



MALMÖ HÖGSKOLA

ISSN 1652-7224 ::: Published September 3, 2008

Printer-friendly version

Read more about sports and gender at [idrottsforum.org](http://idrottsforum.org)

Boxing is one of the original Olympic sports, together with, among others, wrestling and pankration. It is easy to conjure up the image of beautiful- and naked - young men pounding each other - gracefully, one imagines, in noble contest. It is interesting to contrast that image with images of modern-day boxing, usually evoked by professional boxing in America, rather than by the considerably more restrained amateur practices of the modern Olympics boxing. Contemporary boxing culture is dominated by a masculinity cult, which, combined with the inherent aspects of race and class, make the sport of boxing a suitable object for significant socio-cultural analyses. In her new book, *Boxing, Masculinity and Identity: The 'I' of the Tiger* (Routledge), Kath Woodward, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Open University, investigates the social construction of masculinity and identity in a boxing context. Wendy Varney has read Woodward's book, and in her well-written, penetrating review she points out the strengths and weaknesses of the book, relating it to an unresolved personal involvement in a boxer's life and death.

## Theories abound, paucity of narratives

Wendy Varney

Institute of Environmental Studies, University of NSW, Sydney, Australia

Kath Woodward

### **Boxing, Masculinity and Identity: The 'I' of the Tiger**

177 sidor, hft., ill.

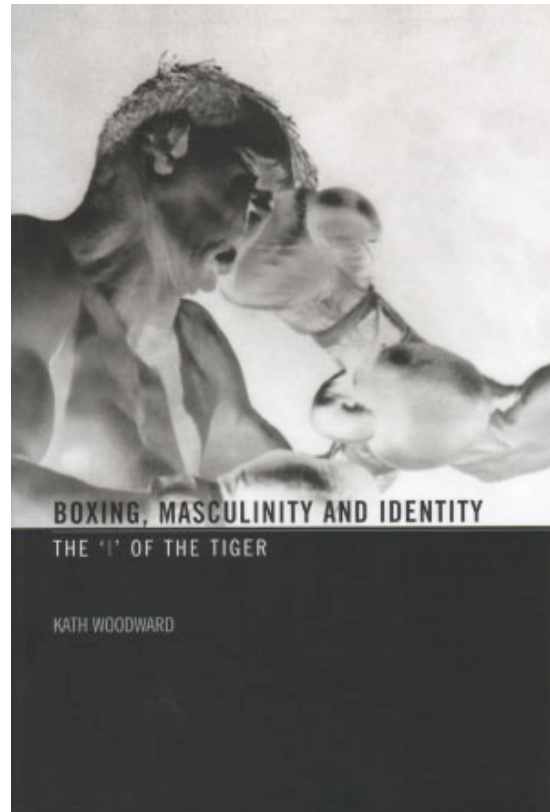
Abingdon, Oxon: [Routledge](http://Routledge) 2007

ISBN 978-0-415-36771-4

My great-uncle was a boxer who fought under the name of Bobby Bryant. He was a very talented and committed fighter, according to family lore, but his pugilism came to an abrupt end in 1911 when he was 28 years old. He collapsed on the way home from a match in which he had sustained a head injury, initially thought to be insignificant. The following day he died.

This was before my time so I was never able to quiz him as I would have done had I ever met him. I would have liked to know about his choice of occupation and the risks it entailed, about his ideas of chance, identity and the perceived links between manhood and its expression through boxing. Was his choice of occupation framed within a class context that saw substantially fewer options available to working class lads? Who were his heroes and why? How did he understand himself and his choices?

In the absence of answers to these unasked questions, I was interested to read Kath Woodward's book, *Boxing, Masculinity and Identity: The 'I' of the Tiger*, which I hoped might provide some insights into the choices and life



of my great-uncle.

Woodward draws on a huge array of theories to uncover many interesting and relevant points about boxing and most especially the images of masculinity which give it much of its appeal amongst participants and followers. She capably applies ethnographic research, cultural study theories and much more in her journey through some fascinating themes. Although focusing especially on boxing's gendered identities, Woodward's analysis shows how issues of race and ethnicity also come to the fore and work in intricate ways on each other and on other issues that arise.

In her exposé of masculinities and identities within boxing, she touches on themes of celebrity, representation, spectacle and embodiment, some of which are anchored well in her discussion, providing useful insights. Perhaps it is a case of Woodward's scope being too ambitious but I felt some of the themes, on the other hand, were not tied as well to her overall argument as they might have been.

