



SCOTT HIGGINS

Assistant Professor of Film Studies, Selects
The Adventures of Robin Hood (Warner Bros.), directed by Michael Curtiz and William Keighley

I regularly return to *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) in my film courses, and so it is a delight to see the film finally available on DVD in a restoration that does some justice to its grandeur. *Robin Hood* provides a glimpse of classical Hollywood's formal perfection and insight into the popular imagination of late 1930s America. Much of film's appeal derives from the fact that it was produced by Warner Bros., the studio of hard-hitting, topical Cagney gangster pictures and Busby Berkley musicals. *Robin Hood*, one of Warner's few cos-

ROBIN, MARIAN, AND TECHNICOLOR

tume prestige-pictures, and only its third Technicolor production, was a departure. It cost the studio an unprecedented \$2 million, but it moves with the speed of an inexpensive B film. Prince John (Claude Rains) announces his villainous coup with the simple declaration, "I've kicked Longchamps out! From now on I am Regent of England." Moments later, Robin (Errol Flynn) storms into the hall, lays a deer's carcass at John's table, and announces "From this night on I use every means in my power to fight you." Prince John attacks, Robin escapes and, amid a hail of arrows, Maid Marian (Olivia de Havilland) flashes a concerned glance. In trademark Warner's fashion, the game is on with a minimum of fuss.

The narrative compression helps bring the genre's politics sharply forward. The adventure genre has always envisioned a world where people are judged by their abilities rather than class, and where determined individuals can change government for the better. In *Robin Hood* these ideals forcefully resonate with 1930s concerns. According to the film's rhetoric, a just government, in Robin's Sherwood or in the late-1930s America, should not squander resources on the rich, nor on international affairs. When the good King Richard returns to Sherwood, Robin chides the leader "whose job was here at home protecting his people instead of deserting them to fight in foreign lands." Though topical, the film never slackens the pace to deepen characters or advocate an agenda. Instead, again in the Warner Bros. style, *Robin Hood* does everything at once. Distinctions between romance and politics collapse when Robin tenderly declares to Marian, "Normans or

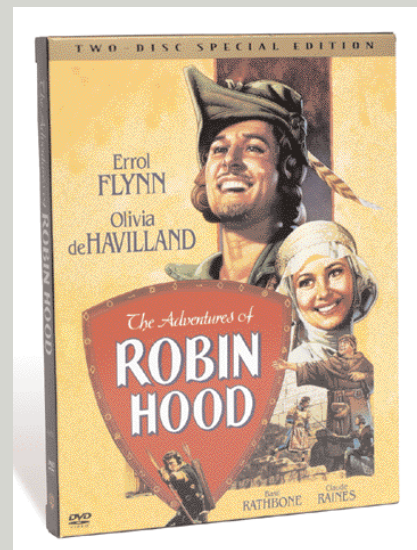
Saxons, what's that matter? It's injustice I hate." Our hero seduces Marian to his side of the fight, against a vibrant forest background and over Erich Wolfgang Korngold's lush love theme. Produced in the late Depression and, eerily, at the brink of the war against Fascism, *Robin Hood* is oddly relevant without betraying the genre's escapist roots.

Robin Hood is also an aesthetic milestone in Technicolor design. Introduced in 1934, "three-strip," Technicolor was a complicated and expensive system that used three negatives to create a full-color image. Technicolor films were painstakingly designed works of art. The Technicolor Corporation, in concert with the major studios, developed "color scores," planning a film's palette around the drama, much like a composer might create a musical score. Where earlier films had subdued Technicolor to make it an unobtrusive adjunct to the story, *Robin Hood* gleefully puts a broad gamut of red, yellow, green, violet, and blue on brilliant display. Like a musical, it weaves in big "production numbers," like the dizzying archery contest, that dazzle with an

intensity that must have overwhelmed viewers raised on black-and-white.

