'Had me laughing and wincing reflexively.' RICK MORTON

ALEX McCLINTOCK

ON THE CHIN

A BOXING EDUCATION

'Compelling–I was left hooked until the final bell.' DAVID HUNT, author of *Girt*

TWO POINTS FOR KISSING

'YOU'RE ABOUT READY to have a fight, you know.'

A bead of sweat ran off the tip of my nose and landed with a plop on the dirty canvas. It was a midweek afternoon, six months after we had moved to HK Ward, and I was doubled over in the middle of the ring trying to get my breath. Paul, who had just put me through an intense six rounds of pads, was standing in the corner, dressed as usual in a tattered grey T-shirt, navy trackpants and white sneakers. We were the only two people in the gym. He put his still-mitted hands on his hips and raised an eyebrow.

'Do you think so?' I asked, gulping in air and trying not to sound too pleased with myself. I couldn't help but be flattered, though: Paul thought that I was good enough to contest, and perhaps even win, a fight against another randomly assigned

novice. I still told everyone, myself included, that I was learning to box to lose weight and because I enjoyed the training. But of course I had thought about putting myself to the test. Why spend so much time training otherwise? You don't amass a scrapbook full of recipes so you can eat out every night.

'Only if you want to,' said Paul. 'But you've got a great jab, you've got good defence, you can pile up points. And if you lose, who cares? That's what the amateurs are for. It's a learning experience.'

'Yeah, but I don't want to lose,' I said, dumbly. Despite my excitement, the terrible and concrete reality of the proposal was beginning to dawn on me. Paul must have seen the uncertain look on my face.

'Did I ever tell you about my first fight? It was in Goondiwindi,' he said.

To me, Goondiwindi is one of those Australian placenames you hear now and then, and always greet with a knowing nod, despite having no idea where it actually is. I nodded.

'I was fourteen. Me and my coach, we drove six hours, and when we arrived there were no other kids my size. They matched me with a full-grown man. A tiny full-grown man, but still, you can imagine what it looked like to a fourteen-year-old. He had wrinkles and a mullet. They couldn't legally sanction a match between a senior and a junior, so they called it an exhibition. There was a crowd, they were all drunk and they were loud. I was so nervous.

'But my coach, he said, let's do it. You need to get the first one out of the way. So we took the fight and he said to me in the corner: "Paul, you can do this. There's no need to be scared, the crowd doesn't matter, only you matter. Do what we do in the gym and everything will be OK."'

'And was it?'

'When the bell went, the little gremlin just ran out of the corner straight at me, throwing punches. I freaked out and swung right back. When I opened my eyes, he was on the floor. The ref gave him a count and it went on: I hurt him a couple more times. Was easy. I would have got the win, but it was a no-decision 'cos it was technically an exhibition.' Paul chuckled.

I wondered what the moral of the story was. Fighting is terrifying? People do get hurt, even if it's a 'learning experience?' You don't have to listen to your coach?

'The point is, how many people can say they've conquered their fear, stepped between those ropes and fought another man? That's something you'll always have, win or lose. You'll learn a lot about yourself.'

'Maybe I already know enough about myself,' I said, half-joking. 'What about my weight?'

'What do you weigh today?'

'About eighty-three.' I had lost nearly twenty kilos in the six months since our first visit to the bandstand and now considered myself quite trim.

'You could fight at eighty-one if you want, but they're starting to be pretty big boys. Seventy-five is better, you'll be bigger than everyone you face.'

'But how am I going to get down to seventy-five?'

Paul laughed his wind-chime laugh. 'Easily. You've got weight still to lose, it's not even going to be that hard. I lost ten kilos going into the Olympics.'

I had my doubts, but what I said was: 'When?' It was the only question that mattered.

'There's a fight night at Souths Juniors the first Tuesday of every month. We could aim for the one in seven weeks?'

'Sure,' I said, feeling not very sure at all.

'I'll speak to the guy who runs it. You'll need to register with Boxing New South Wales, I'll take care of the rest.'

I nodded. My head was spinning, bursting with contradictory thoughts and emotions. Paul's confidence filled me with delight—even as I was certain it was misplaced. I was chuffed with myself for agreeing to something so bold—even as I knew it was a terrible mistake. I wanted to fight tomorrow; I wanted never to fight.

Paul interrupted the reverie, clapping his mitts together, throwing them on the floor and holding the ropes open for me to climb out of the ring.

'Right, I think you better do some floor work, don't you?'

I circled the date in red pen on the kitchen calendar. The cat was out of the bag and spraying all over the furniture. Suddenly everything we did reeked of seriousness. A harsh tone crept into Paul's voice. He would say things like, 'You can't pull straight back like that' or 'You'll need to be much faster than that.'

I completed each sentence in my head: '…in a real fight, or a nightclub bouncer with a neck tattoo will design you a new nose.'

