

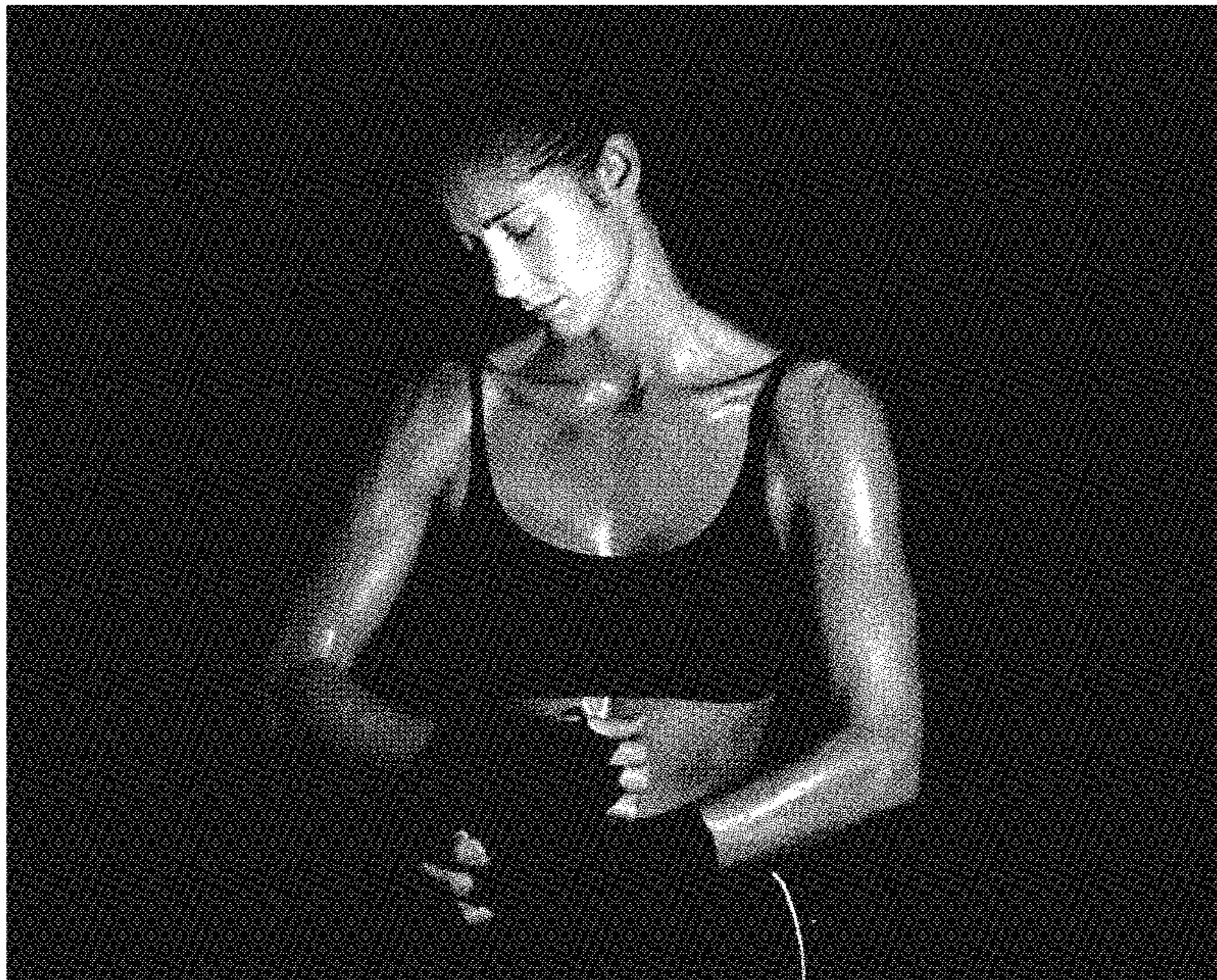
# A fight for rights, lefts

A book about women's boxing lands some punches

**C**HANCES are, as you read this, Melbourne journalist Mischa Merz is squaring up to an opponent in a Melbourne or Sydney boxing ring. Aside from Muhammad Ali, she's just about the best-looking boxer you will ever have seen, posed artfully low on the Picador cover, with eyes closed, head bowed, lethal mitts crossed tautly over her midriff to give the well-oiled muscles of her upper body maximum definition, a picture of concentration, reverence, grace, strength and humility — qualities martial arts masters applaud, but less often practitioners of pugilism.

