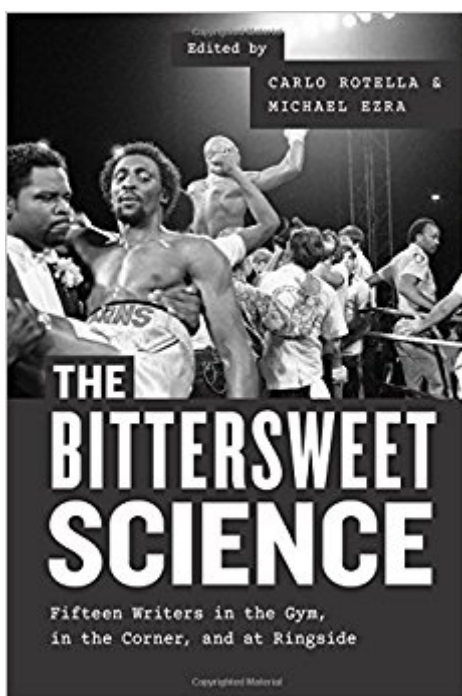


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The Bittersweet Science: Fifteen Writers In The Gym, In The Corner, And At Ringside



Synopsis

Weighing in with a balance of the visceral and the cerebral, boxing has attracted writers for millennia. Yet few of the writers drawn to it have truly known the sport—and most have never been in the ring. Moving beyond the typical sentimentality, romanticism, or cynicism common to writing on boxing, *The Bittersweet Science* is a collection of essays about boxing by contributors who are not only skilled writers but also have extensive firsthand experience at ringside and in the gym, the corner, and the ring itself. Editors Carlo Rotella and Michael Ezra have assembled a roster of fresh voices, ones that expand our understanding of the sport's primal appeal. The contributors to *The Bittersweet Science*—journalists, fiction writers, fight people, and more—explore the fight world's many aspects, considering boxing as both craft and business, art form and subculture. From manager Charles Farrell's unsentimental defense of fixing fights to former Golden Glover Sarah Deming's complex profile of young Olympian Claressa Shields, this collection takes us right into the ring and makes us feel the stories of the people who are drawn to or sometimes stuck in the boxing world. We get close-up profiles of marquee attractions like Bernard Hopkins and Roy Jones Jr., as well as portraits of rising stars and compelling cornermen, along with first-person, hands-on accounts from fighters' points of view. We are schooled in not only how to hit and be hit, but why and when to throw in the towel. We experience the intimate immediacy of ringside as well as the dim back rooms where the essentials come together. And we learn that for every champion there's a regiment of journeymen, dabblers, and anglers for advantage, for every aspiring fighter, a veteran in painful decline. Collectively, the perspectives in *The Bittersweet Science* offer a powerful in-depth picture of boxing, bobbing and weaving through the desires, delusions, and dreams of boxers, fans, and the cast of managers, trainers, promoters, and hangers-on who make up life in and around the ring. Contributors: Robert Anasi, Brin-Jonathan Butler, Donovan Craig, Sarah Deming, Michael Ezra, Charles Farrell, Rafael Garcia, Gordon Marino, Louis Moore, Gary Lee Moser, Hamilton Nolan, Gabe Oppenheim, Carlo Rotella, Sam Sheridan, and Carl Weingarten. Ã

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Customer Reviews

“The volume overall does a nice job of covering different contexts of boxing, from the gym to the business side. There aren’t a lot of the old glorious bang bang pow types of accounts here. The champions fall and eventually die. The underdogs grind and suffer.

It’s not a Rocky account, Marciano or Balboa. (Ear to the Ground Books)“Imagine the difference between watching a boxing match and being in one. The same could be said of the difference between reading about it in the new book *The Bittersweet Science* and in any previous publications on pugilism. . . . There’s an amazing range in their subjects. . . . The book will likely be as fascinating to hardcore fans of boxing as it will to those with just a minor curiosity.”

(Wicked Local)“Gritty and smart, this championship card replaces *Liebling’s The Sweet Science* for me because it comes from the inside and the sweat tastes real. (Robert Lipsyte, author of *The Contender*)“A perfect rejoinder to those who might question the continued justification for boxing, both as human activity and as belletristic fodder. By approaching its subject at inventive, even unprecedented angles, this superb collection manages something novel regarding this inexhaustible topic, the sport all others aspire to. But just as boxing isn’t really a sport, no one plays it, these essays can’t help but exceed their topic to skillfully and intelligently treat violence and courage and human will and craft and the ultimate inevitable decay we all face. The result simultaneously instructs, disturbs, and maybe even emboldens. (Sergio De La Pava, author of *A Naked Singularity*)“The insightful and innovative true tales of *The Bittersweet Science* leave one wanting more. It’s a terrific read for all who think they already know boxing, as well as for those fascinated to learn more about it. (Margaret Goodman, president of the Voluntary Anti-Doping Association and former Nevada State Athletic Commission Chief Ringside Physician)

Carlo Rotella is director of the American Studies Program at Boston College. His books include *Playing in Time: Essays, Profiles, and Other True Stories* and *Cut Time: An Education at the Fights*, both also published by the University of Chicago Press. He writes for the *New York Times*