I don't want to give you the impression I was gearing up for the Thrilla in Manila. It was an amateur bout at a leagues club: three rounds; headgear and singlets; fifty people in the crowd if you're lucky. You'll appreciate, however, that the stakes seemed high to me. 'The worst that could happen' was not merely a loss, but a knockout. Paul insisted that such a disaster was improbable thanks to the cautious refereeing and general lack of skills at the novice level, but I found this about as effective as statistics usually are in countering a phobia.

Even if I didn't get knocked out, I could get hurt, a black eye

or a broken nose. Worse still, there could be humiliation. I didn't want to let Paul down. I didn't want to let myself down. And after telling everyone who would listen that I was going to fight, I didn't want to return with my tail between my legs, battered and bettered, confirming I had never been cut out for this boxing caper in the first place.

Paul could say what he wanted about life experiences and scoring points, but I was going to get in a ring with somebody who wanted to hurt me. Somebody who would be wearing harder, smaller gloves than the padded sixteen ouncers we wore in sparring. Somebody who would not obey the polite conventions of sparring and ease off if he caught me with a hard shot. Somebody who might be bigger than me, somebody who would almost certainly be tougher than me. Somebody I had never met but was already scared of.

So while it might have been a low-level bout, I did my best to train like a high-level athlete. Partly, this was a response to the weight issue: I wasn't sure I had eight kilograms left to lose. I upped my roadwork to seven kilometres every morning. It's amazing how easy it is to get out of bed in the cold when you're in a more-or-less constant state of panic and know that pain and humiliation could result from staying under the covers. Paul began offering tips for further weight loss, such as skipping carbs at night and running on an empty stomach.

'Someone once told me a hungry lion is a dangerous lion. That might sound silly but it's true,' he said, waxing lyrical about the artificially sweetened low-calorie pudding he'd devoured at the Australian Institute of Sport. As time wore on, I started to understand how he felt about that pudding. Every morning I'd wake up, go to the bathroom and stand on the scales to check my weight. I trawled online forums for tips (you feel less hungry

if you have a glass of hot water) and obsessed over what I was eating: was two pieces of toast with breakfast too much? Should I start taking the yolks out of my scrambled eggs? I craved pizza, Big Macs, deep-fried anything.

But some part of me took pleasure in the deprivation too. The hunger gave me a sense of purpose. The burning emptiness in the pit of my stomach was a constant reminder of the task I had set myself. I had never felt so single-minded before, and I haven't since. Dr Margaret Goodman, a neurologist and the former chairman of the Medical Advisory Board of the Nevada State Athletic Commission, has spoken about how the purgatory boxers experience making weight can leave them with eating disorders after they retire. Having experienced it for a short time, I get it.

Boxers have always had an intense relationship with food. Modern nutrition has changed diets, but it hasn't changed the obsession. Traditionally, red meat has been given an almost talismanic status. Rocky pounded those sides of beef, but perhaps the most extreme fictional example of boxing's meat fetish is the 1909 Jack London story 'A Piece of Steak' in which aging pugilist Tom King loses a fight to a less-experienced opponent simply because he can't afford a choice cut. 'Ah, that piece of steak would have done it! He had lacked just that for the decisive blow, and he had lost. It was all because of the piece of steak,' laments Tom at the fight's end.

Butchers did play an outsized role during the sport's early days. Not only did they have access to nutritious high-protein foods, but prior to industrialisation butchery was a trade that required enormous upper body strength—which obviously came in handy in the ring. Blacksmiths and bakers also seem to have been overrepresented in the ranks of bare-knuckle boxers.

Captain Barclay, a legendary walker but also a leading boxing trainer of the nineteenth century, was perhaps the first to cash in on the public's fascination with what boxers eat. He had firm ideas about nutrition and training, which he shared in a popular book, *Practical Advice on Training*. He disdained bread, advised his boxers to eat grass-fed beef and championed the consumption of 'all-potent water gruel—iron prince of health and strength'. Ahead of the blockbuster 1810 rematch between Englishman Tom Cribb, whom Barclay trained, and the black American Tom Molineaux, Barclay insisted Cribb lose more than two stone (about thirteen kilos), and reportedly went through his stools to ensure his nutrition was optimal.

This sort of thing was considered a bit precious even in Cribb's day, and nutrition-minded boxers were mercilessly sent up in *Blackwood's Magazine*:

> In the morning, at four o'clock, a serving man doth enter my chamber, bringing me a cup containing one half quart of pig's urine, which I do drink…At breakfast I doe commonly eat 12 goose's eggs, dressed in whale's oil, wherefrom I experience much good effects. For dinner I doe chiefly prefer a roasted cat, whereof the hair has first been burned by the fire. If it be stuffed with salted herrings, which are a good and pleasant fish, it will be better…

You might think that with the advent of modern nutritional orthodoxy, the idiosyncrasies in boxers' diets would begin to fade away, replaced by a bland devotion to protein shakes, broccoli and brown rice, but nothing could be further from the truth. As boxers from Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America have gained prominence on the global stage, they've brought their own superfoods with them.