Not that Merz is your average boxer. She volunteers that she's the wrong class: born to tertiary-educated parents and reared in a large rambling house. Her boxing apparently started at the University of Melbourne and, having had a career in journalism for 15 years, her hunger to lay about has never been spurred by the hunger to eat. In fact, one of her more interesting observations is that unemployment benefits have turned males away from the ring in droves.

Unaccountably, the cataloguing-in-publication data supplied by her publisher labels *Bruising* a fictional account of women in boxing. Instead, the work fits more comfortably within the stylish non-fiction popularised by writers such as



Grace: Mischa Merz is delighted more girls are taking up boxing and enjoying it

## Bruising: A Journey Through Gender

By Mischa Merz, Picador, 255pp, \$20.61

### Mary Rose Liverani

Dava Sobel, Helen Garner and Janet Malcolm, a style that permits disguising argument as a tentative, personal, exploratory kind of inquiry — contentious matter with a soothing tone. Nonetheless, the book will leave some feminists and anti-boxing proponents keen to go a few rounds with Merz.

Her story is that she took up boxing thinking her sex irrelevant, but that boxing ultimately became a way of defining herself as a woman. Like any good journalist, she starts her tale with an attention-grabbing item: three women mug her in broad daylight and she responds to the attack with some ferocity, scaring them off, wishing she could have another go at them and revelling in the sense of power her victory gave her. This incident becomes a matrix for her various themes, among them, victim fixation, violence in women, the nature of aggression, the excitement of fighting, redefining masculinity and femininity, and the dangers associated with vicariously experiencing violence but having no understanding of the reality.

There's no doubt that experiencing boxing as a woman provides Merz with some provocative and stimulating insights. She notes, for instance, that in boxing class maleness alone is not enough to guarantee you can fight. The instructor often prefers a woman to illustrate the finer points of evading or landing a blow. So if fighting is masculine, then masculinity is gender neutral. She discovers, too, that she and her female sparring partners really enjoy exhibiting their aggression in a public arena, gathering knowledge about their strengths, about their ability to hurt and to withstand hurt.

Not that Merz turned to boxing for self-defence, a concept she spurns for its victim associations. She's in the game to bruise, as well as be bruised, yet fear of the latter initially holds back her advance to fighter status. It takes time for her and her female sparring partners to liberate themselves from the inhibitions that keep

them blurring: "Sorry, did I hurt you?" Getting past that means "disconnecting aggression from emotion" and ending the search for motive. It gives Merz a sense of triumph and power (and me a bit of a shiver).

Failure, however — being knocked down by a fighter who demonstrates superior strategy, footwork, daring or resilience — almost paralyses her with humiliation and it is male boxers, not her female friends, who empathise with her, the men's casual "oh f... that" signalling that they've been there and survived it. This suggests to her that men can and do empathise, but in a different way from women. Conversely, Amanda Buchanan, the licensed boxing trainer who is her mentor, turns out to be lacking in that kind of verbal intimacy normally associated with women.

Merz often turns to research (not well sourced) to bolster her reflections. She cites Finnish studies suggesting that female aggression is not researched as much as male aggression and that, where it is studied, results are skewed by a male perspective. Favouring male forms of aggression therefore leads to the myth of the non-aggressive female. Feminists need to confront the possibility, she says, that female aggression might be a force in itself that springs from a desire to dominate and control. Prepubescent girls are known to be aggressive and to reach a peak of aggression at 12, after which negative feedback forces them to express it covertly, often turning their aggression on themselves — in the case of anorexia, with an awesome control.

Merz accepts that boxing targets the head. It's real danger. It calls for risk management. She sees it as feminine in its grace, rhythm, fancy footwork and evasiveness; masculine in its strength, resilience, and power — but gender neutral, since both males and females possess these qualities. She's delighted that more girls, and littler girls, are taking it up and enjoying it. And she's looking around for sparring partners. *But Queensberry Rules, please, ladies.*



1300 655 191, Australian Books Direct, \$18.55

# Yellowstone yearnings

## DISTANT VOICES

Judith Elen

**D**IANE Smith's *The Naturalist* (Women's Press, \$24.95, 226pp) is being compared overseas with A. S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects*. They're both about the Victorian mentality — collecting, labelling, pinning down. But while Byatt focuses on the hothouse of 19th-century English culture, Smith, an American science writer, is more interested in nature than art.