Magazine, and he has been a regular op-ed columnist for the Boston Globe and radio commentator for WGBH. His work has also appeared in the New Yorker, Harper's, the Believer, Washington Post Magazine, and Best American Essays. Michael Ezra is professor of American multicultural studies at Sonoma State University. His books include Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon and The Economic Civil Rights Movement: African Americans and the Struggle for Economic Power. His work has been published by Deadspin, Al Jazeera, Politico, and the Guardian. Â Â

I love this book. It's a pretty common criticism that essay collections are "uneven," and a rare treat to find a collection that is packed end-to-end with good writing. This is one of those unusual discoveries: a collection of original essays that probes the mysteries of a sport as an art, a business, and a spectacle, asking us to look again at one hundred years of history and to revise our mental categories, all in gorgeous, compelling prose. It brings together essays by fighters, managers, and keen observers of boxing's past and present, and in the process restores the qualitative weight of what appear to be quantitative measures like a fighter's win-loss record. The contributors peel back the layers of history and culture and life experience in events and careers in the fight industry. I love the ways that the collection addresses the strange fate of boxing over the past half-century: a fall from cultural dominance simultaneous to a rise in payouts so enormous that top fighters are the most valuable athletes on the planet. When I watched the Pacquiao-Mayweather fight with friends I remember being stunned by how much money each fighter was making: more than the combined salaries of entire teams of athletes. That question has puzzled me ever since, and it's this kind of conundrum that drives the book forward. Boxing expresses a variety of injustices and imbalances of power. It offers careful analysts the chance to look through the bloody spectacle to see into the lives of the people fighting their way through vast economic and cultural forces beyond their control. While the contributors to *Bittersweet Science* engage the legacy of boxing's all-time greats, most of the writers here also explore the networks of amateur and Olympic fighters, trainers, managers, and administrators who make up the vast majority of those in the fight world. That was super interesting to me, all for being the more unusual in fight writing. Often correcting for the force of the "invisible numbers" behind the record book page, this book's perspectives from around the fight world reveal the ways in which national culture, race, gender, and social status open and close opportunities for a professional fighter, and influence current and future earning potential. Fitness, skill, speed, and style can lift a fighter to greatness, but it takes a different level of savvy to carve an opening in the industry in a

fighter's post-prime. I had a chance to interview the editors for the New Books Network, and I loved the way they characterized what they were hoping to achieve with the book: for sports historians, fight fans, and observers of American writing, the idea is for *The Bittersweet Science* to provide a sampling of "either the glorious last stand or amazing comeback of boxing writing as a genre of literature." It offers fans and scholars the analytical tools and historical perspective to make meaning of fighters climbing into the ring, at a time when we are paying them more than ever to do it, but paying less and less attention when they do.

An excellent read. The stories don't resemble the drippy sentimentalism most boxing writing is prone to. Instead it's a hard, sober look at the perils, triumphs and tragedies of the sport. Like any collection, some contributions are better than others. But the majority of the essays are very good and four or five are outstanding.

This is an unsentimental look at boxing -- but not one that decries inequities and brutalities that are by now obvious. Instead, it's a clear-eyed examination of seemingly basic topics that have eluded the gas-bag authors in the sport: what it means to throw in the towel (from a man who has not only had to do that to spare his charge damage but who also teaches philosophy at a college), why and how one goes about fixing a fight, how a man average in all respects can probe for weaknesses everywhere around him and in so doing, fight at the top level of the game till the age of 50. These 15 essays almost seem written by one person in the way they tread and re-tread terrain, as if tilling it -- but the book is stronger for that constant churn of material never-quite-settled (because it never can be, not fully anyway).

Don't let the book jacket fool you. This book is far superior to the books trying for the same subject that have more appealing book jackets but have far less writing that makes you feel the writer is a friend of yours. You will not regret buying this book as you can see by the majority of the ratings are five stars. Even if boxing is not one of your great interest, reading amazing true stories will make you not want to put this book down.

Great and fantastic

Charles Farrell's article alone is worth the price of admission. Unique in boxing

literature, as far as I'm aware, it examines the custom of fixing fights. In the everyday custom, Farrell maintains from the standpoint of the manager. Farrell, who managed several well-known fighters as well as a number of failed prospects, brings a sophisticated sense of moral ambiguity to the topic. Equally outstanding is Carlo Rotella's profile of the aging but unbowed Bernard Hopkins, wherein Rotella describes the mental weapons that have kept the light heavyweight's opponents off balance for three decades and counting. The damage that boxing exacts on so many practitioners haunts Rotella and Farrell's contributions, as well as the piece by Gordon Marino. All three articles, like others in this unusual collection, are literate, humane, and unsentimental—everything you don't expect in a compendium of boxing lit.

A fascinating, thought-provoking look at the sport of boxing in the modern era-- what it means, what it's all about.

The Bittersweet Science isn't like any boxing book I've read before. It approaches boxing from angles that haven't been tackled in depth previously: analyzing fighters in decline, scrutinizing the meaning of boxing records, the value of brain over brawn, the pain of throwing in the towel for someone in trouble. and an ethical argument in favor of fight fixing, among other things. I'd enthusiastically read full books by most of the authors involved here.

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