Junior welterweight Ruslan 'The Siberian Rocky' Provodnikov credited his superhuman strength and endurance to raw moose liver. And if the *Blackwood's* writer had lived to see the 2009 HBO documentary in which Mexico's Juan Manuel Marquez drinks twenty-five raw quail eggs cracked into a milkshake cup, washed down with a warm glass of his own urine, he might have given up on parody.

Whether crazy or conventional, boxers' diets are all consumed with one thing in mind: making weight. The entire sport is governed by the difficult-to-argue-with principle that one should pick on someone one's own size. One of the great things about this system is that boxing is open to people of all body shapes, from Primo Carnera, the 'Ambling Alp' of the 1930s, who stood just shy of two metres tall and tipped the scale at 120 kilos, to recent flyweight virtuoso Roman 'Chocolatito' Gonzalez, who would have spotted Primo a cheeky forty centimetres and seventy kilos.

For most of the twentieth century, there were eight weight divisions everyone could agree on: flyweight, bantamweight, featherweight, lightweight, welterweight, middleweight, light heavyweight and heavyweight. Titles were contested in 'junior' categories as early as the 1920s and '30s, and over the following decades more and more new weight classes were introduced between the existing ones, like extra layers in an already wobbly trifle. By the time the strawweight and cruiserweight divisions were established in the 1980s, the total number of weight categories had more than doubled, to seventeen—and there are still occasional calls to introduce a super heavyweight division.

Whatever the merits of adding these extra weight classes, they have made the sport far harder for the average Joe to follow. I've even had people ask me whether junior welterweight—the

division sandwiched between lightweight and welterweight—is for younger fighters. And just because things aren't difficult enough, these weight classes are sometimes called different things in different parts of the world and by different sanctioning bodies. Take, for example, our friend Ricky Hatton, who, until he got his soul taken by Manny Pacquiao, was the lineal junior welterweight champion. Or should that be the light welterweight champion? Or perhaps the super lightweight champion? All three mean the same thing: whatever you called Hatton, he weighed 140 pounds (or 63.5 kilograms) on fight night.

One of the arguments for finer distinctions between weight classes is that it allows boxers to fight closer to their natural weight, rather than having to bulk up or drastically diet down. In particular, it's meant to stop boxers from dehydrating themselves in order to make weight so that they'll have a size advantage over their opponent. However, this assumes that they won't just dehydrate an equal amount to a new weight class, where, in theory, they'll be comparatively even larger, assuming their opponent hasn't done the same thing, which they almost always have: it's a vicious cycle.

Drained, skeletal-looking fighters are a fairly common sight at public weigh-ins, at least for the divisions below heavyweight, which has no upper limit. Boxers struggling to weigh in are sometimes forced to hit the scale nude to avoid being weighed down by their undies, while a haircut once saved Shawn Porter from missing the welterweight limit. Some fighters are notorious for drastic weight cuts: Hatton was affectionately known as Ricky Fatton for the way his weight ballooned between fights, forcing him to lose more than twenty kilograms at a time.

Beyond dieting, boxers (as well as Greco-Roman wrestlers, MMA fighters and jockeys) use a variety of techniques to cut

weight. Hard training helps, but many turn to manipulating the fluid levels in their bodies using sweat suits, saunas and 'water diets'. These usually involve a week of controlled sodium intake and drinking lots of water before suddenly cutting fluids to zero, causing the body to dump all the water it has been retaining. When taken to extremes, these techniques are dangerous because they can leave boxers weakened even after they rehydrate. Dehydration may also affect the level of the cerebrospinal fluid the brain floats in, potentially making a drained boxer more vulnerable to serious brain injury—even death.

Day-before weigh-ins were introduced to the professional sport in the mid-1980s to try to stop badly dehydrated fighters getting into the ring, but may have had the opposite effect: more time to recover allows for more drastic weight cuts and therefore greater dehydration.

It's a thorny issue, but there may be a solution: progressive weigh-ins before fights. Much as I hate to give boxing's corrupt alphabet soup of sanctioning bodies credit for anything, the WBC has introduced such weigh-ins, requiring boxers to be within ten per cent of the required weight thirty days out from the fight and within five per cent seven days out. These weigh-ins seem much harder to game. But no doubt boxers and coaches will find a way.

As the day of the fight drew closer, my anxiety manifested as organisational mania. The outcome of the bout might have been out of my control for the time being, but I was going to make damn sure everything else was firmly nailed down. I pestered Paul at every training session. Had he spoken to the promoter? Was my name definitely on the list? Was there any news on my opponent? Was it a problem if I didn't have my registration book from Boxing NSW yet?

'Yes, yes, no, no.' He took my questioning with resignation and good humour.

The same cannot be said of Paul Toweel who, aside from being the event's promoter and the official in charge of registration at Boxing NSW, was the nephew of the Lebanese-South African bantamweight world champion Vic Toweel, and a former Australian junior middleweight contender in his own right.

