



Fat City

Leonard Gardner

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Fat City is a vivid novel of allegiance and defeat, of the potent promise of the good life and the desperation and drink that waylay those whom it eludes. Stockton, California, is the setting: the Lido Gym, the Hotel Coma, Main Street lunchrooms and dingy bars, days like long twilights in houses obscured by untrimmed shrubs and black walnut trees. When two men meet in the ring—the retired boxer Billy Tully and the newcomer Ernie Munger—their brief bout sets into motion their hidden fates, initiating young Munger into the company of men and luring Tully back into training. In a dispassionate and composed voice, Leonard Gardner narrates their swings of fortune, and the stubborn optimism of their manager, Ruben Luna, as he watches the most promising boys one by one succumb to some undefined weakness; still, “There was always someone who wanted to fight.”

Fat City Details

Date : Published September 8th 2015 by NYRB Classics (first published 1969)

ISBN : 9781590178928

Author : Leonard Gardner

Format : Paperback 191 pages

Genre : Fiction, Sports and Games, Sports, Novels

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From Reader Review Fat City for online ebook

Bert says

Written at the end of the Sixties, but set in the Fifties world of boxing, boozing, skid row and bad relationships. It felt totally authentic and testosteroney, and i think i probably admired it more than loved it. There's an old boxing movie called The Set-Up and this made me want to re-watch that and it also made me grateful that i don't have to go peach picking, and that Sian isn't an alcoholic who taunts me in public.

Piker7977 says

Gritty and bleak. I suppose you could say that Fat City is about boxing. Nah. It's about the grind and hustling of poverty. Now we are getting closer. It's tough to support a family, drinking habits, and rent expenses when money is hard to come by. Perhaps it's relationships. Ding ding. I think we have a winner. What drives the main characters in Fat City is the urge to connect with the women of their lives. However, it is not the romance that concerns them. It is the jealousies, petty and big. It's disappointments that come with settling for someone who is simply available yet turning your circumstances into a boring desire. Anxiety comes with this when you worry that you are stuck with them for good. It also returns when you see their presence fleeing from your day to day. That is the theme that spoke to me the most.

Another way to consider Fat City. Equal parts of Mailer, Steinbeck, Bukowski, Thompson, and Crumley. In other words, a great read.

Andy says

Fat City can be shelved somewhere in between Tom Waits records, Bukowski lit and early Cassavettes films. It's got that nighthawks at the diner feel to it. Of all the boxing novels I've read Leonard Gardner describes ringside action more lucidly than anyone else. I can actually understand what's going on in the match. Gardner's a great writer and I'm surprised he didn't produce many more works after this. He could've been a contender.

Fabian says

One solid American Tale. More about the men's personal life (wives, remedial jobs, prejudice) than the sport of boxing. (Why oh why am I so attracted to these little books about athletes? I read "The Natural" a while ago & right now the Olympics ARE where it's all about. But perhaps I'm kinda trying to find that novel that debunks "Art of Fielding" as the best sports novel of all time. It's a real toughie.)

Carl R. says

Leonard Gardner's *Fat City* is a close companion to Don Carpenter's 60's classic *Hard Rain Falling*, with its clean, clear prose and gritty setting. The novel is set in Stockton, CA, fifty miles from my doorstep and scarcely over a hundred miles from where I grew up in the Sacramento Valley, and it has the same ring of geographical authenticity and the same clean, clear prose that helped endear me to *Hard Rain*. I was further impressed with Both Carpenter and Gardner's ability to immerse themselves and their readers in the world of their characters. An aside--They remind me of Ian McEwen in this respect. In *Hard Rain*, it was criminality and prison. Here, it is small-time boxing and agricultural labor. The hopes and dreams of fringe athletes, their trainers and managers, make for a yeasty storytelling. And when we follow the washed-up never-weres into the fields to trim onions and weed tomatoes, Gardner makes us feel every agonizing moment and the agonizing pain in every muscle of stoop labor from the hiring hall to the endless rows and hours under a punishing sun.

