**“It All Gets Beaten Out of You”**

**The Relationship Among Poverty, Boxing, and Writing in Steven Heighton’s *The Shadow Boxer***

Adrian Markle

Steven Heighton’s modern CanLit classic *The Shadow Boxer* is about Sevigne Torrins, a boy who grew up in a working-class family in Sault Ste. Marie, or “the Soo,” a northern Ontario industrial city on the decline. Sevigne dreams of a different life than the one most people find there. He wants to be a writer, and on his journey toward that goal, he travels from the Soo to upper-class Cairo, then bohemian Toronto, and finally to harsh and spartan Rye Island in Lake Superior. In addition to being a writer, Sevigne is also a boxer, a pursuit he inherited up from his father Sam Torrins, who is usually called by his last name.

Sport plays an important role in many authors’ lives and sometimes their creative processes. Haruki Murakami, for instance, runs. As he puts it, “I run in a void . . . I run in order to *acquire* a void” (Murakami 2008, 17; emphasis in original). He runs to distract his conscious thought with groaning muscles and to allow his “comprehension meter to shoot upward” so that he is “finally able to grasp something” (22). His athletic process here is complementary to his creative process. It enhances it, and this complementary relationship is the case for many writers. However, the relationship between sport and the page is not as simple for Sevigne, not as singularly positive. Boxing—a term I use interchangeably with fighting and pugilism—is so closely tied to lower-class poverty that it is emblematic of it. In Heighton’s novel, Sevigne’s boxing, inextricably tied to his lower-class upbringing, actually impedes his progress toward success in writing—an activity associated with a higher social class. It doesn’t do this in an immediate way (he does not, for instance, skip a meeting with an agent in favour of a boxing tournament at the rec centre), but in an almost karmic way. Sevigne’s boxing-as-relic-of-class-background *automatically* prevents him from truly succeeding within the writing class. This is not due to the machinations of any one individual, but to those of the universe itself, as if fated by the stars. His twin pursuits of writing and boxing occupy the shared space of his life but seem to repel one another, like oil sheening atop the rough waters of Lake Superior.

**The Soo and Boxing as Lower-Class Emblem**

“If you want to know who’s at d’bottom of society, all you gotta do is look at who’s boxin’,” said DeeDee Armour, boxing coach at Woodlawn Boys Club in Chicago, as quoted by sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2006, 42). Indeed, “the overwhelming majority of boxers come from . . . the working class” (41). This makes sense, of course. Who else would do it? Boxers—at least the type who are serious enough about the sport to become competitive—must maintain a sometimes-monastic lifestyle and endure numerous injuries and ailments for an ever-diminishing chance to earn from an ever-diminishing prize pool. There aren’t many who would view this as a reasonable investment of their time and health unless they had few other economic opportunities. Boxing as a pursuit is intrinsically tied to lower-class poverty.

While there are certainly boxers—both in literature and in life—who come from the upper class, they are the exceptions. Sevigne was born in and ultimately returned to Toronto, but between those periods of his life he grew up in the Soo, which is “squalid,” and full of “dirt and dead leaves” and “thawing dogshit” in the spring (*Shadow Boxer*, 59). As an adult, he drives a “rotting Pontiac sedan” with a “prolapsed muffler” past “those slumped, wobbling derelicts who swilled Listermint or Sterno or Aqua Velva” to his low-paying job (17–18). With his father retired, Sevigne’s “skimpy tips and paycheques made up the shortfall when the pension money wasn’t enough for the booze” (17). However, Sevigne’s low-class origins are not something he can simply leave behind when he moves to Cairo or Toronto. As Gavin Jones says, “poverty becomes a trait of identity, with class status coming to seem natural rather than contingent” (2008, 3). Poverty, Jones continues, results in “lasting behavioural patterns” (39). It is more than simply a backdrop: it is a fundamental part of who Sevigne is. The same is true about boxing, both for Sevigne and, even more noticeably, for the older Torrins.