In retrospect, it's clear that the blame for us getting off on the wrong foot lay with me. Soon after Paul Miller and I had chosen a date, I set aside a day to organise getting my 'blue book'—the passport-sized document that would be the official record of my career in the ring.

First, I drove up to the local pharmacy to get a photo taken and I did my best to scowl at the cute Italian girl holding the camera, on the basis that a mean-looking headshot might lend me some credibility. She seemed unimpressed. (On my way out I picked up an extra tub of Vaseline, which helps prevent cuts by lubricating the skin, just in case Paul forgot his own on fight night.)

Back at home, I set about printing out and filling in the various documents required to register as a boxer in the state of New South Wales. The Amateur Boxing Association's website was archaic—I could pay with either a cheque or a money order, and the completed forms had to be faxed to head office—but it was the lack of a guaranteed processing time that really got to me.

What if I achieved a state of exemplary preparedness, only to have my fight called off because someone at Boxing NSW hadn't checked the fax machine? What if the cheque didn't clear in time? What if a combined postal strike/natural disaster brought down the mail system?

Actually, part of me thought that any of these scenarios would

be fantastic, in that they would give me a plausible excuse to avoid the probably painful and certainly terrifying night I had signed myself up for, without the shame of having to back out. Still, sitting there at the computer, the sliver of doubt introduced by the possibility that registration would take longer than thirty days was even more unbearable than the previous certainty I would have to fight someone.

There was only one thing for it. Having sent off my forms, I would get in touch with Paul Toweel directly to make sure my registration would be processed on time. Luckily for me, though unluckily for him, his number was listed right there on the website. I picked up the phone and dialled. I waited, a little nervous. I had never had anything to do with a boxing official before and didn't know what to expect.

The voice that picked up was deep, with a clipped South African accent that reminded me of Tony Greig.

'Hi, this is Paul Toweel…'

'Ah, hi Paul, this is Alex McClintock, I'm fighti…'

'I'm not hyer to take your call roight now, please leave a message awfter the beep.'

I sighed and hung up. Clearly I was channelling my fear of the actual fight into paranoia about the effectiveness of the New South Wales amateur boxing bureaucracy (which wasn't entirely irrational, now that I know more about boxing administrators), but that didn't make the anxiety any more bearable.

So I decided to call again. And again. And again. How many times did I call Paul Toweel over the next three days? Over a dozen for sure. He never picked up. The calls either rang out or went straight to the answering machine. Sometimes, when it was the latter, I'd wait five minutes and call back, just to make sure he hadn't been on another call. I learned his voicemail off by heart,

and left an increasingly desperate series of messages. I acted, in short, like a crazed stalker.

This was possibly why, when Paul Toweel finally did call back on the fourth day, I couldn't help but perceive a note of irritation in his Highveld baritone.

'What do you want?' he said.

'Um, I just wanted to check you got my registration forms?' I replied weakly.

'Ja, I got that from your messages. The book will be done when it's done.'

I was starting to feel a bit sheepish about the messages. 'It's just I need to get it in time to go to the doctor,' I said.

'Ja, I know. You can come and pick it up from the office next week. Ask for Polly.'

'While you're here, can I just check that Paul Miller has put my name down—Alex McClintock—for the next fight night at Souths Juniors? That's M-little C-big C-L-I-N…'

'Ja. He has. Ask Paul to call me if there's anything else.'

The line went dead.

As important as the traditional list of things boxers should do in preparation for a fight (roadwork, sweat, eat well) is the list of things they should not do. Traditionally this second list has comprised two big-ticket items: drinking and sex.

The former has a strong scientific basis: repeated studies have shown that alcohol is dehydrating, impairs performance for days after consumption, slows muscle recovery, and can make you gain weight. In modern boxing it's standard practice for fighters to eschew alcohol altogether in the weeks and months leading up to a bout.

Boxers have always had a complicated relationship with

alcohol, though. In the bare-knuckle days the sport was virtually synonymous with the public houses in which the Fancy—the Georgian term for the fight crowd—congregated. It was quite typical for successful boxers to use their winnings to set up taverns, though a large number also died drunk in the gutter (which may have been less of a boxing thing than a reflection of the miserable condition of the English poor in general). Even during training, the consumption of 'blue ruin' (gin) and 'heavy wet' (beer) was common, though ale was thought to be the healthier. A. J. Liebling referenced Egan on the matter.

> Dutch Sam, the greatest little man of his age—he weighed 131 pounds and beat good men of 160—trained on Blue Ruin, but this practice was not endorsed by the Bimsteins of the time. In fact when, in 1814, at the age of thirty-nine, Sam succumbed in only thirty-eight rounds to Bill Nosworthy, the Baker, they all said if he had stuck to Heavy Wet he would not have had such a premature downfall.

Liebling himself was reporting from the Neutral Corner, a bar near Stillman's frequented by ex-fighters and managers. By that time, the 1950s, trainers administering brandy to help boxers recover during fights had gone out of fashion and everybody knew the demon drink was bad news.