Some historical insights would have assisted, as would a little more extrapolation of geographical and cultural nuances. Even under an early heading "Boxing: histories and meanings," there is little historical detail that offers insights. Almost instantly Woodward has turned to some telling moments in the history of early Twentieth Century US boxing and takes a route directly from there, but at that point, she has set her sights too late and too geographically narrow for us to get a picture of boxing's full dynamics in relation to identity and masculinity. Admittedly, she later redeems herself somewhat, but analysts should stop treating world histories and US histories as if they are synonymous. Clearly Woodward knows they are not, but she could perhaps be more consistently mindful of this.

Some points appear to lapse before they are supported or properly articulated. For instance, we are told that boxing "carries different temporal and spatial nuances and inflections. For example, there are some differences in the history of the sport in the US and in Britain." I would not expect anything less, given the historical and cultural differences between these two nations, but I would have liked the key differences spelt out briefly and preferably some concise suggestion as to how these differences might have come about. Obviously this is not Woodward's key purpose, but it can only taunt the reader to tell of differences, similarities and more with no specification and without any tangible evidence.

Linked to this is Woodward's heavy reliance on theory. Her theory is unquestioningly sound and unfailingly thorough, but her scant use of narrative in analyzing a sport that she herself claims to be grounded in strong narrative and mythology, is a little disappointing. The book contains few case studies, despite the ample range of those available. Instantly stories spring to mind that might have assisted Woodward in driving home many of her points. It is not that theories should rely on mere anecdote but rather that this could genuinely have been a very useful text book for students across a number of fields – cultural studies, sports studies and gender studies – but I fear the paucity of case studies to buttress the theories makes it too turgid to be a truly useful student text.

But let's dispense with the shortcomings and look at the strengths and arguments of this book, for these are plentiful.

Woodward is astute to a multitude of factors that influence notions of masculinity within boxing and she is never simplistic about these, but rather recognizes the interplay between forces that are often somewhat contradictory. For instance she recognizes how the tough training and gym work calls on mundane repetition, private resolution and discipline that are poles apart from the fame, publicity, psychological mind games and quick resolution that are in evidence in the ring. Each has its own pull and input into self-identity. Woodward gives a fascinating appraisal of these two very different spaces, one so public, one so much more private.

She recognizes, too, though again not simplistically, the importance of class and how boxing has been seen to be an escape route from poverty. This recognition would have been strengthened, however, by an explanation of the origins of this connection or of how boxing and class become more entangled with the emergence of a working class. To reiterate, the advantages of some historical revelations are not fully utilised.

Certainly, the issues of race and their input into identities within boxing are not lost on Woodward and here at least she makes multiple references to a number of boxers, most especially Muhammad Ali. She might usefully have added the story of Jack Johnson who, reputedly for reasons of racism, had to go outside of the United States, to Sydney, Australia, to claim the Heavyweight title his supporters long demanded he be allowed a shot at. While Johnson does get several mentions in the book, there seems an assumption that his story is well known. A century after he took the title in Sydney, such an assumption seems unjustified. His remarkable story warrants more explanation and even a very brief summary of it would give added support to many of Woodward's key points.

Despite the book's title, the question of masculinity it addresses is largely a question of gendering and Woodward is concerned at the cultural factors that exclude or marginalize women in boxing. She is concerned in particular that women have virtually no part in the rich narratives that are so important in the sport. She is also concerned that, in the dearth of their own boxing culture, female boxers may be seen as merely "doing masculinity." Her concerns

around such questions are perceptive and well thought through.

But my favourite chapter was “When the going gets tough” where Woodward broadens the discussion to take account of how boxing films are informed by gender, race and other issues at the heart of this book and how those films feed back into the body of boxing representations. Here at last Woodward has a discussion going, engaging with real examples and bringing to life much of her earlier argument.


Finally, did Woodward’s book throw light on the story of my great-uncle and provide scope for speculation about what his hypothetical answers to my unasked questions might have been? This was my test for *Boxing, Masculinity and Identity* and the book, despite my earlier quibbles, came through with flying colours. Anyone interested in boxing but also hungering theories largely unencumbered by case studies and anecdotes will enjoy this book. Others may find that more stories among the theory would have helped it make its major points. As for me, I think I’ll go and visit the grave of Bobby Bryant with a fresh pair of eyes.

© **Wendy Varney 2008**

---

 **Köp boken från [Bokus.se](http://Bokus.se)**

 **Kjøp boken fra [Capris.no](http://Capris.no)**

 **Køb bogen fra [eLounge.dk](http://eLounge.dk)**

[www.idrottsforum.org](http://www.idrottsforum.org) | Editor **Kjell E. Eriksson** | Publisher **Aage Radmann**