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Ralph Wiley. *Serenity.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. 242 p. $13.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-9816-3.

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Ennobling and Degrading

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The enigma of boxing presents itself in this memoir in a nonjudgmental fashion. The author begins with a rather ordinary autobiography which only later proves to be a base from which his subsequent reporting of boxing is not only launched, but influenced greatly. In nine chapters and an epilogue, Wiley takes us first through a childhood and youth suffused at least peripherally with contact sport and violence including boxing. A favorite uncle, "Charlie Boy," a former boxer, figures as a kind of standard The tales he tells his nephew color Wiley's approach to the sport journalism throughout. He wrote for, among others, *Sports Illustrated*.

In the nine chapters Wiley not only describes the physical characteristics of the fighters, but touches upon other aspects as well. Tyson, for example, he feels to be more intelligent than Ali for the former was able to dissect himself in clinical fashion. Holmes, another heavyweight, is outspoken, and Leonard, enigmatic and somewhat aloof.

This is not a fight book filled with jabs and hooks, but rather one that speaks from an Olympian viewpoint leaving more than a few unanswered questions most especially, why men do this at all. Not the least of the "whys" deals with deaths which have occurred in the ring: Boom Boom Mancini killed Duk Koo Kim but, like several before him, continued to box. Bobby Chacon, unbelievably, fought a bout two days after the suicide of his wife, the mother of his three children. Then there are the dramatic effects on the body short of death: Sugar Ray Robinson fought more than 200 times and ended helpless and mumbling in a wheel chair; Ali, the charismatic international figure has severs Parkinson's disease; Joe Louis, whose statue adorns Caesar's Place in Vegas, had to wheeled in a chair while acting as a greeter in the Casino. Physical damage in contact sport is a given, but boxing takes the risk to lengths found in no other sport. Wiley talks of brain damage in a short epilogue.

One of the interesting aspects of Wiley's approach are his brief interviews with a select number of top pugs. These interviews have more to do with the personalities of the men such as Thomas Hearns and Marvin Hagler and Lew Jenkins and jail bird James Scott than with this cruelest of sports - the only sport where hurting your opponent is rewarded and the worse the hurt, the greater the reward. Nor does Wiley ignore the crucibles which produce these unique individuals. He singles out the oddly named Kronk gym in Detroit to illustrate. The operator of the Kronk offers ghetto kids something more than the streets and a few of them even avoid the inevitable fate that awaits them. This appears the only beneficence of the sport

If the book has a weakness it is in the pedestrian first chapter, but overall it is a well-written book and a more than interesting set of insights into both sides of boxing as well as into a selected number of individuals who grace our sport pages.

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