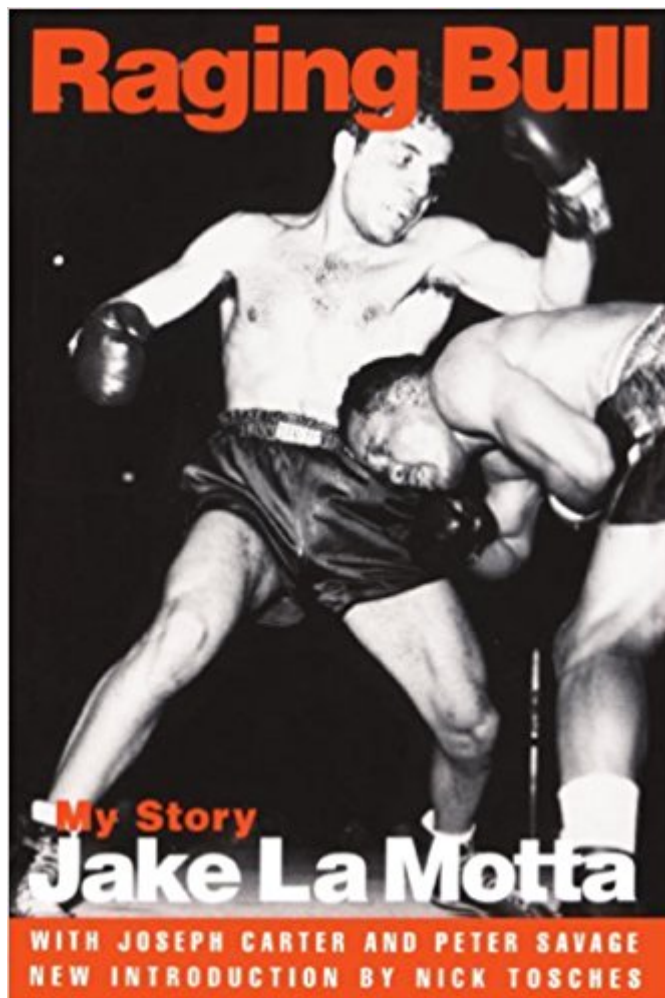




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# Raging Bull: My Story



## Synopsis

Meet Jake La Motta: thief, rapist, killer. Raised in the Bronx slums, he fought on the streets, got sent to reform school, and served time in prison. Trusting no one, slugging everyone, he beat his wife, his best friends, even the mobsters who kept the title just out of reach. But the same forces that made him a criminal—fear, rage, jealousy, self-hate, guilt—combined with his drive and intelligence to make him a winner in the ring. At age twenty-seven, after eight years of fighting, he became Middleweight Champion of the World, a hero to thousands. Then, at the peak of success, he fell apart and began a swift, harrowing descent into nightmare. *Raging Bull*, the Bronx Bull's brutally candid memoir, tells it all—fights, jails, sex, money—surpassing, in hard-hitting prose, even the movie that immortalized it.

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## Customer Reviews

In prose as straightforward and at times as brutal as his style in the ring, former middleweight champion Jake LaMotta wove together an unforgettable autobiography: first published in 1970, *Raging Bull* was violent, candid, primitive, smart, and altogether powerful. It still is. His story, adapted for the screen in 1980 by Martin Scorsese in the Oscar-winning film starring Robert De Niro, is filled with anger—at his father for beating him, at the neighborhood he grew up in, at the petty criminal he became, at the Mob that tried to keep him from the title because he wouldn't take a dive—and real candor about the dive he did take (out in the real world when his boxing career was over). While most of LaMotta's anger was self-directed, he harnessed enough of it to power him to

83 victories in 106 fights, and a two-year hold on a championship belt. His recounting of his ring wars with Sugar Ray Robinson and Marcel Cerdan remain as convincingly primal on the page as they were in the arena.

