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THE DEVIL AND SONNY LISTON

By Nick Tosches

Little, Brown. 272 pp.

Ninety pages into Nick Tosches's riveting biography of the most menacing thug to ever dominate boxing, the author says of a particularly helpful source: "[He] was to prove my Virgil."

Even now, rumor has it that Tosches is in Italy researching a book on Dante, our tour guide to Hell. The chthonic lure of darkness underlies earlier Tosches studies of Dean Martin and Jerry Lee Lewis. This new, haunting exploration of Sonny Liston could serve as prologue to Dante: "Hell's On-Deck Circle."

Choosing a subject whose birthdate, life and suspicious death remain shrouded in mystery, this mesmerizing biographer manages to provide enough detail to tarnish a decade of our most elemental sport.

Tosches's unsentimental candor, spiced with world-weary cynicism that not only calls a spade a spade but tells how much dirt still clings to the shovel, traces Liston's roots through the African slave trade, then follows the family name from the Liston who sailed with William the Conqueror to the owners of Liston's ancestors in 1834 Mississippi.

Liston couldn't have cared less. Sonny knew all about slavery, Tosches insists, but "that was because he knew Tobe Liston," his father, who was cruelly abusive to Sonny.

Nearing adulthood, Liston saw no "future beyond the drink in from of him... [and] knew only that he was nobody and that he had come from nowhere and that he was nowhere." One man who knew Liston told Tosches, "I think he died the day he was born."

In 1949 Liston began a life of street crime--muggings and petty hold-ups. Soon he was off to his first jail time, Missouri State Penitentiary, where he was as at home as anywhere. That's where they first called Charles Liston "Sonny" and where he learned to box.

It proved the thing he was born to do. Within months, he pulverized the best heavyweight in St. Louis. By June 1953, he was Golden Gloves champion of the world. In his first pro fight he knocked out his opponent with his first punch. By 1961 he'd beaten every top contender for the crown. The champ, Floyd Patterson, ran from meeting Liston like a gazelle from a lion.

Many voices begged the virtuous Patterson to keep running. Beloved by whites, he was the black Great White Hope. An ideal representative of blacks, even the NAACP urged Patterson to avoid Liston, having no "faith that the Good Nigger had a shot in hell at vanquishing the Bad Nigger."

He didn't. In 1962, Liston took the title in two minutes, six seconds. In the rematch, Patterson fell in two minutes, 23 seconds. If you lit a cigarette, then watched both fights consecutively, you'd be smoking when the second ended.

Boxing and America were in trouble. The champ was a hoodlum owned by hoodlums. In the only loss during his rise, to Marty Marshall, Liston said he was told to carry Marshall. Who did the telling? It was like the sharecropping he'd grown up among: "If you had ten bales of cotton, the white man got five." "Two guys touched me on the shoulder during the sixth round," said Liston's manager, Monroe Harrison. "We're taking Sonny." "That," Tosches quotes a source, "was the beginning of the takeover of Sonny Liston by the Mob."

Tosches links names to Liston that read like a senate hearing: John Vitale; Frankie Carbo ("sovereign power in the world of boxing"; Blinky Palermo; Barney Baker; even, by tangential association, bosses like Sam Giancana and the Luccheses.

But they tired of Liston. What can you do when the champ you own is a bad draw, an embarrassment getting charged with sexual assaults, constantly in expensive legal scrapes?

Tosches argues that on Feb. 25, 1964 the Mob found a solution.

Here's what the world saw that night. Into the ring against the invincible Liston stepped a pretty boy whose mouth never closed. We didn't know yet he'd become the most charismatic athlete of the century, whose fights unfolded as strategically as chess matches. We thought Cassius Clay, on this last day he was Cassius Clay, was scared stiff. Liston thought he was crazy.

Then, in Round One, Liston learned terrifying information. Into the heavyweight world of thunder, Clay introduced lightning. The ponderous Liston couldn't touch him. Clay hit Liston at will.

In Round Three Clay's right cross caught Liston. The eyes that so often peered through prison bars were cut and swelling. Liston's corner used a styptic medicine that wound up in Clay's eyes, blinding him for two rounds. So he danced, letting Liston flail, only to learn what George Foreman would discover ten years later: you can throw your entire arsenal ceaselessly at Ali and gain as reward only frustration and fatigue. In Round Six, Clay carved Liston up like dinner. Liston never answered the bell for Round Seven, claiming he'd thrown his left shoulder from its socket.

Tosches, though, shares a different post-fight quote: "I did what they told me to." Never implicating Ali, Tosches makes a compelling case for a fix, and the swift Liston fall in the rematch, to a first-round right that couldn't break balsa wood, supports his contention.

Boxing was saved. The thug was gone. Long live the new champ.

And Liston? Back to crime and the streets and dark hallways he'd never left. He fought again, but the spotlight was gone.

It barely flickered when his wife came home on Jan. 5, 1971 to find his bloated body, dead a week, amid .38 revolvers and a bag of heroin. He'd been selling drugs and threatening to talk about it, and that, not the stated obscure heart ailment, is what got him killed, Tosches contends, providing all the evidence but not the killer: "The gossamer web becomes clearly visible. But the spider is nowhere in sight."

Liston's dark life grows almost sympathetic in Tosches's elegant prose. For those who, like Liston, knew slavery, it was "to know fear and was to bear in life the fate of the soul of death, which was that of an ended sigh." Liston was oddly liberated by knowing no one is free; that "was to possess something of wisdom, and therein lay the only

manumission, the only elusive windblown cornsilk strand of freedom that was real amid the illusive and delusive freedom that all professed and praised."

Tosches's incantatory prose rhythms weave the street vulgar into the sublime. He tells of Liston's better, if disingenuous, side that came out with charitable men, especially priests: "It was part honest and heartfelt desire to be otherwise and part con job, the way of a half-wise man: wise enough to sense beatitude, fool enough to think it could be boosted with the right line of shit."

Liston's life here grows brighter but never bright. Tosches has little interest in bright, and part of him clearly agrees with Ali's final assessment: "Liston was the Devil."

Ali had unwittingly predicted even that. Ever glib, Ali said before fighting Liston:

"If he wants to go to heaven,
I'll get him in seven."

No appeal there for Sonny. When Round Seven came, Liston refused to answer the bell.