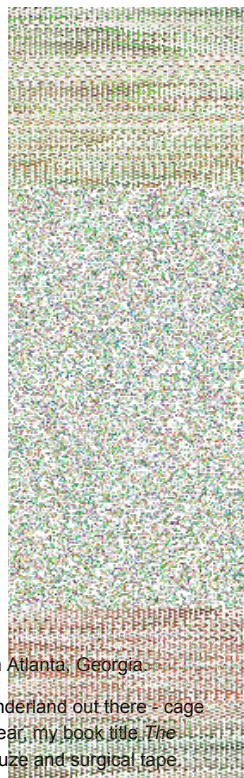


The literate, fighting female

Mischa Merz
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Still standing: Mischa Merz wins a US bout. Photo: Supplied



NOT for the first time in my life I wondered what the hell I was doing. I was alone in a storage room at the back of Wild Bill's in Atlanta, Georgia.

Outside, a massive combat sports expo was in full swing on a sunny weekend in the American south. It was a white trash wonderland out there - cage fighting, hot rod displays, boxing and a bikini contest were among the delights on offer. And there was I, dressed in my fight gear, my book title *The Sweetest Thing* embroidered on my shorts and robe along with my publisher's logo. My hands were wrapped tight in white gauze and surgical tape. Once again, I was ready to rumble.

I'd been dropped off hours earlier and as I wandered past industrial-sized kitchens in search of the "change room", the smell of barbecue and Budweiser was thick in the April air. Girls in skimpy clothes teetered on Perspex stilt heels, men with mullets and baseball caps were everywhere, as were the over-muscled and elaborately tattooed mixed martial arts guys who would fight later on.

I was hoping not only to win the imminent event, but maybe sell a few copies of my book as well, which was a chronicle of my wild ride through the world of women's boxing. There are not many authors prepared to take blows to the head in order to move some merchandise.

Even Norman Mailer, who trailed after Muhammad Ali like a smitten schoolgirl, didn't go to these lengths. So with one hand I punched people in the face and with the other I signed books - this time for sale at a stand at Wild Bill's "Crown Room", attended by the sensibly clad women from the feminist-run Charis Books shop. Whatever they thought about all the machismo on display at this ho-down, they sure enjoyed the bikini contest and the ring card girl, a stripper from the Pink Pony called Brittany-Nicole.

At 46, I found myself practising an Ali shuffle in preparation for a ring entrance in a cluttered antechamber. I was to fight a graphic artist from North Carolina called Lisa Creech Bledsoe. I was, predictably, the "Thunder from Down Under" and Lisa was "Relentless". This would be my sixth fight since I relaunched my career as a masters boxer (over 35) in 2009. I'd been a happy underdog then. Now I was the Golden Gloves and Ringside World Champion - the older lady boxer to beat.

I need not have worried. "Relentless" was unable to live up to her name after one round, allowing me some room to do a little Down Under-dogging, sticking that left jab I'd been honing now for more than 12 years. But still it was a relief to have my hand raised in victory, because you never know for sure in this game unless someone ends the fight horizontal.

A few days later I was sitting in the hushed studios of WNYC in lower Manhattan being interviewed by one of America's heavyweight broadcasters, Lenny Lopate. I was still trying to attract the disparate audiences for my twin passions - boxing and writing. At least in the US boxing and literature have a long-standing connection, from A.J. Liebling to Joyce Carol Oates. But still it was hard to imagine how the potential audience for my next fight at Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn would also be listening to the highly cultured Lopate, whose guests in his 25-year career have included Henry Kissinger and Barack Obama. Lopate was so well prepared it felt like he had not just read my book but also my mind. After the interview he said he was off that evening to meet Peter Carey and I smiled mutely as if I was also good mates with the two-time Booker Prize winner.

The crowd at Gleason's the following Saturday was mostly drawn from the small, grungy boxing gyms around Brooklyn and Queens. But this time there would also be 25 women from Europe and Britain enrolled for a two-day boxing clinic to culminate in an all-female card, the first ever staged by the historic gym where almost every prizefighter of note has trained.

The well-attended, all-female amateur show was a sign of the times, a signal of the exponential growth in women's boxing and its popularity. More women than ever before are fighting all over the world. Women's boxing will be included for the first time in the 2012 Olympic Games. Numbers have exploded since I began, when the boxing brotherhood thought we would surely give it up once our noses were bloodied. But we're not so easily deterred.

I'd also witnessed another seismic shift in September at the International Boxing Association's women's world championships in Barbados when nearly 300 women from 60 countries showed how the gap between men's and women's abilities was fast closing. The 10-day tournament, a precursor to the Olympics, was the most definitive answer to all the doubters. The depth of talent has finally reached a tipping point

In Australia there are now 105 registered female amateurs but according to Ted Tanner, the president of Boxing Australia Incorporated, there are another 900 training seriously in gyms. The tidal wave is coming.

At Gleason's, technically my home-away-from-home gym, I lost the fight by two points to Natalie Davila of Queens. But book sales more than compensated for that. Sweating and dehydrated after the furiously paced three rounds, people still wanted me to sign books. But I didn't complain because I guess, finally, I was among my core readership - literate, fighting females. There are actually more of us than you'd think.

*Mischa Merz is a former Australian amateur champion, 2009 US Women's Golden Gloves champion and the author of **The Sweetest Thing**, published by Seven Stories Press in April 2011.*