But knowing what's good for you and actually doing it are two different things, especially for young men from hard-drinking working-class backgrounds suddenly in the possession of money. Too many fighters to name here have been undone by their fondness for a drink.

Young Griffo, the turn-of-last-century featherweight who can stake a plausible claim to being Australia's first world champion, used to fight tipsy, but had such incredible reflexes it really didn't

matter. At least until the drinking caught up with him. The skinny, square-headed bruiser grew up in the Sydney suburb of Millers Point, where he reportedly took bets from anyone who thought they could hit him while he stood on a handkerchief. No lesser authority than Nat Fleischer, the long-time editor of *Ring* magazine, once said: 'What Shakespeare was to literature, what Napoleon was to military science, Griffo was to boxing.'

Outweighed by New Zealander Dan Creedon by nearly twenty kilos in a fight the press dismissed as a mismatch, Griffo was only hit by one clean blow. His feat of dodging a spittoon thrown at the back of his head by rival Mysterious Billy Smith is even more celebrated—the sozzled Griffo spotted it flying towards him in a bar-room mirror. But from the mid-1890s on he was in and out of prison, mostly on disorderly conduct charges. Once he nearly lost his hands to frostbite after falling asleep in a vacant lot, and he spent many of his later years as an alcoholic ward of the state. He died penniless in 1927 at the age of fifty-six.

Just as sad is the story of Ron Richards, a skilled and hard-punching Indigenous boxer who held the Australian middleweight, light heavyweight and heavyweight titles during the 1930s and '40s. The handsome and powerfully built counterpuncher never fought for a world title, but did defeat Gus Lesnevitch, who went on to become light heavyweight champion.

Basically, Richards' entire career was mismanaged; plans for overseas tours never came off, he fought too many inconsequential rematches and was embroiled in several scandals. After his wife died of tuberculosis he began drinking heavily; fellow fighter Ambrose Palmer told Peter Corris that Richards visited him the day before a fight, offering to share two bottles of wine. (Corris

notes that Palmer, a beer drinker 'like a true Australian of the time', was horrified.)

With his personal life spiralling out of control, Richards' performances in the ring became patchier and patchier, and by the mid 1940s he was retired, most often seen slumped over a bar in one of Darlinghurst's pubs. Reduced to vagrancy, he was brutally bashed several times by bullies who wanted to be able to say, 'I KO'd Ron Richards.'

Eventually, under the sweeping discriminatory powers state governments had over Indigenous Australians, Richards was shipped back to his native Queensland, where he was confined to Palm Island Aboriginal Reservation (known to Indigenous people as a de facto penal settlement) for seventeen years. He was only permitted to leave in 1967, after finding out his estranged second wife was ill. He died soon after.

Richards' imprisonment for the mere fact of being Aboriginal makes his story particularly troubling, but the figure of the shambling ex-pug turned alcoholic is a familiar one in the history of boxing. One-time light heavyweight champ 'Slapsie' Maxie Rosenbloom even had a second career as a character actor in Hollywood specialising in the role. Much like dieting and eating disorders, the pattern of monastic training camps before fights and titanic benders after does not set boxers up to have a healthy relationship with alcohol.

Corris, whose detective Cliff Hardy was an admirer of Griffo, includes the booze problem near the top of his long list of boxing's flaws: 'For too many men boxing was a sad mixture of alcohol and sweat—drinking to celebrate wins and ease losses, losing condition as a result, taking more punishment and drinking more.'

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Alcohol is bad for a fighter, but according to superstition, sex might be even worse. 'You can sweat out beer and you can sweat out whisky,' said the great Sam Langford, 'but you can't sweat out women.'

Going back to the days of ancient Greece, sex has been verboten for boxers in preparation for bouts. It weakens the legs, or so they say. Numerous tales are offered in support of this dubious claim. Ray Arcel laid the blame for Joe Louis' 1936 loss to Max Schmeling at the feet of his wife Marva, who shocked old boxing hands by spending time at Louis' camp. (Louis' trainer, Jack Blackburn, reportedly had to chase other female admirers away with a stick.) 'I did it once, and I got the hell whipped out of me,' said lightweight champ Ike Williams.

More recently, super middleweight Carl Froch abstained from intimacy with his wife, page-three girl Rachael Cordingley, for three months before his 2014 rematch with George Groves at Wembley Stadium. It worked for them both: Froch knocked out Groves in the eighth round, and Cordingley got a splash in British tabloid the *Sun* under the headline: 'The sex ban is so hard for me.'

The cruel irony of the sex prohibition is that boxers are never more physically attractive than when they're in fighting shape. I'm sure the Greeks, degenerates that they were, noticed this, and it may have had something to do with Lord Byron's fighting fixation. Certainly by the time the Queensberry Rules were adopted boxers were becoming sex symbols in earnest. Of course, it didn't hurt that for a long time the boxing ring was one of the few places you could enjoy the sight of semi-naked men.

