

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/3

Guinotte Wise

Welterweights: Erick Bone, Cameron Krael, when they fought each other.

Searching for a watchable program, any damn thing, while I ate a sensible meal of turkey, broccoli and sliced carrots, I came upon the start of a welterweight bout. At first, when I saw the tattoos and the floor signs, the jumble of advertising, I thought, *oh man, one of those godawful mixed martial arts things*, but saw “Boxing” in the description, so I stayed put.

Boxing still has a positional sanctification to me, That’s the first of three sanctifying acts in which the subjects are set apart, if not yet “saved.” Because professional boxing, I now know, has few participants who undergo the tripartite, the triple whammy of grace. Survival of brain, body and achievement beyond the ring. Sugar Ray Robinson made it. George Foreman. Tyson, in his way.

Back to the first part of the three-part deal. I’m not getting all cathedra on you here, or churchy and thurible-swinging, although some of that is analogous to pugilism. I use positional sanctification in my interpretation of its literal sense; set apart and in line for greater glory. These welterweights had flat earned their places in PS. They were fighting for more now.

At this point in their careers both had won their last six fights. Six in a row. That’s big in a savage game like boxing, and it brought me closer to the edge of my seat as I ate; it meant a must-win mentality was a force here. They each had to prove they were, yeah, champ, even if it wasn’t a championship fight. Their trajectory was an eventual championship bout. The winner would have the momentum to get there quicker. It was their time, high time they met. I was rapt and my food cooled, neglected on the coffee table.

It must not have been the big event on the card; the crowd seemed sparse to me. When introduced, in that wonderful stentorian ring-strutting theatricality of the announcer, both Krael and Bone got roughly the same amount of light applause and whistling. Both danced and skipped in acknowledgement, appreciation, faces a bit distorted by mouth guards, causing a grinning sort of rictus. They were ready, nerves as evident as their fitness.

The blue-gloved ref showed them both where he judged the beltline to be. Krael’s red boxing trunks were long, like Bone’s black trunks, but they had rows of shimmering gold fringe, similar to a shimmy dancer’s in the era of Gatsby. Showy and kind of fun. But they somehow furthered the impression of ‘Danger, here. Don’t be fooled.’

I won’t go round by round. Some very good, tight boxing ensued. Both Cameron Krael and Erick Bone are graceful, aggressive fighters. Bone is 29, Krael 24. When my wife got home from work, she grimaced a bit at what I was watching. She likes to relax with something lighter. I said, “As soon as this is over, I’ll watch anything you want, but this is sort of special.”

Special? Yes, I said. “I don’t know what kind of guys these are, but I do know they are endowed with more guts than is usually handed out in that department.” She watched some, remarking on Krael’s outfit. Then she began to appreciate the rhythm, the back and forth, the...boxing. But she didn’t like it.

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I used to enjoy boxing. As a child I recall listening to matches on a big polished wood Zenith radio with my grandfather explaining what was going on. Uppercut. Cross. Body punches. My uncle was a boxer. He showed me how to follow through on a punch, shoulder into it. "Don't peck away on your opponent, reduce his fight." I tried it out at the Salvation Army gym, downtown KC, with one of my best friends, a good boxer who went on to Golden Gloves and amateur status. It didn't take with me. I couldn't use the fear to my advantage. The pain. Later on in other sports I could, but I just couldn't get primal at that age, that time in my accumulation of whatever moxie I tried for or pretended to have. The ones who do, though--they have my admiration and my awe. Krael and Bone have it in spades.

Krael took some shots from the older fighter, and was stunned momentarily, but he gave some of the same back before that round ended. By the tenth round it looked so even, you really didn't know how it would score. The expert judges wouldn't have an easy time. Bone had been stunned as well, but perhaps not to the extent of Krael's quick flounder and comeback.*

The blows to the heads of each were the focal point for me. I found them hard to watch, hard not to. The explosive spray of sweat, the concussiveness, the jarring effect. In cold, clinical terms, I kept gauging what the neurodegenerative consequences might be. How long can a man do this? That was never a consideration years ago, for most of us who watched boxing. It is now. Awareness. I was so happily unaware. The fighters were like characters in a movie--they went down, reappeared in other movies. Now they are so, so real.

The decision was close. Bone won. The last six fights, wins for each, now seven for Bone. Krael will win again, but must start a new streak. I had no favorite in this fight. There were no villains, no bad guys. I'd even silently wished for it to be a draw, but that still would have interrupted the run, and for both.

I will watch these young men again, with other opponents, and I will pull for them.

But I won't enjoy it. My old man told me Sugar Ray Robinson was the greatest boxer the world has ever seen, Ali included. And he told me what Budd Schulberg said: "As much as I love boxing, I hate it. And as much as I hate it, I love it." I may not harbor his passion for the sport, and it is still classified as a sport, but I do understand it.

**Author note: I located a YouTube of this exact fight, and recommend it to devotees of the art. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzjUtvJDV2k&t=194s>*