Sam Torrins (who I, like the novel, will simply call Torrins) was a dedicated amateur boxer in his youth, but his adult life was defined by his naval service and by working on board freighters that sailed across Lake Superior. In his retirement, however, it is his time in the ring that most significantly informs his identity. We see this in Torrins’s dedication to the routines of boxing. He begins his days “shadow-boxing” (11), “moving boxer-like foot to foot” (14) around the kitchen. He asks his son if he wants to go “a couple rounds after breakfast” (111), even after he can no longer actually fight those rounds. For much of his presence in the novel, Torrins is no longer in any real shape to box: “he was lumbersome and wheezy and Sevigne could dance circles around him, landing jabs at will” (*Shadow Boxer*, 13). Despite his degenerating body and the fact that his boxing career ended years ago—and in disappointment—he and Sevigne both seem to demarcate his life according to the state of his body: he is either “still with a boxer’s body” (10) or he is not, having instead “rheumy eyes and white stubble of a queen street drunk, nose cratered and veined, slack breasts. Gut soft, and the rotten old wineskin of his stomach scraped raw with a razor” (112). After all, as Joyce Carol Oates explains, “a boxer ‘is’ his body, and is totally identified with it” (1987, 5). Torrins can’t get away from boxing, nor, it seems, from the working-class anger and dispossession it has symbolized in his life. His last words in the book solidify this connection. Sevigne remembers the scene: helping Torrins to bed one night, the old man announces that he wants to tell him something—“Sum total of all I’ve gleaned. In one pithy summation.” Smiling sardonically, Torrins pulls him close and then “says with casual finality, It all gets beaten out of you” (363). For Torrins, life was ultimately a series of losses in violent conflicts with the world. His identity as both a boxer and a lower-class worker centre on fighting—and eventually one must just quit fighting.

Late in his life, his other sport, swimming, brings him a totally different state of mind. Even when Torrins was too old and drunk to box, “the old boy could still swim” (13), churning miles through the wild water outside their house in a way that awed Sevigne by the grace and purity of the movement, calling to mind Victor Turner’s concept of flow: “the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement” (1982, 55). The flow state is one in which we feel outside of time, becoming completely engaged with the singular task of the present. Flow state, in other words, is a state of “unified flowing from one moment to the next in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future” (56). Flow is the pure, timeless freedom of physicality. Torrins does not seem to feel it any longer when he tries to shadow box in the house or spar with Sevigne in the yard; he’s too self-consciously limited by his decrepitude to lose himself mindlessly in the physicality of the sport. But he remembers how his boxing flow used to feel and can still access it while in the water—at least for a while. Torrins dies in the water, notably, on an occasion when he is unable to access the flow state because he is conscious to the point of distraction of “the burning of his gut” (112), the feeling that “his arms are dead weight” (112), the “whirling and vertigo” (113), and “his own heart, hugely amplified” (113). Here, Heighton reinforces the link between sport and identity: Torrins literally ceases to live when he ceases to feel like an athlete. Yet this athlete identity is not neutral for Torrins—it is not linked to just any sport. Although he swam successfully for longer than he boxed, made his living on the water for decades, and died by drowning, swimming is never the sport with which the old man most closely identified, nor the one with which others identified him. Long after Torrins’s death, Sevigne recalls how “their father almost fought Ali” (128), invoking his father’s unrealized boxing fantasy rather than the real accomplishments of his time on the water. In *The Shadow Boxer*, like in many novels about boxers, it is boxing that completely dominates the identity of the athlete.

Sevigne inherits his father’s love for boxing. At the same time, ironically, boxing becomes for him a way to escape the things that the sport represented in his father’s life: disappointment, trauma, and poverty. This is reminiscent of Stephen Lyng’s concept of edgework: participation in dangerous activities as a means of escaping the kinds of “social conditions that produce stunted identities and offer few opportunities for personal transformation and character development (2005, 6). Growing up in a social environment that left his father feeling that everything had been “beaten” out of him, Sevigne turns to an activity of physical danger to transform himself into someone who can endure that endless beating and won’t be kept down by it, but this liberatory view of boxing is not shared by everyone. When Sevigne starts properly training and competing with his high school boxing club, the “aspiring artists and songwriters” who had become his friends deride his decision, claiming that boxing is “primitive” and “scum culture” (67–68). Sevigne immediately understands that this judgment is about class: “boxing lived on the wrong side of the tracks” (68). Although his friends come from that same side of the tracks, they don’t see boxing as a means of crossing them and aspire instead to more high-minded pursuits with which boxing appears incompatible. Heighton invites us to consider that while Sevigne may be able to use boxing to withstand his conditions, he may not be able to use it to overcome them. The identity of boxing is anchored in the body and in in social class, and it appears to act as an anchor for Sevigne, who has internalized it and crafted it into a part of his identity. Boxing eventually gives him the confidence to leave the Soo, but it also prevents him from ever truly leaving his class-background behind.

**Cairo, Toronto, and Writing as Upper-Class Domain**

As we’ve seen, Torrins’s identity is tied to his body. In Jamie Dopp’s words, drawing a distinction between the body and the mind, he is a “body-person” (2018, 95). Leger Grindon notes that the boxer specifically “personifies a division between the body and the spirit,” where spirit refers to anything “beyond the body” (2019, 258). Grindon also refers to this division as a “mind-body split” (259). There is a separation or even conflict between the boxer’s life of the body and the writer’s or intellectual’s life of the mind. Sevigne experiences this separation but, like many things in the novel, we first see it in Torrins.

