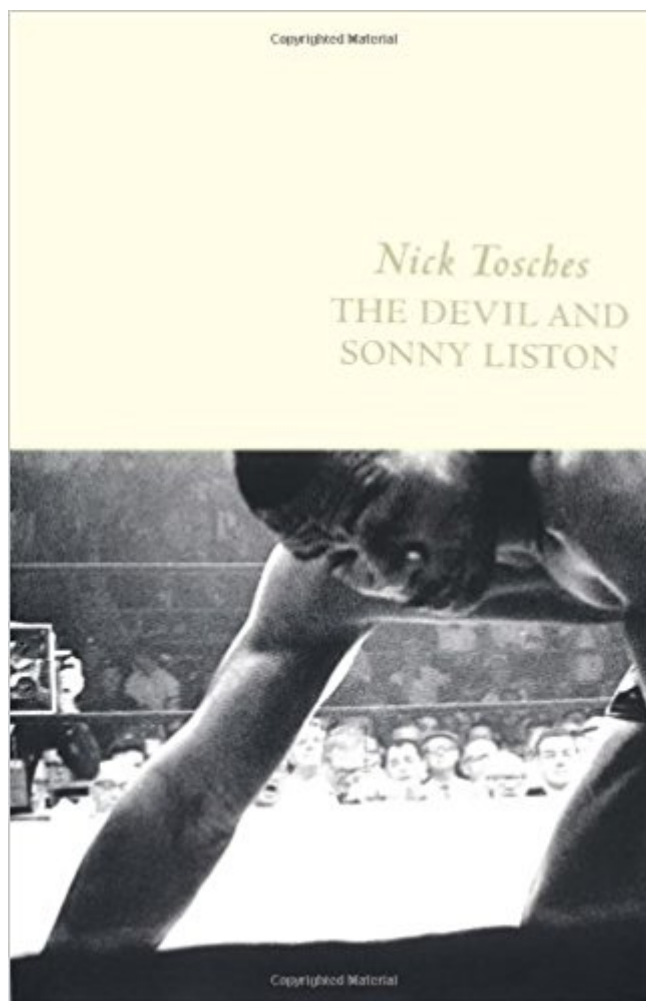


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# The Devil And Sonny Liston



## Synopsis

Now in paperback: Nick Tosches's brutal, stunning, and widely praised biography of Sonny Liston -- the world heavyweight champion who hit harder than any man alive, and who embodied everything that is compelling and terrifying about boxing.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Tosches has always been drawn to the lives of dark and mysteriously flawed or fallen public figures--Jerry Lee Lewis in Hellfire, Dean Martin in Dino--and in one-time heavyweight champ Charles "Sonny" Liston he has found his biggest and darkest figure yet. Born in abject poverty in eastern Arkansas, Liston grew up to be a quiet, inarticulate youth who, after moving with his mother to St. Louis, put his only talent to work: intimidation. Knocking over gas stations and grocery stores, he ended up in a penitentiary doing eight years. His brawny build and huge hands made him an invincible force in the prison boxing program, which earned him an early release but delivered him into an enslavement from which he never escaped. Tosches marshals prodigious research to prove that, early on, Liston became captive to organized crime at a time when boxing was ruled by a mob syndicate. This is a very sad tale of an illiterate man who became useful to figures who had their own agenda: making money. Tosches finds people close to Liston who claim the fighter told them that his first bout with the man then known as Cassius Clay was fixed (with the mob taking down \$2.1 million by betting on the 7-to-1 underdog); others strongly imply that the outcome of the second fight--that of the infamous "phantom punch"--in Lewiston, Maine, was also a foregone conclusion. Events around the beleaguered and bewildered Liston whirl at dizzying speeds--the Kefauver

investigation of boxing, the war in Vietnam, the rise of the Nation of Islam, the cultural roar of the 1960s generation--and Tosches is a master at keeping his finger on the pulse of the period and his eye on the pitiable Sonny. Throughout, though, what is most remarkable is Tosches's empathy for the fighter derided as "a bear," a "hoodlum" and, by the loquacious Ali, as simply "ugly." In Tosches's hands, Liston is an unfortunate victim of people much worse than he, and the boxer emerges with a kind of mute dignity: this man "who neither knew his age nor felt any ties of blood upon this earth nor saw any future knew only that he was nobody and that he had come from nowhere and that he was nowhere." In a prose style that runs like a hot improvisational jazz riff, Tosches makes a somebody of a nobody, and along the way brings more than a few reputations down a good notch. (Apr.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

