

## Press Release



### Cut Time

by Carlo Rotella

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### Introduction

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In his previous books and in essays for publications such as the *Washington Post Magazine*, *Harper's*, and *The American Scholar*, Carlo Rotella has translated his fascination with urban landscapes into critically acclaimed portraits of blues musicians, police officers, and boxers of every stripe. In his newest book, *CUT TIME: An Education at the Fights* (Houghton Mifflin, August), Rotella delves deeply into every corner of the boxing world for a powerful and moving look at the hidden wisdom of the fights.

In the tradition of classics such as F. X. Toole's *Rope Burns*, *CUT TIME* portrays the world beyond the prizefights we see on television. From the glitz of a prime-time heavyweight championship, to the dusky backroom smokers where the main event is the pre-fight mingling between boxers and patrons, to the decidedly unglamorous tank-town circuit, Rotella gives a mat-level view of the tough choices, hard knocks, and sometimes subtle victories faced by every sort of fighter, whether he's the aging former heavyweight champion Larry Holmes or the woebegone amateur, a student of Rotella's, whose brief romance with boxing leaves him physically scarred but emotionally wiser.

Rotella — a college professor whose real education began the day he wandered into Holmes's training center in Easton, Pennsylvania — gives a master class in the lessons to be learned at ringside and the ways in which they can be applied to life outside the ring. The result is a gut-level, revealing exploration of pain and hard-won wisdom, relevant even to the most casual observer of the sport.

"The deeper you go into the fights," writes Rotella, "the more you may discover about things that would seem at first blush to have nothing to do with boxing." In his hands, the everyday challenges of maturity and aging, intimacy and distance, pain and persistence,

have much to do with both boxing and life outside the ring. Thus the wisdom of the fights — the knowledge that comes from intense physical and mental training and the relentless study of past bouts, both victories and defeats — can be used to help process the trauma of a car crash, understand the aging process, and endure crushing physical pain.

The ring becomes a master class in learning itself, for as Rotella writes, "Boxers, whether testing themselves against an opponent or shadowboxing in the mirror, are always reminding me that you can get an education out of whatever you find in front of you, wherever you find it."

## About the Author

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Carlo Rotella's writing has appeared in the *Washington Post Magazine*, *DoubleTake*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *The American Scholar*, which named one of his boxing pieces Best Essay of the Year. His work has also been included in *The Best American Essays*. His most recent book is *Good with Their Hands: Boxers, Bluesmen, and Other Characters from the Rust Belt*. Rotella lives in Massachusetts and teaches at Boston College.

## A Conversation with Carlo Rotella about *Cut Time*

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**Q) You've spent a lot of time hanging around in gyms and other places where boxers, trainers, and other fight people gather. What might a reader who doesn't know that world be surprised to learn about it?**

**A)** Fight people care about craft and history, and they have deep respect for boxing lore. There's a lot of downtime in a boxing life, a lot of hanging around and waiting, and a significant amount of it is spent talking about instructive precedents: how so-and-so solved the problem of fighting a tall southpaw; or how so-and-so got ripped off by his manager; or what the history of light-heavyweight champions' mostly unsuccessful attempts to move up to heavyweight says about Roy Jones Jr.'s chances against John Ruiz. The fight world has inspired a lot of writing, but for the most part its inner lore gets passed on face-to-face — by talking to, listening to, and watching others.

So when I hang around gyms to watch fighters train, I also pay attention to the conversations around me. You can expect to find talkers and listeners in the gym, just as fighters expect to find other fighters their size to spar with. When I have a question, I ask. Fight people like to talk, and often you'll find that if you ask a question of one person, others will drift over and get a seminar going.

**Q) In the book, you describe being a professor as your day job. Coming from the academy, do you feel comfortable around boxing?**

**A)** Yes, and for a couple of different reasons. First, fight people are extraordinarily tolerant of wanderers-in. They rarely question what you're doing in the gym or at ringside or anywhere else you go. They assume that you care enough to be there, or that you have business to do, and that's usually plenty for them. I'm always pleasantly surprised by how easy it is to simply show up and hang around. It helps, too, that I'm a fairly anonymous-

looking person, and that my main skill as a reporter, to the extent I have one, is to sort of disappear in plain sight.

Second, the fight world and the academy have plenty in common. They're not only places of learning and accumulated knowledge, they also have a similar relationship to the wider world. They're both remote islands largely cut off from everyday life, but they also offer lessons that are applicable in everyday life. Teaching *Moby-Dick* and checking out a welterweight prospect are highly specialized activities that are deeply and satisfyingly different from the rest of life, but they also raise ideas and principles that extend far beyond the closed world of the classroom or the ring.

**Q) Can you give an example of the way the fights connect to the wider world?**

**A)** There are lots of examples in *Cut Time*. One of the book's main purposes is to show that the deeper you get into the world of the fights, and the more specialized boxing knowledge you acquire, the more you also learn about things that at first blush would seem to have nothing to do with boxing: lessons about craft, getting hurt and getting old, distance and intimacy, the way we wrap hard facts in showbiz spectacle to cushion them with meaning. And boxing teaches lessons about education itself, about how people learn and fail to learn, about knowledge with consequences.

To take one example among many of the two-way traffic of meaning through the ropes: watching fighters pace themselves through a fight or a career, watching them try to balance the accrual of experience against the accrual of damage, gave me insight into growing old. And, conversely, watching my grandmother become truly old and keep struggling to walk to church or visit her husband's grave gave me insight into the importance of boxing rituals like the pre-fight ring walk and the practice of having older, retired fighters climb up into the ring to greet the crowd. The two versions of measuring yourself to go the distance — the ring version and the version from everyday life — have a deep resonance.

