



Arts: Pugilistic primacy

From: *The Times*: London, 1987.

By: Melinda Camber Porter

Joyce Carol Oates has taken the American critics by surprise with her concise and inspired volume *On Boxing*. "I can't imagine putting one's whole life on the line, all that you are up to that moment, and stepping into the ring and more than I can imagine stepping into oblivion," she says. "Maybe it's partly because I'm a woman. But it is one of the reasons why I am fascinated by boxing."

However, the themes that Oates explores in her many novels, from *The Assassins* and *Them to Do With Me What You Will* and *Bellefleur*, are the very same facets of human nature that she celebrates in the art of boxing.

"The book is a celebration of a kind of primal energy and ingenuity. At the same time it can be devastating and cruel and Darwinian. It's the manifestation of a maniacal life-force. But a life-force that we're looking at through a pane of glass, so it's not able to hurt us personally. And thus it appears to be some kind of celebration of energy as we might feel if we look at a star or a comet exploding out in space."

For Oates, boxing is simultaneously the history of the black man in America and the story of his escape from the ghetto. Boxing is an expression of dedication and discipline, and of justified anger given artful expression. Throughout *On Boxing*, Oates claims a unity between the writer and the boxer, and then dismisses her comparisons, standing in awe of the swift, uncorrectable moment of the fight. She says that the appeal of boxing to writers such as Swift, Pope, Lord Byron and Hemingway, among many, "springs from the sport's systematic cultivation of pain in the interests of a project, a life-goal."

Her empathy with the boxer and the aficionados of his sport began in her early childhood, when her father took her to matches. "I come from a world that is somewhat under-privileged, and when I was young and taken to boxing matches I had no critical sense at all. But I saw dramatized in front of me a spectacle that these working-class men were reading as something very symbolic. It was telling them a story about themselves, about their lives. And they didn't get this story from the government or from the church. For many of these young men, the boxing ring is a place of sanctuary."

Oates sees boxing as a haven from the chaos and routine violence of American ghetto life. She says that if one wants to abolish boxing one should abolish poverty first. "The boxing ring is so much more safe for them than being out on the streets. There are rules in the ring. They enter the gym and they can't smoke anymore and can't drink any more. And their life-expectancy immediately increases. Mike Tyson, for instance, with whom I became acquainted just a little, was saying that many of his friends from his old neighborhood are dead now. And some are in jail. And he would probably be dead now if he hadn't rerouted and been saved by way of boxing.

"So I don't think boxing should be abolished. There are much more dangerous sports. If reformers want to abolish some sports, they should start with something like sports-car racing. But people get very emotional about boxing and they have been emotional towards me on the issue. But I don't see myself as a propagandist."

But the controversy surrounding Oates's celebration of boxing has obliged her, somewhat unwillingly, to defend herself, and although there is no hint of feminist ideas within her book, and no moralizing on the sport, she arms herself, in conversation, with arguments that belie the tone of her writing.

“Almost no women have written about boxing. There's a whole macho tradition of talking about boxing as if only men can talk about it. That's not the reason why I chose to write about boxing, because I like boxing. But, even if I didn't like it, I would be drawn to it as a sort of quintessential masculine exhibit of masculinity.

“And another reason I am so drawn to it as a feminist, as a subject of feminist enquiry, is that most men, including athletic men and men in good condition, are so excluded from the world of boxing. The kind of high physical development, the ingenuity represented by someone like Sugar Ray Leonard, is unthinkable. It is as if Norman Mailer and I are both equal in front of the boxer, and Mailer knows that. So it's a wonderful feminist sleight of hand where you seem to be writing about something masculine and you're a woman but in fact you're almost the same as all these other men, because they couldn't possibly be boxers either.”

Oates feels essentially out of place in the public arena. She is a soft-spoken, guarded writer, who talks in a coy and secretive tone about her work, and is apt to respond with startled surprise when one ventures an interpretation of it that she finds too pertinent. She is quite content with the apolitical role she sees assigned to American writers and does not wish to enter the political fray.

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