Torrins is an avid reader, a devout lover of the classics, who plays a game with Sevigne in which the elder Torrins chooses a quotation from classic literature and Sevigne names the writer and the work. When referring to these famous authors, Torrins casualizes their names: “Ginny Woolf, Joe Conrad, Gus Herodotus—Torrins was on a nickname basis with them all, like a man who’d never expected to be let in to some elite coterie and now must constantly remind you of how fully, and by his own bootstraps, he has arrived” (*Shadow Boxer*, 15). But Torrins has not, in fact, been let into this coterie. He has not arrived. Torrins lives in a social class below the “elite.” He lives in squalor, alone except for the intermittent company of Sevigne. No one consults him. No one includes him. Even his identification game—the primary way he discusses these works—simply indexes their contents and does not meaningfully interact with them. There is always a distance between him and them; they remain always inaccessible, even if ever present in his life. This tension plays out in different ways in Torrins’s life, for example in Sevigne’s brother’s name. Their mother, Martine, had wished to name him Byron, after the poet. Torrins, despite his love of classic literature, refused that name, as if his inability to truly feel kindship with that elite coterie was so profound that he could not overcome it, even by blood relation. Torrins settles on a compromise, naming his son not B*yr*on but B*ry*on (*Shadow Boxer*, 36).

Torrins has internalized the idea that writing and literature are an innately upper-class concern, and in that he is correct. Just as boxing is primarily the purview of the lower classes, so is literature, and media in general, the dominion of the upper classes. As John Carlos Rowe says, “the traditionally defined proletariat is defined less by the theft of its *physical* power—labor power per se—than by exclusion from the diverse media through which the economy produces its effects” (1993, 62). Media, which includes literature, has long been a vehicle for “the production of social consensus” and as such has also long been primarily limited to those from the appropriate social stratus (74). So, while Sevigne may share the traditionally “bourgeois fetishization of the novel” (74), there are significant cultural barriers to his involving himself in (let alone seizing) the production of such a text. As Rowe says, “the exploitation of the postmodern working class begins with our exclusion from these media” (72). Gavin Jones makes a similar observation about the way in which poverty might exclude the lower class from engaging in activities with high cultural capital, though his explanation is more internal. He says that hunger, by which he means “the desire that constitutes the human subject,” is in its extremes able to “destroy the intellectual self-consciousness of the poor, thus cutting them off the entirely from the realm of literate culture” (2008, 144–45). So Sevigne, like Torrins before him, may never truly become a part of that writing class; his background of poverty (embodied by his pugilism) is a fundamental element of his identity and as such will always remain a barrier.

When he was a teenager, Sevigne’s parents divorced, and his mother and brother relocated to upper-class Cairo with their mother’s new diplomat husband. Sevigne went with them briefly, but soon returned to live with this father in the Soo. As a boy in this town, Sevigne had grown up scrapping wildly with his brother, but as a high school student Sevigne commits himself to properly learning to box. He also commits himself to literature. In fact, Heighton reveals the origins of literature and fighting in Sevigne’s life as being intertwined, perhaps giving truth to Sevigne’s claims of a poem and a fight being “made from the same energy” (68). Sevigne begins “tearing through books at a rate of one or two a day,” which is cause enough for other students in the school to beat him up, thus literally putting violence in opposition to literature from the outset (*Shadow Boxer*, 53). After physically defending his reading habits, Sevigne also begins “to fill dime-store notebooks with poems and stories of his own” (53). The intertwined origins of boxing and literature in Sevigne’s life might give the impression that they are complementary, yet they do not function that way in the novel. Though they are both central to Sevigne’s life, engagement with boxing regularly corresponds with diminished engagement or success in writing.

Sevigne boxes and writes throughout high school, but the writing clearly takes a back seat. He rarely manages to do more than dash “urgent stanzas on the endpapers of his books” (72–73), demonstrating that his writing is the result of occasional inspiration rather than dedicated time or effort. This dynamic continues past his graduation. Heighton pays significant attention to Sevigne’s amateur boxing career, in some cases even giving a blow-by-blow account of his exploits, but, except for one summer when Sevigne is “focused on his books and his poems and his boxing” (82), says comparatively little about Sevigne’s writing. Then, after a brutal bout in the North Ontario finals, he pitches “his bloody handwraps and shoes and mouthpiece into the trash” (89). This moment is not the end of his training or sparring or even fighting, but it is the end of his participation in organized competition. With competition behind him, Sevigne finally begins to see success with his writing, and has a piece accepted by the *Toronto Poetry Review* approximately a year after his last competition.