**Q) Is this what attracted you to boxing in the first place? How did you get interested in it?**

**A)** It's hard to say exactly what first attracted me to boxing, but Larry Holmes played a role in it, which is why he's a main character in the book. Boxing was still on network TV when I was a kid in the seventies, and I remember being impressed by the way Holmes overcame one opponent after another, especially when the opponent seemed to be more physically imposing than he was. He's probably the most accomplished craftsman, the most artful bruiser, among the all-time heavyweight greats. His commitment to professionalism and craft caught my attention in a way that, say, Ali's or Tyson's theatricality didn't. Also, I came to appreciate Holmes's honesty and sense of humor. Holmes can be prickly, and over the years he's made people mad by saying what's on his mind, but he's learned a lot in his long career and he's full of useful wisdom. He's one of the more engaging talkers in the business, because he's a student of the human animal. He's achieved some hard-won insights into that animal's ways, and he doesn't run these insights by an internal Marketing Department before he talks about them.

I started writing about boxing in the mid-nineties, when I moved to Easton, Pennsylvania, which happens to be Holmes's hometown. I moved there to teach at Lafayette College,

which is at the top of a steep hill overlooking Easton. Holmes owns a gym down below, by the railroad tracks and the canal, and I found my way there when I went for a walk to explore my new home. I soon got into the regular habit of hanging out there. Going up the hill and down the hill, back and forth between college and gym, got me thinking about what the educations available in the two places had to do with one another. I also had a student, Russell, who trained at the Holmes gym. Russell is one of my favorite characters in the book. He put himself in harm's way in exploring the two kinds of education that the campus and the gym had to offer.

**Q) Boxing is often characterized as brutal, corrupt, even immoral, and some would like to see boxing abolished. How do you respond to that?**

**A)** Boxing is brutal and corrupt — which is part of what makes it worth writing about — and I can't get interested in working up a moral defense of it, either. The institutions of boxing obviously need serious reform. The corrupt sanctioning bodies should be done away with, there should be better oversight by the existing state commissions and by a unified national commission and a single international governing body, there should be a pension fund for retired boxers, and so on. Some reformers want professionals to wear protective headgear, as amateurs do.

But to take seriously those proposals, which I do, doesn't lead logically to calling for abolition. As others have pointed out, if your main motivation is to prevent the harm done to the bodies and futures of fighters, then you can save more bodies and futures by abolishing scholastic football, or fast-food franchises, or fashion advertising. If you're really worried about brain damage, abolish action movies: you'll save many more minds in the long run. If those analogies strike you as ridiculous, then maybe it's because the notion of abolishing boxing for boxers' own good is a little ridiculous. What happened to the idea of a reasoning, responsible consenting adult? Nobody becomes a boxer by accident. You have to significantly depart from the path of least resistance to even find the fight world, and it's very hard for men and women who try boxing to stick with it. Fighters aren't pushed into boxing; they're drawn to it, and usually for reasons other than money.

**Q) In the book, you make a distinction between seeing a fight from ringside and watching one on TV. You even claim that you don't feel qualified to score a fight that you see on TV. Are you just being cranky, or is the difference that important?**

**A)** Television can get you close to action that you couldn't otherwise get to, and in theory it brings millions of people to ringside, but it hides as much as it reveals. TV tends to muffle the consequences of action. When you're watching a TV fight, you often can't tell how hard the punches are; it's much easier to judge that from ringside. Occasionally you can't tell what's happening at all in a TV fight. After eleven replays, you're still asking, Was that a hard shot or a glancing blow? Did it knock him down or did he stumble?

Look, I know a ringside view of a fight can also be skewed, and I recognize that TV is useful in all sorts of ways. After I see a fight from ringside, I usually watch it again on tape, to fill in or correct my understanding of what I saw in person. And I'm grateful that the boxing archive on videotape has allowed me to see a century's worth of fights that I could never have seen in person. But it's true that I don't even try to score a fight unless I was there.

The larger point here is that TV flattens boxing, both visually and in the human sense, and ringside provides a more three-dimensional perspective. The same goes for the kind of analysis available: on TV, announcers describe the action and say the usual things about "stepping up at crunch time"; at ringside, there are trainers, reporters, commissioners, judges, the doctor, cops, other fighters, all kinds of experts with all kinds of perspectives on boxing and life. I think there's much, much more to learn at ringside about the human meaning of a fight than there is on TV, and I wrote *Cut Time* with that principle in mind.

**Q) You talk a lot about learning. Is that the point of your subtitle, *An Education at the Fights*?**

**A)** There's an education to be had at the fights, and of course we each bring our own education to the fights. In the book, I write about boxing as I have found it at ringside and as it persists in memory, mixed up with everything else I've picked up along the way — in the academy and elsewhere. The effect of persistence, the way a fight lives in me and I make use of it, tends eventually to silt over the original experience. I bury a fight like a bone, and dig it up from time to time to gnaw on it. After a while, I'm tasting mostly my memory of the original meal, but the exercise has contemplative value, and it's good for the teeth.

## **Praise for *Cut Time***

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"Rotella gives back to boxing some of its old-school, venerable aura." — *Kirkus Reviews*

"[Rotella's] carefully crafted prose . . . demonstrates a gift for language as well as an in-depth understanding of boxing. Rotella's essays, with their marriage of literary analysis and the hard-knocks reality of the fights, are a welcome addition to the vast library of boxing literature." — *Publishers Weekly*

"In an age when boxing is primarily a television sport, Rotella sings the praises of watching the fights at ringside, where blood spatters on your shirt and there's no turning away from what's at stake. Rotella's enthusiasm for boxing is refreshing — and reminds us why no-name fighters keep hitting the heavy bag." — *Booklist*