

Gorn, Elliot J. *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America*. Updated ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010.

American historian Elliot J. Gorn's *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America*, originally published in 1986 and updated in 2010, is a study of bare-knuckle prize fighting in nineteenth century America and England that spans a broad range of historical disciplines. This well-researched book, emerging from Gorn's dissertation, argues that prize fighting was a means for working class men to fight back against the Victorian bourgeois rigidity of the nineteenth century and maintain an identity in an increasingly impersonal capitalist society. Gorn explains how nineteenth century gender roles as well as other social structures were reflected in and encouraged by prize fighting. He pairs his attention to detail with vivid imagery that succeeds in placing any reader, academic or otherwise, right into the scene of whichever moment he is describing. Through the combination of a wide array of primary and secondary sources, *The Manly Art* comprehensively tracks and analyzes the shifts and ideals that altered American society's relationship with pugilism throughout the nineteenth century.

Gorn's original interest in prize fighting came from his father's adoration of the sport, a fascination which he clearly shares; still, he does not allow his personal experiences and preconceptions about pugilism to interfere with his objectivity in thoroughly researching all perspectives in this study. He often focuses on a single pugilist's career to give a glimpse into American society during that figure's lifetime, impartially writing about the best and worst traits of renowned fighters such as John L. Sullivan, John C. Heenan, and John "Old Smoke" Morrissey. These fighters represent the ups and downs of both the sport and the life of the working class, and Gorn captures "the ring's unique combination of lightheartedness and brutality" (26) by offering unbiased stories of pugilists that neither overly romanticize nor demonize the sport. His use of primary sources that range from newspaper articles to songs and

poems written about prize fighters demonstrate how different social groups responded to the sport.

Gorn studies prize fighting through a combination of historical perspectives, and *The Manly Art* was one of the first influential works to appear in the field of sports history. *The Manly Art* makes a strong contribution to the history of prize fighting by clearing up misconceptions and discrediting rumors surrounding pugilism's past. Frequently citing H. Johnson's 1849 book on the history of boxing, *American Fistiana*, as well as articles in one-sided—often hypocritical—newspapers, Gorn highlights how nineteenth-century biases led to inaccurate assertions about pugilism. This dedication to historical accuracy makes the book a reliable source of information even with the occasional factual uncertainty, which is mostly due to the nineteenth century's lack of impartial documentation on prize fights.

Gorn offers a thorough analysis of how prize fighting reflected class and ethnic tensions, challenged Victorian ideals of masculinity, and offered an outlet from the labor-intensive and socially immobile lifestyles of the working class. *The Manly Art* is, as the name suggests, heavily focused on gender history (which was, as with sports history, a newer field at the time of the book's original publication), specifically on how gender was perceived and performed in the nineteenth century. The gendered nature of pugilism's history is closely tied to the class divisions that prize fighting centered on. As Gorn writes, the upper classes abhorred prize fighting because it railed against their ideals of masculinity—“morality” (143), “piety” (143), and “strict self-control” (143); by contrast, the working class felt that prize fighting encouraged manliness because of the sport's emphasis on “prowess, courage, and virility” (146). Prize fighting allowed working class men to take control of their identities in a society that restricted them from having control over any other aspect of their lives.

Gorn is careful to not impose a modern perspective on the era of his subject and provides the background information necessary to keep his readers from making this mistake. Tracing pugilism's history from its initial popularity in early nineteenth-century England, Gorn writes in a chronological order that allows him to argue on how changing societal norms altered perceptions of prize fighting throughout the nineteenth century, placing each critical point of the sport's history in the context of its time. *The Manly Art* contrasts English aristocracy's commitment to prize fighting with the United States' upper-class disdain and persecution of the sport and its participants. Gorn then follows how America's elite grew to support pugilism by turning it into the supposedly less violent sport of boxing in order to make the fighting more palatable for upper class fans. While Gorn stresses that boxing was no less brutal a sport than prize fighting, the emergence of this more controlled form of entertainment "shaped violence into art...and thereby gave it order and meaning" (144). With the rise of boxing, prize fighters had the opportunity to continue using their skills and venting their frustrations in a manner that was more legitimate in the eyes of the nineteenth-century elites.

The pugilists Gorn writes about rarely have stories that end on a positive note; Sullivan spent his last years in alcoholism and poverty, Heenan's career ended with a humiliating defeat that he could not come back from, and other prize fighters met grisly ends in the ring. At times the book can become so dark that it is difficult to see the benefits of prize fighting that Gorn insists are there. However, *The Manly Art* places these disheartening stories within a broad perspective that shows that nineteenth century pugilism, as Gorn argues, was one of the best outlets for the frustrations and cruelties that working-class men faced daily. Gorn displays in this work a masterful understanding of the psychological, social, and economic reasons that pugilism

was subject to both intense criticism from the bourgeois and unfailing devotion from the working class.

I hereby pledge on my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work. Nicole Ford