

The Fair fight

READING GROUP NOTES

THE INSPIRATION BEHIND THE NOVEL



At the turn of the nineteenth century, England was a pretty brutal place. There was no street lighting and no police force. If you were born poor in 1800, there was about a 25 per cent chance that you wouldn't live to see your fifth birthday. Popular sports of the day were often bloody ones: bear or badger baiting; dog or cock fighting; and, of course, bare-knuckle boxing.

When I was researching British history (for a book idea that ended up being shelved), I came across newspaper extracts of the time in which women challenged one another to fight:

I, Ann Field, of Stoke Newington, ass driver . . . having been affronted by Mrs Stokes, styled the European Championess, do fairly invite her to a trial of her best skill in Boxing, for 10 pounds . . .

And then the reply:

I, Elizabeth Stokes, of the City of London . . . do assure her I shall not tail meeting her for the said sum, and doubt not that the blows I shall present her with will be more difficult to digest than any she ever gave her asses.

Reading those extracts, I had one of those magical moments that drive me to research history: I knew those women were real, breathing people. I felt them. I almost became them. At a time when ladies were expected to occupy themselves with nothing more than sewing, painting and music, Ann Field and Elizabeth Stokes had been standing in front of a howling crowd, fists raised.

They had punched and been punched in return, they had seen their own blood stain the boards of the ring. They'd been as desperate and frightened and savagely elated as any of us would have been in their place.

And what had happened to these women, to drive them to choose such a different, brutal way of life? These were fights with almost no rules; medical science was often ineffective. They were genuinely risking their lives. The prize of ten pounds was a huge part of it, of course – it was more than many domestic servants would earn in a year. But there had to be more than that.

The newspaper articles of the time suggest that many of these women came from a background of prostitution. So I began there; perhaps boxing felt like the only other option.

Beyond that, however, it proved very difficult to find out much about their real, everyday lives. History is mostly recorded by, and about, people from the upper classes. There are facts and figures about mortality rates and a fair bit about the everyday diet of people living in poverty. But whereas there are a fair few surviving diaries of aristocratic women, recording their thoughts and feelings, most of the working-class women who took their chances in the ring weren't even literate. I was left to imagine how it must feel to choose between making your living by your fists or lying on your back. I like to think that if I were in that position I'd make the same choice that my character Ruth does and step up into the ring.

Another protagonist in *The Fair Fight*, Charlotte, sprang from those aristocratic diaries. Many of the noblewomen keeping them felt trapped and miserable, imprisoned by the genteel bordeddom of their day. When I discovered that some ladies did accompany their husbands to watch boxing matches, I thought, My god, what must it have been like to step out of your drawing room, bound by the shackles of convention, and watch another woman break them so completely?

In fact, there was one 'lady of quality', Lady Barrymore, who was nicknamed the 'Boxing Baroness'. She enjoyed watching boxing matches as much as her husband did, and would dress up as a lady boxer and pretend to spar. Reading about her, I could

imagine the kind of freedom she must have felt while she was in costume. I wondered how much further she would have liked to go, if she could.

The Fair Fight is intended to be fun to read, and it's a fiction. Even so, it's based on real struggles. Every character in *The Fair Fight* is battling the limitations imposed on them by their class, gender, sexuality or family situation. It's always been an unfair fight for women, working-class people and people outside the heterosexual norm. Some of the characters fight in the ring, and others in drawing rooms and around the dinner table. And every little victory counts.

This article was first published in BookPage.

A Q&A WITH ANNA FREEMAN



Q. Where did you get the idea for the novel?

A. I got the idea for *The Fair Fight* when I was lazing around in my pyjamas, reading a book I meant to give to my niece, *Horrible Histories* by Terry Deary. I found myself gripped by the paragraph on eighteenth-century female prize-fighters; it just seemed so odd – and brilliant – that women were boxing on stage at the same time that other ladies were fanning themselves and embroidering.

Q. How important was historical accuracy to you when writing the novel, or did you see the setting as of secondary importance to the characters?