One of the early idols was 'Gentleman Jim' Corbett, who is remembered for his top hats and tails, but pioneered more revealing ring wear: the kind of shorts that would today be called hot

pants. He knew his audience. By the time Jack Dempsey met Georges Carpentier in a 1921 battle of the hunks, the secret was out: 'It's no longer enough to have speed and a good right arm to be the favourite. You have to be good looking too, now that ladies go to the fights,' said Dempsey.

There have been many examples of the boxer as sex object since. Muhammad Ali was one of the sexiest men of the 1960s—even Norman Mailer couldn't help noticing how beautiful he was. Oscar De La Hoya wasn't lacking in the looks department either, and during the '90s seemed to appeal as much to Los Angeles' teenage girls as its Latino boxing fans. In 1997 he gave one of these groups what they wanted and posed for *Playgirl* under the headline 'Boxing's champ of romance'. Today, lightweight prospect Ryan Garcia offers a modern twist, with a Disney Channel aesthetic and millions of Instagram followers who lap up his pouty selfies and moody captions.

To the viewer, boxing's sexual symbolism isn't exactly subtle. 'No sport appears more powerfully homoerotic,' writes Joyce Carol Oates.

> The confrontation in the ring—the disrobing—the sweaty heated combat that is part dance, courtship, coupling—the frequent urgent pursuit by one boxer of the other in the fight's natural and violent movement toward the 'knockout': surely boxing derives much of its appeal from this mimicry of a species of erotic love in which one man overcomes the other in an exhibition of superior strength of will.

If I had a dollar for every joke friends have made about me watching sweaty, shirtless men on the internet, I wouldn't have to dip into my savings for the next big pay-per-view.

Do boxers themselves think about these signs and signifiers? For

the most part, I think not. Some male boxers might acknowledge the way the sport allows them to enjoy caring relationships and physical contact that might otherwise be taboo among straight men, but I suspect few would put it exactly like that.

There are instances where fighters have acknowledged and even revelled in the homoerotic, though, usually as a form of showmanship or a crude display of dominance. Interrupting a stare-down to kiss your opponent on the lips, as British heavyweights Tyson Fury and Dereck Chisora have done to separate foes in recent years, is probably the former, while pelvically thrusting at your opponent's bottom during a clinch, as Adrien Broner did to Marcos Maidana during their 2013 welterweight title fight, is certainly the latter. (Though as a tactic it proved unsuccessful—Maidana knocked Broner down, returned the gesture and won by unanimous decision.)

How you would categorise the case of the immaculately named junior welterweight Trenton Titsworth—who in 2008 was docked two points for tenderly kissing Jesse Vargas on the neck—I'm not sure. You could certainly take it as a comment on prevailing attitudes in the sport, given the referee only took one point from Lopez for clocking Titsworth in retaliation.

There have been gay boxers, of course. Emile Griffith, the hat maker turned welterweight and middleweight champion of the 1960s and '70s, was quite open about his sexuality, at least for the times. American journalists were sensitive on the subject (probably because homosexuality was not something you could discuss in newspapers back then), but their British counterparts were a little surprised when they walked in on Griffith French-kissing one of his cornermen after he beat Brian Curvis in London. Puerto Rican featherweight Orlando Cruz made headlines when he came out in 2012, still a very brave thing to do

in the macho world of boxing. He hoped to dedicate a world title win to Griffith, but was stopped in his two attempts to win one. For whatever reason, homosexuality seems less of a taboo among the women of the sport, and top female boxers who identify as LGBTQ have included Christy Martin, Lucia Rijker, Ann Wolfe and Nicola Adams.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given boxing's macho culture, nobody seems to have given much thought to whether abstinence is necessary for these men and women, or indeed anyone outside the straight male 'norm'. The mechanism by which sex might affect a boxer's legs has never really been explained, either. There seem to be three schools of thought among those who support the policy of pre-fight abstinence. First, and perhaps least plausible, is the age-old idea that a man is weakened in some fundamental way by giving away his, ahem, essential essence.

Second, and more credible, is the proposition that it's not sex itself that has a deleterious effect on a boxer, but the late nights spent trying to secure it. In the words of 1950s welterweight and middleweight champ Carmen Basilio: 'It's all right for the married guys cause they're at home. They're in bed early, and they get their sleep and get up and do their roadwork. It's those young guys who are single. They go out all night trying to pick up some bimbo and they're not going to get up and do their roadwork.'

The case of Muhammad Ali is of interest here. Despite his latter-day elevation to secular sainthood, 'The Greatest' left a trail of ruined relationships in his wake, chiefly due to his almost pathological quest for female affection. Ali's second wife, Khalilah Ali, went so far as to label him a sex addict. Which means that one of the toughest and most graceful heavyweights of all time, a man who moved in ways that people thought heavyweights were not supposed to move, was an infamous pants man. Crucially,

however, Ali was never a drinker. He might have stayed up late, but he didn't stay out late. Maybe old Carmen was right.

The third theory, which is the most credible to my mind, is that sex has no particular negative effects, but that abstinence has a positive one. Namely, it makes you frustrated, aggressive and mean. Kind of like Paul's 'hungry lion' theory of dieting. You could call it 'horny lion'.