Shortly after that acceptance, Torrins dies. Torrins is the only other character in the novel who understood the flow state of boxing and the allure of that experience. As the only other person in the novel who spoke that particular language of the body—the poetic energy of pugilism—Torrin’s death leaves Sevigne without anyone who can fully understand him. Restless and lonely, Sevigne returns to his mother and brother in Cairo.

In Cairo, Sevigne remains unhappy much of the time. His relationship with his brother is strained, and although he does not physically fight with Bryon like he did in the Soo, there is conflict, and even violence. During a game of golf (a sport associated with the upper class), they argue and criticize each other, and Sevigne ends up “hacking away” at a dwarf palm with his five iron and seemingly purposefully driving the cart, with his brother screaming in the passenger seat, into the Nile (124). But they do not throw fists; they do not *fight*.Heighton suggests that actual fighting simply is not an option in this upper-class existence, even for those like Sevigne who identify with violence. But writing is another story. It is in Cairo, in a large house with servants and far away from the rough, hand-to-mouth life he lived with his father, that Sevigne starts to write *Islands of the Nile,* the novel that comes to represent his literary success in the same way that boxing represents his class. Notably, this real literary progress is not made until he has removed himself from the place of his lower-class upbringing.

When Sevigne finishes the first draft of his novel, he also finishes with Cairo and moves back to Canada, landing in Toronto to meet up with some of the artists who had been his friends in high school. With them, he lives a bohemian lifestyle of drinking, sex, and music while trying to make it as a writer. This new lifestyle does not make him happy. Heighton depicts him as being in a steady state of conflict with his environment, though this conflict rarely manifests as anything more than dissatisfaction. Sevigne does achieve moderate writing success, placing some poems and signing a deal for a poetry collection, but his great ambition still rests on *Islands of the Nile,* which eludes him to his increasing frustration and distress.

Sevigne is poor in Toronto, living in a cheap bachelor apartment he refers to as a “cell” (185) for “six fifty a month inclusive” (170), but he does not—for the majority of his time, at least—fight. This living situation seems to buck the trend of pugilism being an expression of poverty, but on closer examination that trend is still upheld. Sevigne’s poverty here is voluntary, and perhaps even a facade. He has ample opportunity to make money; he simply chooses not to. He regularly argues with his magazine editor friend about the length of the book reviews he turns in, and therefor does fewer of them than he could. He takes, then quits, a one-dollar-per-word job writing book summaries for the type of CD-ROM encyclopedia popular at the time, and then he takes a job writing lyrics for advertising jingles that would pay him between “eight and fifteen grand per year” (204). This would be more than enough to cover his small bachelor apartment for “very little effort” or time, but he eventually quits this job too, (290). So, while he does not have much money in Toronto, he is no poorer than he would like to be at any given moment. He is not truly poor, nor is the community he is a part of—which, being populated with artists, is also one of high cultural capital and high potential monetary capital. His boxing-free experience of poverty in Toronto underlines the ongoing incoherence of fighting in his existence in and pursuit of a higher social and monetary class, a conclusion supported by the events surrounding Sevigne’s departure from Toronto.

After having been away from the working class for long enough, Sevigne finally gets some good news regarding *Islands of the Nile.* One of Toronto’s major publishers announces their plan to partner with a major New York publisher and release his book, which is what he’s been yearning for since moving to Toronto. He rides the high of that success until one night, when out for dinner with his more successful artist girlfriend Ike and her successful friends, he gets into a fight. Defending himself against a thin-skinned former friend, Ray, who has become jealous of Sevigne’s new-found success, Sevigne leaves Ray “sprawled out on the icy flags” while “the guests look on” in “wary fascination” (268). After Sevigne fights Ray, he does not rejoin his upper-class girlfriend and colleagues, opting to save them the “embarrassment” that his presence might now cause (269). His fighting thus causes a literal departure from this group of upper-class creatives.

Sevigne’s re-engagement with fighting and the lower-class origin it signifies causes the total break between him and all his upper-class pursuits. Soon after Sevigne’s return to fighting, he receives notice that his big-deal publisher “may have been somewhat . . . prematurely optimistic” (282) in contacting him about publishing his novel, and now has no such plans. He has fought again, and now he has “lost the book” (287). He also loses his girlfriend, who he cheated on. Suddenly, he has lost all sense of belonging in this upper-class environment—his “false life” (*Shadow Boxer*, 22). But what is false about it? Sevigne shares the same artistic calling and sensibilities as his Toronto cohort, many of whom come from the same socio-economic background as him without feeling their lives to be “false.” Sevigne’s feeling of falsity rests on the fact that boxing—and through boxing an interiorized working-class poverty—remains a core element of his identity. Any life he built within extravagant, upper-class Toronto would be incompatible with his essential sense of self.