" "Sometimes I think [Tosches is] the only writer out there who still stands up when they piss." -- Jim "The Hound" Marshall "...Tosches' hardbitten prose is well-suited to the task of bringing Liston...to vividly seedy life...A" -- Entertainment Weekly, 4/21/00"...[Tosches'] exhaustive research paints as clear a picture as we're likely to get of his enigmatic subject..." -- Wall Street Journal, 4/21/00"...at once biography and meditation...boast[s] the author's trademarks: insight and raving excess. One doesn't so much read a Tosches book as experience it..." -- The Denver Post, 4/23/00"...hard, tough writing suited to a hard, tough subject..." -- New York Times Book Review, 4/30/00"Tosches is smooth and cool and in control here...tells a captivating, tragic tale." -- Austin Chronicle, 4/21/00"Tosches' hard-bitten prose is well suited to the task of bringing Liston...to vividly seedy life...A" -- Entertainment WeeklyTosches has a talent for getting inside the skin of such men, as he does for drawing out meaty stories from the denizens of shadowy worlds--neither an easy task. -- The New York Times Book Review, Vincent Patrick

All you have to know about this book and how much the author knows about boxing, is this: Nick Tosches stated that Archie Moore threw his fight with Rocky Marciano. Moore, if he were to throw a fight could have found a bit easier way of doing so than taking the pounding he did from the Rock. Just watch the last three rounds of the fight and you tell me if this was a thrown fight. Fair or not, this one seemingly innocuous passage, lost total credibility of the author for me. I paid for this book and now regret it. If you want good stuff on Liston from credible sources (though you may not agree with everything they write) read William Nack's SI piece, Nigel Collins' Boxing Babylon or The HBO documentary on Liston. Tosches may have done some incredible research here, but I don't view him as a reliable source.

Well written. A very interesting historical and psychological approach.

I personally enjoyed the book. I have never read anything about Sonny Liston. I remember the fight that made him champion and the fight where he lost the title and the one with the phantom punch. Since reading the book. I checked out his fights via youtube and gained clarification about him. He was the best in the world in his prime. His life outside the ring was the thing that killed him with the public, The political Powers in the U.S.A., and his backers Truman Gibson, Frankie Carbo, Blinky Palermo who began to lose money on him by quashing scandals, getting him out of jail and etc. He was his biggest enemy and it was understandable when his backers gravitated to the up and comer Cassius Clay who provided a better image for boxing bought him three months before the championship fight in February 1964 and forced him to give up the title. He under better circumstances would have crushed Cassius Clay but had lost his enthusiasm by fight night. He was not the same fighter that was shown in the youtube clips, he did try to blind Cassius Clay when his handler put liniment on his gloves almost causing Clay to quit. Sonny Liston was seen in his entirety through this story by Nick Tosches

Very pleased

Sonny was a "bad man".

I saw the cover, I saw the title, and I thought to myself--I have to get this book. Finally, a detailed account of Liston's life! I was expecting a lot from this book--maybe too much. After reading it, my expectations were not met. A much better account of Liston can be found in William Nack's brilliant 1991 article "O Unlucky Man," in Sports Illustrated (perhaps the best sports piece ever written); so is David Remnick's "King of The World." Those two books, though smaller works than Tosches' Liston book, have more detail and probe into further depths of Liston's psyche. Tosches obviously knows about and likes to write about the underworld and Liston's connection with them--unfortunately, that wasn't all Liston was about--Tosches misses on Sonny's human side, seeing him as just a piece of meat passed around from mob boss to mob boss. Tosches virtually ignores the two fights with Ali--speculating on a fix but offering no hard evidence--and barely touching on his title winning effort and rematch with Floyd Patterson, the stuff of high drama, given the time these fights took place in. He also uses the annoying postmodern glitch of interrupting the flow of the book at times to put his

own cute comments in the book (hint to Mr. Tosches--just because you're writing about boxing doesn't mean you have to say the f-word every time you interject the story). I appreciate the detail Tosches went to in writing the book--he obviously did his homework with interviews and documents---if he had just focused more on Sonny the person instead of Sonny the piece of meat, he would have captured Liston's essence much better.

Tosches, regardless of whether or not it was accurate, paints quite a picture with his work. One of his theses is that Sonny Liston was always the sharecropper's kid, even as a successful boxer. That's why, in Tosches' view, Sonny wouldn't have had difficulty doing what he was told from "the man." Maybe, maybe not. In any event Mr. Tosches covers the events of Sonny Liston's life. This book has no light spots, really. It's all medium gray to black. Maybe it's this perceived lack of contrast that irritates some readers. Maybe that's the way Sonny Liston's life really was. The Liston that Tosches leaves us with isn't particularly likeable, but somehow you end up feeling something for the man. In the end, I get the impression from Mr. Tosches that he's telling us that Sonny was our creation, that we made him. To that degree, perhaps we deserved some of the unpleasantness that came from the sad boxer with the massive hands and the pile-driving punch. And, maybe, to that degree Sonny was a victim. I'd give the book a 3 for substance and a 5 for style. Guess I'll settle for a 4. And "settling" is pretty much what Liston's life was about.

This was an excellent bio by a fine writer. At times I thought he swayed from the subject of Mr. Liston and lost his clear and concise voice, but these instances were relatively rare. I recommend this anyone who enjoys bios and excellent writing.

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