Of course, there's little scientific evidence for any of these claims. Very few studies have been done on the impact of sex on athletic performance, and to my knowledge none have studied boxers specifically. The small studies that have been done on other athletes all conclude that abstinence has little to no impact. And, like the rest of the discussion, the research that has been done has focused almost entirely on men.

There's an obvious flavour of sexism about the whole thing: blaming Marva Louis for her husband's failure to bring his left hand back to his chin, or 'some bimbo' for a boxer's lack of discipline. This seems particularly unfair because the partners of fighters must be some of the most patient people on Earth. They put up with grouchy, frustrated and absent lovers, wearisome dietary requirements, cut eyes and bruised lips. When times are good they're usually left at home while their sweethearts luxuriate in the affections of others, and when times are bad they're the ones left holding the ice packs and whipping up dinner in the blender.

And it's the wives of fighters who are forced to deal with boxing's long-term consequences, since often they're the only ones left to look after their bumbling, punchy husbands after the money, the fame and the admirers have disappeared. You could write a whole other book on that topic.

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At the risk of revealing too much information, I can say that neither staying up nor staying out was high on my list of pre-fight concerns. I was simply too tired after running all morning and training all afternoon to be very interested in either. The only thing I was chasing was my registration booklet, and I was doing that with fanatical zeal. Which is what led me, two weeks before the fight, to the Amateur Boxing Association's head office, located in a low-slung outer-suburban recreation centre, itself located in a flat expanse of brittle yellow grass. Typically, I had budgeted two hours to get there, just to be safe, and arrived an hour early.

There was nothing and nobody around. Despite it being the end of autumn, the sun was beating down mercilessly, and seemed to have bleached everything, from the footpaths to the trees, shades of grey and blonde. I felt vaguely uneasy in an unknown and empty neighbourhood, so I stayed in the car with air-conditioning on and the doors locked.

When I got out of the car and approached the centre's glass entrance, a loping shadow appeared behind me. I turned skittishly, then held the door as a skinny tattooed Filipino man with a splayed nose and twin rat tails (clearly a fighter) walked through in front of me.

'Do you know where I can find Polly?' I asked.

He pointed to a closed door, then turned and walked into the bowels of the building. The sounds of children shouting and shoes squeaking on a timber basketball court echoed down the corridor as I watched him go. How much did he weigh? I couldn't be fighting him, could I? What if Paul Toweel matched me with someone out of my league to teach me a lesson about phone etiquette?

These paranoid thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of a Pacific Islander woman wearing trackpants and a huge head

of curls. 'You must be Alex,' she said, with a hint of motherly indulgence. I had the impression Paul Toweel had told her about his stalker. She opened the locked door of a small office, its walls covered in engraved plaques and signed certificates, every flat surface supporting gold trophies and stacks of paperwork.

She sat down behind a small desk but did not invite me to sit. In a businesslike but not unfriendly fashion she took my envelope of cash, made out a receipt, stuck down my passport photo with a glue stick and, finally, handed me my ring record book.

In my hand at last. A pleasingly retro document, a relic from the pre-digital era, like an international driver's permit or the papers an Eastern European refugee might hand to a border guard. It had a thin blue cardboard cover, the unlaminated passport photo in the front and dozens of lined pages to record my future results.

Trying to sound casual, I asked if she knew how many fighters had signed up for the fights at Souths in two weeks. She said she didn't, offering the insinuation of a smile without actually moving her mouth. She must have seen a few nervous nellies in her time. I thanked her, said I had a doctor's appointment and left. The whole meeting had taken less than five minutes. Australia Post probably could have handled that, I reflected as I drove back to the city.

The bit about the doctor's appointment was no lie. The back of the blue book contained space for five years' worth of annual medical assessments. I needed to get a clean bill of health before I would be allowed to box. Rather than going to my family GP, a lovely man whose great passion is the theory that Sir Francis Bacon wrote the plays now attributed to William Shakespeare and who might have refused to sign the book, I rocked up at a bulk-billing medical centre. After half an hour with *New Idea*,

I was called into a small consultation room by a spiky-haired young doctor with freckles. He turned on a lamp and beckoned me to sit down on an examination table upholstered in synthetic leather. He didn't seem much older than I was.

'What can I do for you?' he said brightly.

'I'm going to have my first boxing match and I need a check-up to make sure I'm medically fit to fight,' I said.

'Really?' he said, unable to hide his curiosity.

'Really,' I said, producing the blue book from my back pocket.

'I need you to check all this stuff,' I pointed at the grid of medical requirements, 'and order some blood tests if that's OK.'

'There's a first time for everything,' he marvelled. 'Let me get this straight: I need to certify you healthy enough to be punched in the face?'

'Yep, that's about the speed of it,' I replied breezily, as my attempt to avoid the medical profession's censure crashed and burned.

'Do you know how bad that is for your brain? Would you let somebody hit you in the head with a cricket bat?'