**Violence as Signpost in the Liminal Spaces Between Classes**

*The Shadow Boxer* is a novel of movement. The class and identity conflict the novel contains is there because the characters, especially Sevigne, move frequently through different environments. The family starts out in Toronto, then moves to the Soo, where ultimately Sevigne’s parents’ divorce. Sevigne’s mother Martine remarries and takes the boys to upper-class Cairo. Sevigne returns to live with his father; Bryon returns once to visit. After Torrins’s death, Sevigne returns to Cairo, then moves to Toronto, then to Rye Island. After this, he returns briefly to Cairo before going travelling. The presence or absence of fighting in Sevigne’s (and, to a certain extent, Bryon’s) behaviour is connected to his current class context and extends to the edges of his time in each place, the moments after he has decided to move from an upper-class to a lower-class setting but before he actually does so. The violence he anticipates in his future bleeds into his present.

The Torrins family spent the first years of Sevigne’s life on the outskirts of Toronto, but financial considerations forced them to pack up and relocate to the Soo, where Sam Torrins grew up, like “a shameful retreat after a bad beating” (43). By comparing moving to a lower-class area to fleeing after a physical assault, we see the beginning of a key pattern for understanding the relationship between class and boxing in *The Shadow Boxer*: not only does violence in the form of fighting or boxing stem from lower-class areas, but such violence is in fact *solely* the province of those areas and the liminal spaces between classes. When the characters enter a lower-class context, they fight; when they enter a higher-class context, they do not, even though most other elements remain consistent. So, it is when the Torrinses move from the more cultured and affluent Toronto to the less cultured and affluent Sault Ste. Marie that Sevigne and his older brother Bryon “began to fist fight, the larger Bryon always winning, but Sevigne, even pinned and bloodied, unwilling to submit” (30). This fraternal violence continues throughout their time in the Soo; Heighton even introduces readers to new locations in the town as places where Sevigne and his brother “had once pounded each other bloody” (8). In the Soo, this violence is a part of their everyday lives.

Heighton presents Cairo as a clear cultural departure from the Soo, not only in terms of ethnic culture but also in terms of class. Everson Milne, Martine’s new husband, lives in an “antique house . . . in the old city” (38) from which Sevigne’s bedroom view is a “poetic and surprisingly clear panorama of Cairo” (39). Milne’s lifestyle, which Martine, Sevigne, and Bryon now share, is characterized by “the comforts of his home, his hired help, [and] the bounty of his table”—a constant source of anger and conflict for Sevigne. This household experience is Sevigne’s family’s first encounter with upper-class life, and remarkably, though the boys have even more conflict in their relationship now than they did in the Soo (having sided with opposing parents and feeling differently about Milne and their new life), they cease to fight physically. While in the poor area of their father’s life, they decide their differences with their fists, in the rich area of their mother’s life, they do so with their words, demonstrating that in the world of *The Shadow Boxer,* Heighton not only associates pugilism with the lower class, but also sophisticated communication with the upper class. As Sevigne’s departure from Cairo approaches, this contextually appropriate mindset begins to shift. He becomes more combative with his mother, “slap[ping] at her until she pinned him down . . . or stormed out . . . or they embraced” (42). In this liminal stage of having decided to leave but having not yet left, Sevigne has a fractional return to physical conflict—slaps and tears—before returning to the fists and blood of his fights in the Soo.

Bryon demonstrates this same class-contextual engagement with violence later when, having returned to the Soo for a visit and getting into an argument with Sevigne over the dinner table, he ends up “shaking” with rage before “smash[ing] the bake-dish of poutine against the mural” (63). Bryon’s smashing of the dish is not the full-on violence of the brothers’ previous fights, but a behaviour that he is settling into as he readjusts to this lower-class experience. Bryon, like Sevigne, stopped fighting once he moved to Cairo. Unlike Sevigne, except for this one blip when he returns briefly to the Soo, Bryon never returns to violence in any form, distancing himself from it so much that he comes to refer to boxing as “caveman culture” (128). Fighting becomes “other” to him.

Finally, after being drawn into the fight with Ray that precipitates the collapse of his upper-class life and encourages his departure from upper-class Toronto, Sevigne enters what we might see as another of these liminal, transitional spaces in which he prepares to remove himself to a lower-class environment. As if in preparation for his social decline, he *starts* a fight for the first time in the big city, attacking and then getting beaten by a group of youths harassing a homeless man (298). We see Sevigne move back and forth between lower- and higher-class environments several times in the novel, and while his violence is largely confined to low-class environments, we frequently see it bleed through at the tail end of his attempts to fit into to higher society, signalling his mental shift to a different cultural context.