At its best, Technicolor filmmaking was the art of a million details, and it is in the dense texture of its costumes and *mise-en-scène* that *Robin Hood* distinguishes itself. When Sir Guy of Gisbourne (Basil Rathbone) is introduced in the cold hall of Prince John's palace, his back is to the camera so that his rich blue cape contrasts with deep velvety red accents stretched across the composition; he is set like a blue sapphire in a band of rubies. Suddenly, Sir Guy turns, the gold lining of his cape flares, and he reveals the brilliant yellow emblem on his chest. The flourish is only momentary, but it completes a visually arresting primary triad of blue, yellow, and red. Technicolor boldly punctuates our first glimpse of Robin's arch rival. Color's orchestration can also be rather subtle. Maid Marian's costumes shift with the drama: dark and brilliant at the start of the film, and progressively softer and lighter as she falls in love. Indeed, her gowns are a barometer for Robin's fortunes. When he is sentenced to death, matching compositions of Marian and Robin coordinate their deep, red-and-brown costumes and together they form a stark contrast to Sir Guy's blazing robes. Color unites the characters at a point when they must keep their allegiance a secret.

After countless viewings, *Robin Hood* still astonishes with its deft mosaic of color. If the care lavished on the film seems inordinate for a simple adventure yarn, it also reminds us of the strength of the Hollywood industry and its importance to American culture in the studio era. With each return to Sherwood we relive the basic pleasures of innocent adventure, but the journey also affords fresh discoveries.

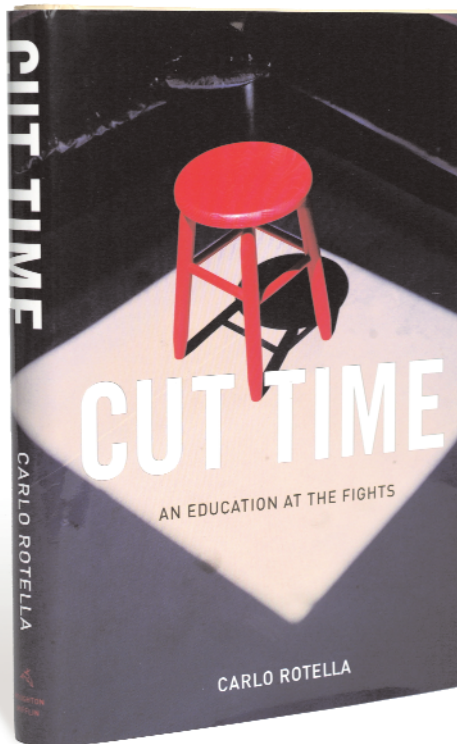


Three Good Reasons to Write About Boxing

Cut Time: An Education at the Fights (Houghton Mifflin, 2003) by Carlo Rotella '86 takes us behind the scenes of the boxing world and reveals how it connects to life outside the ring. The author describes the rewards of writing about this ferocious sport.

In 2002, when he was 52 years old, Larry Holmes, former heavyweight champion of the world, made a nice payday fighting a barnstorming fat-man and minor celebrity 17 years his junior known as Butterbean. I called Holmes a week before the fight because I had an assignment to cover it for a magazine. He behaved himself at first, saying all the right things about Butterbean: "They say he's so tough and hits so hard," and, "You should never take an opponent lightly," and so on. But Holmes has always been too forthright for conventional sports talk. "Look, I won't lie to you," he said at last, when he could no longer stand to hear himself speak another word of promotional nonsense. "He cain't fight, and I'm a kick his ass." A week later, the fight proved him exactly right.

Boxing may be brutal beyond reason, irredeemably corrupt, and morally indefensible—all of which makes it a more promising subject to write about—but boxers themselves are curiously appealing. In my experience, they are, as a group, funnier, more honest, more profanely articulate, and more closely attuned to the weirdness and hardness and fugitive joys of life than are other athletes . . . or just about anybody else. The same goes for trainers and officials and other fight people, many of whom used to be boxers. A referee named Eddie Fitzgerald visited me in my office at Boston College the other day. He's 72 years old, straight and trim, with flowing white hair and giant hands studded with prominent knobs of bone. He looks like the gunfighter English Bob, played by Richard Harris, in the movie *Unforgiven* (although Eddie, who used to box in the Navy, would have cleaned the clock of the sucker-punching sheriff, Little Bill, who visits a terrible beating on English Bob in



the movie's big streetfight scene). I was telling Eddie that a crabby local fight guy, another former Navy boxer, had taken obscure exception to something in my book. "Ah, yes, him," Eddie said. "He'll die in his own arms."