Both the older, clearly done-for Billy Tully and the younger, more promising, Ernie Munger live on the edge. Tully has actually crossed over the edge, mired in days of alcohol and regret over a lost wife and lost loves. Munger's in somewhat better shape. He pulls down a small wage at a service station while pursuing his fights, and he manages to marry and produce a child, about which he is more or less happy.

What the characters have in common besides their time in the ring and their ties to their manager is a total lack of insight into themselves or their situations. They drift without substantial goals, without capacity for joy or love. The result is a novel of unalloyed grimness. *Hard Rain*, despite its horrors, had soft touches. A real romance that generates hope in readers, even if it doesn't eventually pan out. Even the most intimate moments in *Fat City*, though, are fraught with angst to the point that one senses no real connection between the participants. Not that I ask for Disney joy and dancing from every book, but all ugly and no pretty or even chance of it seems a little much to ask of a reader. At least this one.

Gary says

The writing, the dialogue, the plot, the down-and-out characters with their demons--Leonard Gardner's *Fat City* is a total knockout.

Robert Hobkirk says

It took about 2 months to get *Fat City* from the library, there was that much of a waiting list although the book was published back in 1969, so it wasn't like some recent highly promoted book that people just had to read because of all the rave reviews. Apparently it has a cult following. I read it before, several years ago. As I read it, some things came back to my memory like *deja vu*. This is the one and only novel by Gardner although he's made his living working as a writer for TV. He spent 4 years writing this relatively short novel. Maybe after the 4 years, he said to himself, not going to do that again. He knew what he was writing about. The setting is Stockton where he grew up, and he was an amateur boxer at one time. That's right, this this a boxing story set in Stockton. Unlike the fairy tale *Rocky*, the two main characters don't make the big time, don't get the girl, don't get respect.

This book is a page turner. It moves fast. I think it could have been further filled out in spots, whole chapters instead of just paragraphs. The author seemed to be in a hurry in places. Slow down, man, you got ten

rounds, no rush. Gardner hits you with a couple quick jabs; you get hit with a punch you never saw coming and years later you might want to go back into the ring and have another go round.

I would have liked it if Gardner had written more novels because *Fat City* was that good.

Matt says

You know those evolution posters, where you get the silhouettes of apes transforming into a Cro-Magnon man into a human into a slacker with a surfboard (or whatever)? *Fat City* gives a portrait like that, only its characters each represent a stage in a certain kind of life. It is a novel of a time and place, Stockton CA in the 1950s, for a down-low segment of society--men scraping by on bad work, boxing, and a brand of love craved and despised. The novel is exquisite in its misery, honest to its place and to the work the men do. And it spares no pain in portraying, quite perfectly I think, their bewildered sense of injustice done to them and the shocks of recognition over what they've done to themselves. Their desperate need for love, and their hate for the kind of people they find themselves worthy of, is awful, as is their misery when they find themselves staring down the barrel of the rest of their lives, alone. Kids, you can fuck up your life, and when you realize that, it might be too late to fix it, because fixing it would mean fixing yourself, and sometimes it's too late, you're just not up to it, and you understand that it's just going to keep going how it's going, and you have to take it because you can't do any better. Yikes.

Tfitoby says

Why haven't you heard of this book?

I'm one to talk, owing my knowledge of Leonard Gardner to having recently had the pleasure of watching John Huston's forgotten cinematic masterpiece that was adapted from it. So that's a forgotten movie and a forgotten book. And Gardner never published another novel. The novel becoming the perfect allegory for its own life in hindsight?

Ernie Munger and Billy Tully are two amateur boxers, Ruben is their trainer. All three men have dreams of making it big, of a happy life, none of them get it. There's not much more to the actual plot to add to a synopsis. There are a few ups but mostly downs, it's a largely depressing novel and beautifully written. Much like a kitchen sink drama there is not so much a completed journey feel to the story just a documentation of life and Gardner allows you to tag along for a while.

Place Gardner alongside John Steinbeck, Nathanael West et al as a superb chronicler of the misery of the American people, the death of the American dream. Through a series of vignettes a portrait of emptiness and despair, of loss and desperation is completed with a bleak outlook and brutal honesty.