**Rye Island and Trauma as Therapy**

After losing his girlfriend, book, and sense of belonging in the upper-class society as a result (in part) of the expression of his lower-class upbringing in that false upper-class context, Sevigne journeys to Rye Island. This move echoes his father’s much earlier decision move from Toronto to the Soo—“a shameful retreat after a bad beating” (43), which in Sevigne’s case happens to be literally true. Rye Island is a rough and wild place in Lake Superior that has long been a cornerstone of the moonshining mythology of his father’s family. The island, and its harsh, ascetic lifestyle, will remove Sevigne from the Toronto culture that he never felt a part of, will allow him the time to do nothing but finish his novel, and will allow him to punish himself, and thus perhaps atone, for his infidelity to Ike. He arranges to have himself dropped there in the summer, to be retrieved in the spring, and to be occasionally resupplied in the meantime. He will be the lone occupant of the island, living in an old bootlegging shack with historical significance to his family. Being alone prevents him from actually fighting anyone, but his willingness to engage in violent acts nonetheless returns when he descends to the class of the bootleggers, a shift that is evident when, for instance, he fires his rifle at a nearby pleasure boat of rich partiers who kill a bird he had befriended (322). To fill his days, he swims if the weather will allow it. He listens to the battery powered radio. He drinks moonshine that he finds hidden in the shack from an earlier age. He edits and re-writes *Islands of the Nile.* But beyond his new daily routine, he has not yet meaningfully changed.

Before leaving Toronto, Sevigne quit his lyric writing job because he couldn’t bear to write one more jingle, saying “I’d hate myself if I did it.” He adds, “Hate myself more, I mean” (290), demonstrating the depressed self-loathing that he feels before he sets off to remote Rye Island. In *Class Representations in Modern Fiction and Film*, Keith Gandal discusses how “traumatic self-loathing and depression” often result in a character “degrading his body” in narratives about masculinity and poverty (2007, 161). Gandal says that “the desecrated body is a central image” of these narratives (164), in which tropes of bodily decay and degradation are associated with purification and transcendence (160). Ultimately, the protagonist is delivered “from the bohemian depths . . . with a death or symbolic death near the end (166–67). All of these observations are relevant to the events that soon play out for Sevigne.

Eventually, Sevigne gets “frostbite on his trigger finger and the pinkie of his right hand” (351). And after a week of increasing infection and pain, he takes Torrins’s hunting knife and “sets the blade at the very base of the pinkie and begins to cut,” leaving his pinkie lying on the log like “nothing remotely human” (353)—a degraded (former) body part. While recovering from his act of self-mutilation, Sevigne is degraded further, his bowels violently spasming on the floor of the stillhouse (which he had been occupying since he accidentally burned down the bootleggers’ cabin). At this point, Sevigne feels like nothing more than a “dead man rising up and throwing off his grave-clothes to soil his own tomb” (363). Sevigne’s literal destruction of his pinkie is also symbolic: he removes the pinkie on his right hand—that is, his *punching* hand. The right hand is emblematic of boxing, and thus of his lower-class identity. It is the dominant hand, the power hand, the knock-out hand—and Sevigne mutilates it, the symbolic death of the boxer within him. Though Sevigne does eventually return to training (seemingly with no competitive interest), this symbolic death is what ultimately opens the door to his end-of-novel growth.

Gandal refers to this type of narrative arc as “trauma as therapy,” a common trope for the emotional development of characters that come from lower-class backgrounds (2007, 155). Sevigne destroys his identity as a fighter, and by extension as a lower-class person, with all the anger that connotes. When the boat finally comes for him in spring, he is “strong and sane and grateful,” and “he stands on the shore and beams, clenched fists uplifted” (369), much more emotionally prepared to function in the world to which he returns, which is somewhere in between the two worlds of his past. He spends time in meaningful locations around the Soo, but only as a visitor. He lives again in Toronto, but is far less connected to or interested in his old upper-class social and cultural contexts than before. He is calmer, more at peace. His ex, Ike, notices the change and considers getting back together with him. His family notices as well. In trying to explain his transformation to himself, Sevigne speculates that the isolated, natural environment of Rye Island perhaps “reconceived a hunger for blood connections”—though that alone does not seem to satisfactorily explain the seemingly total lack of conflict with his brother or his brother’s and mother’s romantic partners, the latter of which are obviously not “blood connections.” He also suggests that “the writing of his novel seems to have exorcised other demons” in him (377), though he continues to write his novel even after Rye Island: “[E]very day. Same novel. I can’t seem to finish it” (381). Heighton would later explicitly claim that “failure” was “the making of” Sevigne (2020, 23). But this explanation also doesn’t fully explain the change in him. Sevigne began writing his novel long before Rye Island and would continue long after, and he had failed many times before: in the boxing ring, in love, on the page. The unique event with the power to exorcise his demons was the symbolic destruction of his identity as a working-class fighter.