So, one good reason to write about boxing: fighters and fight people supply better dialogue than writers could possibly make up for them. Maybe that's because the fight world's knowledge is mostly oral and there's a lot of downtime in a fighting life, a combination that tends to make for good talkers. Maybe, too, those talkers' sensibilities get more interesting as they marinate in the nutrient-rich broth of brutality, corruption, and immorality.


A second good reason to write about boxing: it regularly produces scenes that challenge you to come up with the proper language to capture their essence. Writers have been describing knockout punches, for instance, for three millen-

nia. There's a doozy in Book 23 of the *Iliad*, in which Euryalos, KO'd by Epeus during the funeral games for Patroclus, goes down "the way a leaping fish/falls backward in the offshore sea when north wind/ruffles it down a beach littered with seawrack:/black waves hide him." Homer aside, even the stock phrases of the boxing press can be eloquent, as sportswriting clichés go: e.g., Epeus starched Euryalos, who did not have titanium whiskers. So when you set out to describe a knockout blow, you can turn for inspiration to a deep and various literary tradition, but you must also work extra-hard to make your knockout fresh and original. I take pleasure in the challenge of describing a knockout (and I have the luxury of taking my time in finding the words, since I'm never on a next-day deadline; there's one fight in the book that gestated for 15 years before I wrote about it), but boxing presents plenty of other, less obviously dramatic scenes that call out for a writer's attention: A referee, stripped to the waist, laundering his blood-soaked shirt in a bathroom sink in the Days Inn in Allentown, Pa. The locker room of an overrated young prospect, sheltered from strong opponents for too long, who has just suffered his first major defeat. The quietly galvanic efforts of a retired fighter in failing health to get through the ropes one more time just to mitt the crowd.

A third good reason to write about boxing: it's something you can do with a Wesleyan education. Working on *Cut Time*, I found myself revisiting a variety of lessons learned—or half-learned, or at least encountered—between 1982 and 1986. The fights bring me back again and again to Richard Slotkin's classes, especially to the primal balance between the signifying power of vio-

lence and the limited capacity of violence to mean anything at all. Fight people's habit of comparing present bouts to analogous ones in the past returns me to Andrew Szegedy-Maszk's emphasis on modern repetitions and variations of narrative templates provided by Greek mythology. I come back, too, to the literary nonfiction I read and tried to write in Gerald Burns's course in New Journalism, the deliriously close analysis of form in Joseph Siry's architecture courses, the introduction to genre in Joe Reed's and David Rivel's film courses. Echoes of these and other elements of a Wesleyan education come to me at the most unlikely moments: during a staged altercation at a prefight press conference, say, or when a pair of out-of-shape cruiserweights lurch in a clinch into the ropes, threatening to fall out of the ring onto reporters trying to capture that very moment in laptop prose.

Finally, a central premise of liberal arts education animates the education at the fights pursued in *Cut Time*. The deeper you go into the fight world, the more you may learn about things that would seem at first blush to have nothing to do with boxing. From ringside, you find yourself catching unexpected views of the wider landscape of humanity you never saw before you made your way into the fights. The same arrival at a vantage point commanding a surprising vista can happen as you explore any seemingly esoteric, insular world—like an ancient civilization, an unfamiliar literature, or school itself.

Carlo Rotella is the author of two other books, *Good With Their Hands* and *October Cities*. He contributes regularly to the *Washington Post Magazine*, and his essays have appeared in *Harper's*, *DoubleTake*, and *The American Scholar*. 

"Fighters and fight people supply better dialogue than writers could possibly make up for them."