'No, but…I'm not planning on getting hit.'

He raised a sceptical eyebrow. 'Really, though, why do you want to do this? You could get hurt. You could hurt somebody else.'

This caught me flatfooted. I didn't have an answer. I stammered something about it being the ultimate test of fitness. He looked me in the eye and shrugged, perhaps feeling he'd gone as far as was appropriate. Then he produced a magnifying glass shaped like a sparrow's head on a stick and proceeded with the usual investigation of the eyes, ears, nose and throat.

When he told me to take my shirt off and pressed the cool

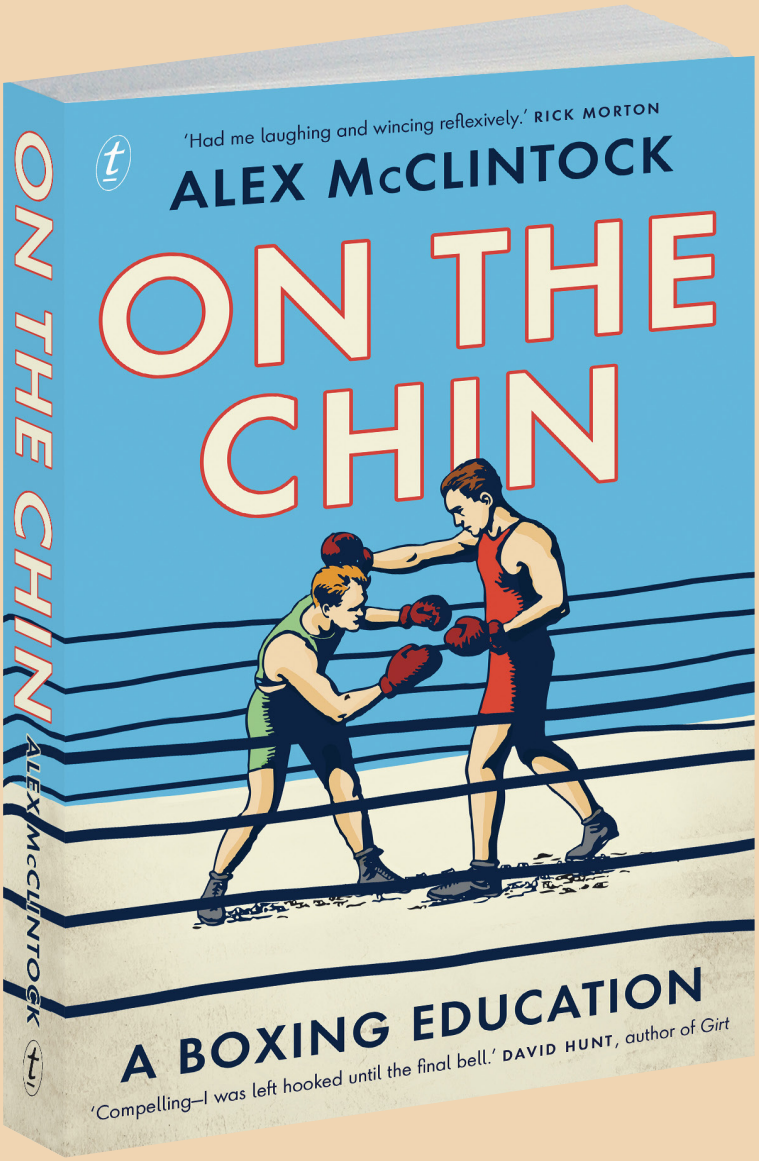
metal of his stethoscope against the bones of my ribcage, another possibility dawned on me. What if I was not fit to fight? What if I had undiagnosed hepatitis or a heart murmur or some exotic disease I'd never even heard of? What if I was fit but the young doctor falsely certified I wasn't because he didn't want me to get hit in the head? (Surely that last one would be a breach of medical ethics.)

I felt simultaneously that such an outcome would be both monstrously unfair after all my hard work and an incredible relief. In some ways, I wouldn't mind taking my chances with disease; I'd heard that hepatitis was manageable these days. Like my fantasy postal strike, it would provide an excuse to skip the fight without admitting I didn't want to go through with it. 'Mate, I really wanted to fight but they won't let me,' I'd tell the guys at the gym. 'I have African trypanosomiasis, so unfair.'

The doctor sat me down again, consulted the blue book, which was lying open on the desk, and produced a syringe. As I felt its dull impact in my arm, I ran over the possibility of failing the medical again and again in my mind, trying to understand how I really felt.

'Well, those results will come back in a few days, but from my point of view you're a very fit and healthy individual. I still don't understand why you're doing this, though.'

I hadn't noticed him taking the needle out. He signed the book, bundled me out and shook my hand in the waiting room, wishing me a cheerful 'good luck' despite his disapproval. The receptionist called the following Friday. It was good news, depending on the way you looked at it. I was HIV negative, free of hepatitis B and C, and medically cleared to box in the great state of New South Wales.



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