**Conclusion**

Sevigne Torrins is a kid with dreams of a sophisticated life of the mind in the big city, but he is also a working-class kid. He is emblematic of the working class: he fights, both in the ring and out of it. His fighting is not the cause of his failure to achieve his dreams over the course of the novel, but it is the symbol of the cause. His love of boxing is illustrative of his origins in poverty and its influence on his identity. Each time he retreats from an upper-class context to a lower-class context, he demarcates that movement by fighting. His life of the body will not easily become a life of the mind. His life on the one side of the tracks cannot easily be transplanted to the other. He cannot resolve this conflict until he retreats to the lowest class he can, out of society altogether to Rye Island, and there destroys the symbol of his lower-class upbringing: his punching hand. When he returns to civilization, he is more equipped to function in that class context emotionally and intellectually, and perhaps creatively as well.

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**On Boxing**

**An Interview with Steven Heighton**

This interview was conducted via email between Steven Heighton and Adrian Markle from February 17 to March 2, 2021

Adrian Markle: What kind of research on boxing did you do for the novel, and how did that impact the writing process? Did you feel a particular fidelity to the facts or experiences you gained in that research, or were they always only in service to the greater narrative?

Steven Heighton: All my life I’ve been in too much of a rush—sometimes a matter of creative excitement, sometimes just standard-issue impatience—to follow the path of the apprentice and learn the skills I’ve needed. I’ve written eighteen books now using just a couple of fingers (well, mostly just one) because I couldn’t be bothered to take a typing class in high school. At sixteen I taught myself to fingerpick guitar with just two fingers instead of learning properly. I taught myself to skate at eighteen and quickly internalized all sorts of wrong techniques.

Likewise, on starting *The Shadow Boxer*,I threw myself into the project and didn’t worry that the only boxing I’d done was a bit of amateurish outdoor sparring in the pine woods at Jasper Park Lodge, in the Alberta Rockies, where I worked as a dishwasher and then waiter in the months after finishing high school. I and the other boys had no idea what we were doing. Various undignified minor injuries were sustained. That half-assed experimentation turned out to be useless when it came to drafting the novel’s boxing scenes. Naturally I barged on anyway. I figured if I simply recalled the feeling of being in our pine forest ring, then extrapolated and imagined while deploying lots of muscular verbs, I could build scenes that felt real.

But when I reread the novel’s first draft, those scenes felt dead on the page. The language seemed lively but some crucial spark was missing. So I learned the hard lesson every stylist has to metabolize: you can revise and polish your cadences forever, but if that X-factor is lacking, you end up with nothing more than an exercise in fluency and euphony.

In this case the X-factor was, I guessed, actual bodily knowledge and experience of the ring. So I joined the Kingston Youth Boxing Club and over the following year and a half redrafted and repeatedly revised my boxing scenes while working out and sparring at the club. I loved it there. The place had been in operation for some thirty years but it felt and smelled as if it had been around since the 1920s. The coaches were gruffly, avuncular, like the cornermen in old boxing films. In due course I got my rib cracked by the Canadian junior heavyweight champion, a 200-pound 16-year-old named Alex White, to whom the coaches injudiciously fed me one night after he’d tired out or maimed all his other, usual victims.

The scenes I drafted while training at the club wrote themselves, as they say. I could feel a live current flowing through me as I drafted them, my palms sweating, heart speeding, body fully engaged. To some extent I still felt it even as I rewrote them—and when passages continue to feel alive to you, so that the repeated revision doesn’t seem like mere chore-doing, you know they have a pulse and legs**.**

As for feeling a fidelity to facts/experiences—no, never. I’ll unapologetically change facts, dates, quotes, etcetera, to suit the stylistic or thematic exigencies of the work.

AM: At one point Sevigne talks about the thematic and experiential similarities between boxing and writing. Could you talk a little more about that comparison—where it holds up and where it falls apart? And, just for fun, if your experience of writing this novel was a boxing match, how would you describe it as having played out?

SH: Fun answer first. Novels are impossible. All novels fail at some point or on some level, first novels especially. In this case I’d say the author lost the fight in a split decision, having taken a beating in the middle rounds, but he went the distance and scored a couple of knockdowns, especially in the early and late rounds.