Her novel is written as a series of letters from members of a botanical expedition into Yellowstone National Park, taking the reader into the Montana wilderness as well as the foreign territory of 19th-century attitudes. A young naturalist is mistakenly accepted as a member of the group under the assumption that she is a man. There is suspense and discovery, engaging characters and a breathtaking landscape — the park which is a frontier in the American pursuit of liberty, the young naturalist's in particular.

*A State of Symmetry* (The Migdal Press, \$24.95, 382pp) by Paul Clingman is about the complex interdependence of events. Clingman, banned as a songwriter-musician in apartheid-ridden South Africa, was forced into exile until 1994, but his novel is not overtly political. As in *Snow Falling on Cedars*, and yet very differently, a murder trial at the centre of the story illuminates the society in which it occurs. Clingman is also a scriptwriter and poet. His novel's distinctive technique is predominantly poetic — in its distilled language and in the way it fragments time, place and point of view. These bits of story are like ripples set in motion in the past, realising themselves with a fatal inevitability.

Linda Grant is a feature writer with The Guardian newspaper in England. Two of her three earlier books won awards. Her latest, *When I Lived in Modern Times* (Granta Books, \$26.95, 261pp), puts us in the frontline at the reshaping of the modern world. In 1946, the war over, people are on the move — finding their way home; fleeing their homes. This is an impressionistic account of the difficult birth in 1946 of a homeland, Palestine, for the world's Jews — the Promised Land. Evelyn, 20, a Jew brought up in London's Soho, travels to British-occupied Palestine to be present at the birth: from the London neighbourhood of her childhood, to a kibbutz in Galilee, to the invented city of Tel Aviv. Grant's slightly breathless journalistic style matches Tel Aviv's overheated mix of idealism and opportunism, waning British imperialism and terrorist extremism. The book ends with Evelyn, in middle age, returning to Tel Aviv to discover that times always seem modern at the time.

Granta Books' translation of *Sans Moi* by Marie Desplechin (\$27.95, 220pp, translated by Will Hobson) captures a quirky perspective of life in Paris. It's all about Olivia — drug addict and courier in the book's recent past, and then nanny to a couple of small, charming children, whose mother narrates the tale as if in a day-by-day conversation. She loves Olivia and recounts her ups and downs, the patchily revealed stories of her past, her motivations, her views on life. They are both fallible and endearing, and the book's overall impulse is its tolerance, its acceptance of the inexplicable in others, and the persistence of love. It's a celebration of humanity, with a delicious sense of humour and an edgy feel for life precariously straddling bourgeois respectability and the dangerous streets. The greatest pleasure it gives is in the subtly drawn characters (including the children, and the briefly appearing young widowed Spanish concierge, conspirator and protectress).



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## 2001 New South Wales Premier's Translation Prize and PEN Medallion

Nominations are invited for the New South Wales Premier's Translation Prize, to be presented every two years in conjunction with the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards.

This is a new prize which acknowledges the contribution made to literary culture by Australian translators. The prize is offered by the NSW Government through the Ministry for the Arts and the Ethnic Affairs Commission in association with International PEN (Sydney Centre).

The prize is valued at \$5,000 and is open only to literary translators who translate from other languages into English. Translators should be able to demonstrate a body of literary work which has been published or performed in recent years. This work can include poetry, stage and radio plays, and fiction and non-fiction works of literary merit.

Translators may nominate themselves, or be nominated by authors, agents, publishers, translation and literary associations, theatre companies or radio broadcasters. The closing date for nominations is Friday 13 October 2000. The winner will be announced in May 2001.

Guidelines and nomination forms may be obtained from:

The Secretary, Ministry for the Arts  
PO Box A226, SYDNEY SOUTH NSW 1235  
Telephone (02) 9228 5533 Fax (02) 9228 4722  
Email: ministry@arts.nsw.gov.au

The Hon Bob Carr, MP  
Premier, Minister for the Arts  
and Minister for Citizenship