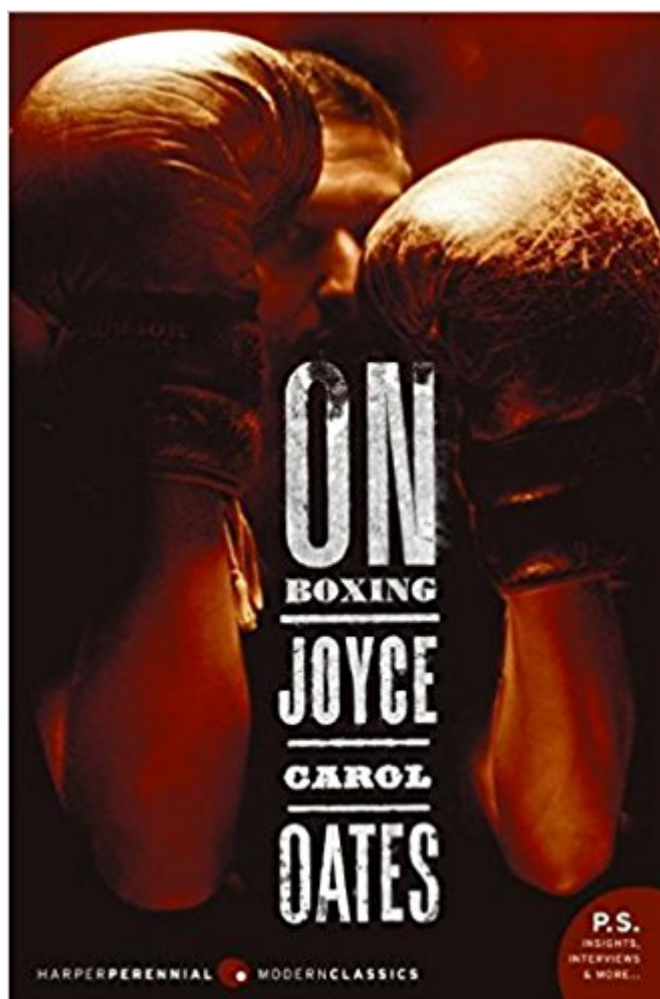


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# On Boxing



## Synopsis

A reissue of bestselling, award-winning author Joyce Carol Oates' classic collection of essays on boxing.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Yes, the same Joyce Carol Oates who packs one of the most lethal punches in American literature also happens to be an astute observer of the sweet science. Oates filters her knockout collection of essays through multifaceted prisms of art, history, sexuality, and politics to directly confront and explore boxing's physical and commercial brutality, but also the sense of human struggle and survival that's at boxing's purest core. "In the boxing ring," she writes, "man is in extremis, performing an atavistic rite ... for the mysterious solace of those who can participate only vicariously in such drama: the drama of life in the flesh. Boxing has become America's tragic theater." And from her ringside perspective, Oates, a true heavyweight of letters, analyzes the performances just brilliantly. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

A fight fan since her youth, novelist Oates follows in the tradition of boxing-loving writers like Hemingway and Mailer. In a slim volume expanded from a New York Times Magazine article, she candidly assays "The Sweet Science" for its spectacle, aesthetic elements, and its history from ancient Greece and Rome to today's ring dominated by callous promoters, casinos, and TV. Oates concedes boxing's brutality and often seamy side but finds positive merits as tragic theater. Good fare for fans and haters alike, especially those who have read Thomas Hauser's *The Black Lights* (

LJ 10/15/85) and Sam Toperoff's Sugar Ray Leonard and Other Noble Warriors ( LJ 11/1/86).  
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--This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