As for parallels between boxing and writing, I think really we’re talking here about the similarities between boxing and life; the sport is not just like writing, it’s like any activity that involves strife and struggle, conflict with others/oneself (especially, always, oneself), self-doubt, self-destructiveness, fear of failure, failure, tests of stamina, and brief moments of triumph (a lousy word here but I’m going to stet it). Consider this: how many key adages or turns of phrase has soccer, the biggest sport in the world for a century, lent to our language? Few if any, because soccer (like hockey, or basketball, or baseball) is nothing like life. It’s artificial, its rules arbitrary. And there’s nothing wrong with artifice; to play tennis, you need lines and a net.

But boxing, like running, is less a sport than an adapted form of a primordial activity. Fight or flight: box or run. And since boxing and running embody basic human survival mechanisms, their terminologies are widely applicable—and also now so well embedded they’re all but invisible, which is to say clichéd. To go toe to toe with someone. To stay on your toes. Roll with the punches. Be on the ropes. Keep your chin down. Be in someone’s corner. Throw in the towel. Take it on the chin, then take a low blow. Hit below the belt. Down for the count. Beat the count. Saved by the bell . . . I’ll embrace the clichés here and spell it out: life too often feels like a combat sport, the kind where you’re trapped and fighting to beat the odds while dimly aware of faces watching from the periphery, a few cheering you on, most leering or at least indifferent, none able to save you. And of course we all get knocked down and need to get up again (cue dramatic music) and keep trying. The hackneyed nature of this paradigm is what makes it seem so puerile, but on some level it’s all perfectly valid and true.

And where does the analogy fail? I would say that it falls apart—in the sense of becoming superfluous, irrelevant—only if, after years of disciplined spiritual work, you achieve the wisdom to stop fighting yourself or needing to fight with the world. But even at that stage—which must be so nice—a fight might be forced on you, or you might need to take one on, on behalf of others. Though I guess by that point an enlightened being would know how to respond with aikido instead of throwing punches.

AM: There is a pretty substantial tradition in western literature of “the boxing novel.” Do you consider yours a boxing novel, or a novel with boxing in it, and did that distinction, if you even agree there is one, affect your decision making when writing the novel (re: genre convention, entering canonical dialogue, etc.).

SH: I can’t imagine writing a book that could be called a boxing novel. What would that even look like? A bit like those fluent, entertaining hockey stories for boys that Scott Young—Neil Young’s father—used to write and that I read as a pre-teen? *Scrubs on Skates* is one title I recall. Now those were true sports novels; they were built around practice, games, scoring goals, getting benched, all that. The characters, as I recall, were flat—mere delivery systems for the exciting sports scenes that many kids of that age like reading. To write an adult version of that sort of book now, focused on any sport . . . I just wouldn’t be interested, let alone obsessed, and obsession is the pathological basis on which a writer has to found an edifice as large as a novel. Without obsession how would you ever finish building something of 100,000 words? (I’m not sure exactly what it is that does obsess me enough to finish my books; I am sure it isn’t my job to describe it.)

Anyway, whether my characters box, serve as sailors and get shipwrecked in the Arctic, work as doctors, mechanics, or bakers, that’s not exactly who they are. Their various jobs or vocations matter, in terms of public identity, but are not primary to their inner lives. Often they’re accidental. (Our lives are often largely accidental.) And what a novel for grownups does is investigate inner lives as opposed to outer identities. In Leonard Gardner’s small masterpiece *Fat City*—now there’s an almostperfect novel—boxing is simply the medium, the ring, in which the main character learns some of life’s necessary lessons. So while boxing is central to the book, I wouldn’t call *Fat City* a boxing novel.

In my book, the sport’s role is partly to furnish a useful metaphor for my protagonist’s quarrel with the world and, above all, himself. “To shadow box” literally means to train by practicing your moves against a phantom opponent—and, sometimes, using a mirror, your own reflection—but to me the term also implies the kind of civil war our divided self constantly wages. Our public and private selves arguing; our ego, threatened by change, battling the deeper self that tries to enact same; complexes we inherited from one parent duking it out with obsessions bequeathed by the other. We’re always throwing wild punches at shadowy projections, ghosts, memories, all of which are really aspects of ourselves.

The fact that boxing in my novel serves partly or largely as a metaphor might have been the most important reason I had to enter the ring and experience the sport first-hand. Metaphors in fiction have to be fully embodied and embedded, lest they seem merely conceptual, schematic, superimposed. Once my body and senses had internalized the sport, blow by blow, bruise by bruise, I was able to re-enact Sevigne’s trials and to root his metaphor in the living physical world my novel was trying to incarnate.