JUST PUBLISHED

Winter 2004 Books

Our seasonal roundup of noteworthy books by Wesleyan alumni, faculty members, and parents.

FICTION:

STAN HART '52, *When Truth Calls* (PublishAmerica, 2003)

JACK MCDEVITT MALS '72, *Omega* (Ace/Berkley, 2003)

NONFICTION:

JOE DECKER AND ERIC NEUHAUS '89, *The World's Fittest You: Four Weeks to Total Fitness* (Dutton, 2004)

STEVEN DRESNER, EDITOR, AND E. KURT KIM '91, CONTRIBUTOR, *PIPEs: A Guide to Private Investments in Public Equity* (Bloomberg, 2003)

LINDA J. GOODMAN M.A. '68 AND HELMA SWAN, *Singing the Songs of My Ancestors: The Life and Music of Helma Swan, Makah Elder* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003)

DAVID LUFT '66, *Eros and Inwardness in Vienna: Weininger, Musil, Doderer* (The University of Chicago Press, 2003)

PEG O'CONNOR '87 AND LISA HELDKKE, EDITORS, *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance: Theoretical Readings on Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism* (McGraw-Hill, 2003)

STEVEN L. OSSAD '70 AND DON R. MARSH, *Major General Maurice Rose: World War II's Greatest Forgotten Commander* (Taylor, 2003)

LINDA PERLSTEIN '92, *Not Much Just Chillin': The Hidden Lives of Middle Schoolers* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003)

SANFORD SEGAL '58, *Mathematicians Under the Nazis* (Princeton University Press, 2003)

MICHAEL TRASK '90, *Cruising Modernism: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought* (Cornell University Press, 2003)

NEW FROM WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY PRESS:

Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century BY IGNATIUS DONNELLY; EDITED BY NICHOLAS RUDDICK

First published in 1890, this work of fiction was the first major dystopian novel in the English language and was a best seller in its time. It tells the tale of a visitor from Uganda who visits New York City in 1988. The great metropolis dazzles with its futuristic technology, but its wealth and luxury mask the

brutal repression of the laboring classes by their rich bosses. The workers stage a violent revolt, and the visitor flees the devastated city by airship to found an agrarian utopia in Africa.

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LISA DIERBECK '86

One Pill Makes You Smaller

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003)

Dierbeck makes a powerful literary debut with this novel set in the permissive '70s about Alice Duncan, an 11-year-old girl who resembles a grown woman and attracts the attention of older men. When she is left alone after her father checks into a mental institution and her sister flees to Los Angeles, Alice travels from Manhattan to a rundown art school in North Carolina where she gains some questionable training in becoming an artist. Her friendship with a charming yet unreliable drug dealer takes her life in a dangerous direction, and she is forced to confront a mixed-up adult world in which the rules of morality are unclear. Dierbeck skillfully alludes to *Alice in Wonderland* as she unfolds her compelling tale.—David Low

ANDREW MEIER '85

Black Earth: A Journey Through Russia After the Fall

(W.W. Norton and Company, 2003)

Meier served as a Moscow correspondent for *Time* from 1996 to 2001. In this remarkable historical portrait, he takes the reader on a journey to the five corners of contemporary Russia—Moscow, Chechnya, Norilsk, Sakhalin,

and St. Petersburg—and movingly records the common need of the people he meets to find meaning among the Soviet ruins. He chronicles a land of great potential in which its citizens remain fearful of the return of past repression and tyranny. In its review of Meier's work, *The Economist* wrote: "His knowledge of the country and his abiding love for its people stands out on every page of this book . . . The treasures lie in the detail, the small nuances that emerge from his encounters with soldiers, politicians, pensioners and public servants."

CHUCK STONE '48

Squizzly the Black Squirrel: A Fabulous Fable of Friendship

(Open Hand, 2003)

In his first children's book, civil rights activist and journalist Stone tells the delightful tale of seven-year-old Marcus who befriends Squizzly, the only black squirrel in Fairmount Park. Marcus learns an important lesson when he observes how squirrels of all colors play happily together in the park without caring about the color of their fur.