There is much to be appreciated about this book for those who wish to truly contemplate boxing fully. Oates's prose is beautiful, and she weaves a narrative which will keep the lover of literature and history stimulated as much as the lover of fighting. Sam Sheridan refers to Oates's *On Boxing* many times in his *A Fighter's Heart*. I am using Sheridan's text for the second time in a writing course I am teaching at the college, and I finally broke down and bought the book this week. The first half was amazing, but the book is a collection of essays, was originally published in 1985-86, and it is, in many ways, a historical artifact that gives you a poetic vision of boxing up to that time, but does not age well in its insights into the contemporary heroes of the time, such as Tyson (his doc, which I have shown in part this week, sits on top of my worn copy of *A Fighter's Heart* next to me), though, again, they are interesting historically. Her writing on Muhammad Ali is excellent, however, and needs to be read. I cannot entirely praise this book as a complete work, however, for the problem with this being a collection of essays is that the passionate prose style of Oates can just become hyperbolic when the same phrases or theories (the atavistic urge, the warrior primitive man, the sacrificial victim and sacred rite of boxing, the oft-repeated assertion that boxing is "not the most dangerous sport but seventh, etc.) are used over and over again. And, as a man who has fought all of his life, mostly in the streets, it is hard to read too much from someone who writes "about violence", but seems to have had no direct life-threatening experience of it herself. This said, the more you know about the history of boxing, going back to the bare-knuckle days or ancient Greece (and I am currently reading Keirnan's *The Duel in European History*, Mee's *The History of Bare Knuckle Prize Fighting*, and Gorn's excellent *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America*), the more you will enjoy this book. I have to mention that some of the writing on the history of race and boxing is powerful and extremely important, from before Jack Johnson through Ali and Tyson. She covers racism, lynchings, and all of those things that came before, during, and after that intertwine with the history of boxing. An example of Oates's prose: "Where in his feckless youth Ali was a dazzling figure combining, say, the brashness of Hotspur and the insouciance of Lear's Fool, he became in these dark, brooding, increasingly willed fights the closest analogue boxing

contains to Lear himself; or, rather, since there is no great fight without two great boxers, the title matches Ali-Frazier I (which Frazier won by a decision) and Ali-Frazier III (which Ali won, just barely, when Frazier virtually collapsed after the fourteenth round) are boxing's analogues to King Lear's ordeals of unfathomable human courage and resilience raised to the level of classic tragedy. (197)

These are great stand alone essays but they don't compile very well into a cohesive singular book because the background information becomes repetitive. Marciano's record, integrating fights, boxing's place among the most dangerous sports, and so on, while all interesting and integral to the individual essays at hand, become tedious, especially after the third time, should the reader decide to tackle the book in one fell swoop. The brevity of the book suggests well-edited succinct writing, but, unfortunately, as the essays run together quickly the reader finds himself thinking, 'Didn't I just read that a few minutes ago?' I still think it's important to have Oates' boxing essays compiled together. However, it may be a helpful suggestion for some readers to spread out the reading of these essays if this kind of repetition annoys you.

Like a previous reviewer, I was amazed at Joyce's understanding of the fight game. She graphically describes the naked loneliness that a fighter feels as they take off their robe in the ring, the feeling that in spite of recent losses, they will still emerge triumphant as they take on the younger lions in the division. Oates discusses both the abhorrent features of two fighters trying to destroy each other and the almost homoerotic like way the fighters hold on to each other in the clinches and embrace fondly at the end of the match. Not sure if I ever thought of boxing as homoerotic art, but Oates makes it sound plausible. Oates also discusses the rise of Mike Tyson, and his desire to punch Jesse Ferguson's nose into his brain. She also underscores how terrible judging can mar an otherwise compelling boxing match (Holmes-Spinks II as an example). The author feels that Muhammad Ali in his prime was one of if not the greatest fighter of all time. She pulls not punches, though, in describing Ali's early racist, segregationist comments. There is also a chapter about the great Jack Johnson and how he taunted opponents in the ring, dated (and married) white women, and lived the way he wanted to live, and was revered and reviled by many. The book is a bit dated, and there are occasional misspellings of fighters' names (Pernell Whitaker, not Pernell Whittaker), but the insight into the game is timeless and priceless.

It's an ok book if you're into boxing and want some perspectives from someone who is truly a fan

and has been following the history of this sport from early in her life. There are some good references to movies, books and, best of all, those fights that have been iconic and important in the history of boxing. A bit repetitive some times and also a bit "esoteric" in what boxing means for boxers and watchers.

An honest discussion of a gritty and dangerous sport. The approach of the essay is from the viewpoint of the boxer, as well as from the spectators and the culture that embraces the brutality of combat sports. A short and very readable work that holds the readers interest.

Oates knows her stuff. Great insight into not only the Sweet Science but she writes of fighters said she has known some these giants for years. Great read.

I had only read one piece by Ms. Oates. It was scary story about a family living on the Delaware River north of New Hope, PA. I liked it but I would never have believed that the same Ms. Oates was so knowledgable about "The Sweet Science." My father did some exhibition boxing for the USO during WWII. He never wanted me to box but I joined a gym and did quite a bit of training and sparring when I was young. I know just enough to realize that Ms. Oates knows her stuff. I really enjoyed this book. She includes some interviews and I was fascinated by her take on Mike Tyson. I knew one of Evander Holyfield's trainers and hated Tyson for his conduct when he bit Holyfield's ear. Reading her interviews with Tyson made me see him as a human being for the first time. This is a great book by a great writer in my opinion.

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