Lights*, the chatty coziness and insider's view of A. J. Liebling's *The Sweet Science*, Trevor Wignall's earlier book with the same title, or Fred Dartnell's *Seconds Out*; and it lacks the historical guile and wit of the volumes by Pierce Egan on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century boxing and the books by Nat Fleischer on the history of black boxing. Nevertheless, it possesses a certain critical audacity that none of these books comes close to having. It makes up in critical height what it lacks in the kind of width we have become accustomed to boxing books having. Jose Torres's biography of Muhammad Ali and Floyd Patterson's pieces in *Sports Illustrated* and *Esquire* are still necessary reading for anyone who wants to understand this sport, but so is Oates's work as well. She has established the possibility and the necessity of our best writers writing about sport in a way that is finally free of sentiment, romance, and a deadening and juvenile yearning for the purer (whiter?) past. She has freed us from reading the intellectual's entrapment of writing about boxing as if it were the fulfillment of a masculine golden dream of wonder or as if it can only produce a text that is nothing more than a *j'accuse* writ with orgiastic eloquence. Along with Hauser's *The Black Lights*, Oates's work is one of the more absorbing texts that I have come across on this topic in quite some time.