The characters may well exist as boxers, that's their surface designation but there's no glamour in what they do, Gardner does not drift in to eulogising the pugilistic arts as many have done before and since; Ernie and Billy are all men and boxing is the metaphor for the toll life can take on you.

"..... they succumbed to whatever in them was the weakest, and often it was nothing he could even define"

Sometimes there's so much beauty in a book that could be missed, the content is depressing but the choice of words and the framing of them in this case make the experience of reading so much more than its content.

Brian says

California is a story of two states. Norcal and Socal, for all of their rivalries and proclamations of differences are really two sides of a coin. It's moving inland - where the politics shift right, home values decrease and employment outside of the agriculture sector becomes more scarce – this is where you'll find the *other* California, the second state, the place that looks and feels so different from the coastal cities it may as well be in the Midwest.

Stockton is one of these inner California towns, and it's almost not fair to the rest of the world that takes up a pen to write fiction that Leonard Gardner can write such a perfect first novel using this city as his setting. Yes, this is boxing fiction, but boxing is simply the clay Gardner uses to cast his dual protagonists, the young Ernie Munger and the fading Billy Tully. They meet in the opening pages of the book and then their stories depart for a time, Munger's new life in the ring presenting subtle echoes of Tully's same experiences a decade before. There is an uncomfortable intimacy in the writing concerning poverty, a day-to-day hardscrabble finding a meal and a roof. Gardner must have pulled from firsthand experience in writing these scenes. They are too perfect.

My copy of this book comes with a Denis Johnson penned *Introduction*, one of the most beautiful homages of the form. Johnson credits this author, this book, as his northstar when he was beginning as a full time writer. I love learning about how authors are touched by those that came before. If only *Fat City* had the readership of Johnson; it certainly deserves it.

Tony says

The obligatory Introductions in the nyrb-classics series are often scholarly analysis by well-known authors. Don't tell, but I often skip them, or cherry-pick an important date or two therein. But Denis Johnson, in two pages (I like that), didn't try and tell me how smart he is, or how his writer's insight is more important than my mere reader's view. No. Instead, he wrote about what it is to be a fan of an author or a book. He told this story:

My friend across the road saw Gardner in a drugstore in California once, recognized him from his jacket photo. He was looking at a boxing magazine. "Are you Leonard Gardner?" my friend asked. "You must be a writer," Gardner said, and went back to his magazine. I made my friend tell the story a thousand times.

I loved that. And told the story already in a bar last night. And will again, to friends who love a special book, and talk about every paragraph ... one by one and over and over, the way couples sometimes reminisce about each moment of their falling in love.

I tried, after that, to make *Fat City* be that book for me. But it wasn't. And I fall in love easily. But, ah there were moments:

"All I need's a fight and a woman. Then I'm set. I get the fight I'll get the money. I get the money I'll get the

woman. *There's some women that love you for yourself, but that don't last long. Ernie?"*

Not a boxer, I can still feel that. Ernie? Take this outside the ring:

As if in rebellion against his influence, they had succumbed to whatever in them was weakest, and often it was nothing he could even define. They lost when they should have won and they drifted away. Over the years he would see one around town. A few he read about in the newspapers--some fighting in other towns for other managers, one killed on a motorcycle, one murdered in New Orleans. They were all so vulnerable, their duration so desperately brief, that all he could do was go on from one to the other in quest of that youth who had all that the others lacked.

It's the American Dream. Dropped in the desert in the middle of the night. No cut man. Best to break your nose in your first fight, so there's one less thing to worry yourself about the rest of your life. Ernie?

Rod says

If you're a writer, and if you're going to write just one novel over the course of your career, please try to make it as good as this one.

Cody says

Ripper: Mandrake?

Mandrake: Yes, Jack?

Ripper: Have you ever seen a Commie drink a glass of water?

Mandrake: Well, I can't say I have.

Ripper: Vodka, that's what they drink, isn't it? Never water?

Mandrake: Well, I-I believe that's what they drink, Jack, yes.

Ripper: On no account will a Commie ever drink water, and not without good reason.

Mandrake: Oh, eh, yes. I, uhm, can't quite see what you're getting at, Jack.