A. No, they're equally important, especially because it was Bristol. I love Bristol. I mean, really love it. It's my home, and we belong to each other. It was a pleasure to learn about its history, and I included as much as I could. I'm sure real historians could find a host of errors, but I did the best, most accurate job I could whilst still trying to tell the story the way it seemed to want to be told.

Q. The use of slang in the novel brings the eighteenth century to life. Did you do a lot of research into the language in the book, or did you use creative licence to create the atmosphere you wanted?

A. It's all real! Loads of it comes from *The Vulgar Tongue* by Francis Grose, published in 1785, though I also read a whole pile of other cant dictionaries. I tried to choose slang that I thought

a reader would instinctively understand, either because it's a word close to something we still say today, or through context. But there are some gems I didn't use: 'gutfundered' for hungry. I love that one. Or 'rum bung' for a full purse.

Q. Do you ever think about what might have happened to Ruth, Charlotte and George next?

A. I think they just kind of go on as I left them at the end. I didn't really want to decide. So I have no idea if Granville dies, or if Dora comes back. Anyone who'd like to decide for themselves is very welcome to. I don't think about the characters at all, anymore, unless someone asks me about them. I really missed them when the book was first finished – loads more than I expected to – but now I'm obsessed with my new book and there's no space for them in my head.

Q. You are an award-winning performance poet, so did you find writing a novel difficult?

A. I wasn't sure that I was capable of writing an entire novel. It was a mammoth project, as all novels are. But as the writing went on I became determined that I was never going to give it up, even if I had to be skint and have no social life, even if after everything no one wanted to publish it. In eighteenth-century boxing circles, the phrase 'to have bottom' meant a fighter who would never surrender, even when they seemed to be beaten. My favourite characters in *The Fair Fight* are the ones with bottom, even if they don't always think of themselves as fighters. When I finally finished the book, I thought, Hey, I have more bottom than I would have credited myself with. And as an added bonus, it sounds rude. Shake that metaphorical ass.

Q. Who are your favourite writers and biggest inspirations?

A. Kazuo Ishiguro and Toni Morrison are both really important to me, and I love Sarah Waters. My favourite spoken word artist is probably Shane Koyczan, a really mesmerising Canadian poet. He's all over YouTube, if anyone wants to find themselves

unsure if they're about to cry or laugh, or both. He does that to me, anyway.

Q. What are you working on next?

A. I'm writing another novel . . . but I can't talk about it much, just because I might not be able to sum it up the way it is in my head, and then I'd be really sad.

DISCUSSION POINTS



- How do you interpret the title of the novel?
- Did you find your sympathies with the characters shifting with the move between the different narrators?
- Why do you think the author has chosen to tell the story from three different points of view?
- Although the book is set in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it is easy to identify with the characters. How has the author achieved this?
- The author has said that she was fascinated by the fact that ‘women were out there beating each other up on stage whilst Jane Austen was sipping tea’. Has *The Fair Fight* changed your ideas about what life must have been like in Georgian times?
- *‘My days, I said, ‘who’d want to be a lady?’*
‘Indeed, no one should,’ she said. ‘It is a hateful thing to be. We are bound in every direction.’
‘What’d you rather be, a gent?’
What do you think the novel is trying to say about female emancipation?
- What do you consider to be the most significant fight of the novel?

- Ruth, Charlotte and George are all oppressed in some way. Who do you think has the greatest struggle?
- *I had never before been so utterly without chaperone. Oh, I had been out with only a servant, but Henry and Mrs Webber were not servants, they were conspirators. I thought, I am out at dusk, in unsavoury company, and felt the joy of it bubble in my throat.*
Why do you think Ruth and Charlotte are so drawn to one another?
- All of the characters are striving for personal freedom. How many of them are ultimately successful?

FURTHER READING



Fingersmith by Sarah Waters

The Crimson Petal and the White by Michel Faber

Moll Flanders by Daniel Defoe

Burial Rites by Hannah Kent

Ace, King, Knave by Maria McCann

Frog Music by Emma Donoghue

History of a Pleasure Seeker by Richard Mason





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