Ripper: Water, that's what I'm getting at, water. Mandrake, water is the source of all life. Seven-tenths of this earth's surface is water. Why, do you realize that seventy percent of you is water?

Mandrake: Uh, uh, Good Lord!

Ripper: And as human beings, you and I need fresh, pure water to replenish our precious bodily fluids.

Mandrake: Yes.

Ripper: Are you beginning to understand?

Mandrake: Yes.

Ripper: Mandrake. Mandrake, have you never wondered why I drink only distilled water, or rain water, and only pure-grain alcohol?

Mandrake: Well, it did occur to me, Jack, yes.

Ripper: Have you ever heard of a thing called fluoridation. Fluoridation of water?

Mandrake: Uh? Yes, I-I have heard of that, Jack, yes. Yes.

Ripper: Well, do you know what it is?

Mandrake: No, no I don't know what it is, no.

Ripper: Do you realize that fluoridation is the most monstrously conceived and dangerous Communist plot we have ever had to face?

* * * * *

Anyone familiar with *Dr. Strangelove* has a soft spot for Sterling Hayden's Col. Ripper. He's a hilarious character that embodies all of the best worst qualities of an archetypal, macho male Americano: patriotic to a psychotic level, humorless, xenophobic, flouridophobic. Now the above quote, the "Commie" talk and such, has nothing to do with this book. The reason I included it? Because the entire time I read *Fat City*, I couldn't get Ripper's stentorian voice out of my head. Seriously. A book-on-tape of this by Hayden in-character would be a national treasure. The book is that sober.

That's not say that *Fat City* is bad by any means, just not really for me. It reminded me of Steinbeck (never a good thing, sorry), what with all the plaintive detailing of MidCal's agriculture, "Mexican and Negro" fieldworkers, and spangle-browed sincerity. It is a Naturalist novel *in extremis*, with all the requisite socio-economic externalities that weigh on the characters given equal import as actors in the story. If you're into that kind of thing, go for it—it certainly stands out from most of its brethren. But I want orotund, bombastic, sparkler-tracer-at-night prose that leaves impressions on my retinas. If I wanted to read about how bad-love-is-easy-to-do or the depravities of alcoholism in them's-the-facts fashion, I'd just re-read any Ray Carver story at-hand.

I can't imagine that anyone ever read this for the boxing, and if they did I assume they were disappointed. Which, hey, was a plus for me. Reading about boxing is like [ed.—insert Zappa "architecture" quote here]. Beyond the Naturalism and my predisposition away from it, *Fat City* just didn't move me in any way. I simply didn't care about the characters, plot...—not a single thing spoke to me. This is fine writing undoubtedly, compact and not without innate talent. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that a 16-year-old me would've have appreciated it more than the Hermit at Middle Age.

One last try: When it was over, I exhaled it like cigarette smoke. Gone.

Tyler Jones says

Denis Johnson, one of my favourite authors, has often cited *Fat City* as the book that made him want to be a writer, and after finally getting around to reading it I can see why. Leonard, like Johnson, illuminates the lives of the under-privileged with empathy without getting sentimental. One senses that Leonard gets very close to the heart of the matter.

Focusing on the lives of one boxer on his way down and another just starting his career, Leonard is able to create an over-all picture of what life was like for the vast majority of fighters. In our society a boxer, like a whore, is viewed only as a physical being. What a boxer's aspirations and values may be are irrelevant to society; only his ability to beat people up matters. By investing the lives of these men (even those who are self-destructive) with nobility and grace, Leonard gives us a truer understanding of our world than a typical champions story ever could.

Unfortunately you are not likely to find *Fat City* on the shelves of a bookstore. Ask your local bookseller to order a copy in for you.

Rae Meadows says

Fat City won the National Book Award in 1970. Reading it I felt the masculine despair of Carver, Bukowski even, a gritty look at men who are not making it. One character is a past-his-prime boxer who works day labor in the fields of Central California but returns to the gym to try to regain something of his life. The other character is a younger man who trains in the same gym, hoping for something other than his pregnant wife and stifling life in Stockton. It is grim, to be sure, but Gardner is a marvelous writer. (Denis Johnson wrote the soaring introduction to this edition.) There is such subtlety in the scenes and dialog between men and women--simmering resentment, hopes, hate--juxtaposed with the gruesome violence of the small-time boxing ring. Uplifting, this book is not. It's full of alcoholics and lost hope and lives lived on the edge. But it has a humming humanity at its core and I loved reading it.

Wu Ming says

WM2: Come spettacolo sportivo, la boxe non riesce a piacermi. La maggior parte degli incontri che ho visto era di una noia mortale, divertenti quanto uno zero a zero per chi non ne capisce di calcio. A parte questo, riconosco nel pugilato una forza evocativa superiore a quella di altri sport. Forse è grazie alla sua semplicità archetipica - picchiarsi finché l'altro non va giù - fatto sta che i migliori film di genere atletico hanno a che fare coi guantoni (se si escludono *Ogni Maledetta Domenica*, *Momenti di gloria* e *L'allenatore nel pallone*). E' molto difficile raccontare di calcio senza fare un racconto sul calcio, qualcosa che riscaldi chi non è appassionato. Le storie di futbol narrate da Soriano sono magia pura, musica per le orecchie, ma già mia madre, che di calcio se ne frega, le legge con un certo distacco, percepisce il pathos ma non lo condivide, non riesce a rintracciarlo dentro di sé. Invece *Million Dollar Baby* è un film dirompente, un diretto al mento che colpisce qualunque spettatore, me compreso.

La noble art sembra essere in contatto diretto col nocciolo dell'esperienza umana, con il corpo e la rabbia, la fatica e il successo, la sconfitta e la rivalità, il sesso e la morte. Un pugile steso sul ring col naso che butta sangue e un altro a braccia alzate, gli occhi pesti e la faccia gonfia, sono un'immagine ben più diretta e potente che un tabellone elettronico con su scritto 3-0.

Così *Fat City*, per il lettore che non ama ganci e riprese, non parla di boxe più di quanto non parli della raccolta di pomodori in California. Non a caso il titolo fa riferimento a una città, che è il Paese dei Balocchi, ma è anche Stockton, vera e propria protagonista del romanzo, fatta di alberghi squallidi, disoccupazione, ettari su ettari di campi coltivati. *Fat City* (come *Città Amara*, il grande film di John Houston tratto dal libro di Gardner) è una storia di loser, sempre sul punto di arrendersi, ma mai fino in fondo, quasi che l'ambizione fosse una fame chimica, impossibile da saziare, sempre più grande del loro stomaco. Non c'è ascesa e caduta: i protagonisti di questa storia non sono mai stati davvero grandi, al massimo sul punto di; per loro la boxe è sempre rimasta una promessa, troppo ingombrante per incastrarla nella vita, tra mogli, figli, affitti, alcol, lavori di fatica per sbarcare il lunario. E' molto difficile scrivere di aspirazioni tradite, sfighe, piccoli sotterfugi, squallore, desideri e voglie di piccolo cabotaggio, ma comunque eccessive per chi non riesce a sbrogliare il groviglio dell'esistenza. Gardner ci riesce, senza mai un eccesso, niente retorica, abilità degna di Steinbeck. Una scrittura illuminata per raccontare il lato oscuro delle strade, delle case, del ring e dell'anima. Descrizioni nitide come fotografie, spietate come un KO, leggere come Ali quando balla intorno all'avversario, un attimo prima di stenderlo. Mai una luce, mai un momento di respiro, il domani che incalza, mentre ogni dettaglio, anche l'immondizia e la nebbia, si trasforma in destino.

Un grande romanzo sulla precarietà del vivere e della speranza, con il caporalato come agenzia interinale,

una stanza d'albergo come singola a cinquecento euro, e il ring come occupazione ideale, non meno spietata di tutto il resto, che anche quando l'assaggi, non ha mai il sapore che ti aspettavi.
<http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/Giap/nandropau...>

Victoria says

Fat City is a book so beautifully written that it seems at times far from its subject matter. One could see it as somehow cruelly inappropriate to use intricately crafted sentences writing about characters who by their very nature could never appreciate them.

The characters are involved with amateur boxing, everyone hoping to earn a little money from either getting beaten up, beating someone else up, or training the fighters and arranging the bouts. When they're not fighting, the boxers get farm work by the day, miserably difficult and ill-paid, where they're subjected to insultingly dismissive treatment by the hiring team in their smelly trucks and by their employers.

So when reading about a sometime-boxer picking onions in a field, half kneeling and half lying between the rows, we find:

"Occasionally there was a gust of wind and he was engulfed by sudden rustlings and flickering shadows as a high spiral of onion skins fluttered about him like a swarm of butterflies. Skins left behind among the discarded tops swirled up with delicate clatters and the high, wheeling column moved away across the field, eventually slowing, widening, dissipating, the skins hovering weightlessly before settling back to the plowed earth. Overhead great flocks of rising and fall blackbirds streamed past in a melodious din."

it's clear the workers aren't noticing the phenomenon so lovingly described, and how, and why, did we get taken away from the hard-working men of the story to this extravagantly lovely descriptive aside. And the effect is perhaps even more anomalous when such passages occur during the blood, sweat, violence, and anxiety of the boxing ring. It's a kind of authorial intrusion more distracting than the usual unidentified omniscient narrator telling the story.

To its credit, *Fat City* ends on a note as unresolved as the lives of the young men of Stockton. And the story does hold our interest, is occasionally amusing. But questions of appropriate language and style do keep rising.

Tim says

FAT CITY by Leonard Gardner is the story of Tully, a washed up fighter who lost his career as a result of sinking into the bottle after his wife left him.

Tully meets up with a young man named Ernie training in a gym and invites him to go a few rounds of sparring, after which Tully gives him words of encouragement and tells him to get in touch with his old handler Ruben.

Oma is a drunk Tully finds sitting at a bar, and they strike up a relationship that evolves into a situation where they live together in a dysfunctional relationship with alcohol being the glue that keeps them together, that is until Tully decides to clean up and resume his boxing career.

Superb story in this book written by author Gardener, and the 1972 movie starring Stacy Keach and Jeff Bridges directed by John Huston is also excellent and does as well as a film can be expected to at condensing the story from the book while still staying true to the majority of what takes place in it.

5 stars.

Matthew says

I found this fascinating. It's all about the sustained miseries and brief thrills of boxers. It was published in '69, I think it is set in the late fifties.

The details of the boxing life are gloomy, but they are not without grace and fine emotion. The main boxing trainer in this book, Ruben, has been training quitters for years, but his optimistic dialogue with his boxers breaks your heart (and makes you laugh).

This book does not encourage you to root for anybody. It's not about championships. It's about how the boxers survived, or didn't. One illuminating portion details the journey of a boxing veteran traveling up from Mexico City to California by bus.

Also the agony of fruit picking, tomato thinning, onion topping, nut shaking for wages (nuts seem like the best gig).

And for some reason I'm always interested in what bars were like back in the day.

It's in the same family as Fante's "Ask The Dust" and Bukowski's "Factotum", because it is set in California in the mid-twentieth century, and because it's a perceptive and funny book about melancholy. But it has much more emotional variety and perspective than those two books.

I guess most people would find these types of books to be immensely depressing, but I find them strangely comforting.

There's a part in this where a character wakes up in a stove used to burn trash. He's arguing with the guy who wants him to get out because he doesn't like his tone. "What's the matter with you? You don't even want to move when someone's going to light a fire under you?" I have a weakness for this stuff. It makes me laugh. I love that type of story.

J.M. Hushour says

If fists are your thing, and if their connecting points with both bone and soul is a concomitant obsession, then go buy some new pants and prepare to enter "Fat City".

No, this isn't about the running battle against morbid obesity. Instead it's the terse, supple and yet streamlined

story of two boxers, one a washout mixed up in alcoholism, whoring, and fruitpicking, and an up-and-comer who likes sex, hitting people, and sex. Despite sounding like a fun, if desperate, hoot, this novel is also about the crushing, inexorable bleakness of life. Noses are broken, but so are spirits. Sort of the Tony Danza of boxing novels: personable, but harboring a heart of darkness.