Meet Jake La Motta: thief, rapist, killer. Raised in the Bronx slums, he fought on the streets, got sent to reform school, and served time in prison. Trusting no one, slugging everyone, he beat his wife, his best friends, even the mobsters who kept the title just out of reach. But the same forces that made him criminal - fear, rage, jealousy, self-hate, guilt - combined with his drive and intelligence to make him a winner in the ring. At age 27, after eight years of fighting, he became Middleweight Champion of the World, a hero to thousands. Then, at the peak of success, he fell apart, and began a swift, harrowing descent into nightmare. *Raging Bull*, the Bronx Bull's brutally candid memoir, tells it all - fights, jails, sex, money - surpassing, in hard-hitting prose, even the movie that immortalized it.

There is what seems to be a running joke in *Raging Bull II*, the sequel to this book, where whenever Jake wants to hit on a woman he gives her a copy of "*Raging Bull*". In typical "Hit 'em first, hit 'em hard" Jake LaMotta style, he usually inscribes it with something like, "To Beautiful, Gorgeous, Sexy Sally, Good Luck, The Champ." Later on, when Jake asks the woman what she thought of the book, the woman invariably replies, "I didn't believe a word of it." I knew a man from New York boxing circles, who knew Jake and worked with him back in the late 50's and early 60's. He used to say that "*Raging Bull*" was the "Sound of Music" version of Jake's life. Vikki LaMotta complained that the book "*Raging Bull*" was so highly embellished that she met "Pete," who in the book is portrayed as Jake's best friend and constant companion, only once during her entire 11-year marriage to Jake. So what are we supposed to believe about "*Raging Bull*?" Honestly, I don't know. But I can tell you, having read my share, that this book and its sequel are two of the best written and most entertaining boxing memoirs ever written. A few observations: 1. The character in them called "Jake," an ex-hoodlum, tough guy middleweight champ, is one of the most realistic and believable characters in the whole noir genre, more realistic and believable than the characters played by James Cagney or Humphrey Bogart or anything in a James M. Cain or Raymond Chandler novel. 2. As pure storytelling, I'd say it's first rate. I really do admire the way the authors made sure that this was the case, truth or no truth. In literature as in boxing, you've got to entertain. The book deftly handles a combination of classic noir elements (tough guys, tough dames, lots of booze), psychology (the fears that haunt Jake from childhood and frequently explode in violence) and lurid pulp novel

elements (he supposedly rapes an innocent neighborhood girl, turning her into an alcoholic prostitute). By the time the book ends there is no commandment left unbroken and no deadly sin left unexplored.<sup>3</sup> In the book Jake himself comes off as much more intelligent and charming than the version of him that appears in the movie. And one thing the movie Jake is missing, which is very apparent in this book, is that the real Jake has a very good sense of humor. If you happen to see any interviews with Jake on Youtube, you'll see this is the case.<sup>4</sup> The book has plot devices, which all good stories have, but which most memoirs generally lack. For all I know, there is no truth to the story of the bookie murdered by Jake, and the prison chaplain, which culminates on the night Jake wins the middleweight title. But the story features a plot twist worthy of Charles Dickens.<sup>5</sup> Boxing fans will enjoy the fact that Jake gives blow by blow details about his fights and their background, something surprisingly lacking in a lot of boxing books. Again, among the best, most entertaining boxing books ever written.

It would be an understatement to say that I'm not really into sports. I can more or less follow a baseball game, and I get excited enough about football one day a year that I'm actually paying attention to what's happening on the field between Super Bowl commercials. More often than not you'll find me with my nose in a book. I'd never heard of "Raging Bull," or Jake LaMotta for that matter, before my husband and I decided to work our way through the American Film Institute's list of the 100 greatest American films. Since I have a rule about never watching a movie based on a book unless I've read the book first, I found myself picking up LaMotta's autobiography in order to prepare myself for the 1980 Martin Scorsese film adaptation. Having heard that the book focused at least as much on LaMotta's personal struggles as on his athletic career, I thought I might find it a decent read. I wasn't expecting to be blown away, to find myself swept up in this man's life story and reluctant to put the book down. Even with the scholarly Joseph Carter as coauthor, I certainly wasn't expecting a masterful work of raw, beautiful prose, and yet that's exactly what I got. LaMotta dropped out of high school and freely admits he never had much use for education, so I imagine the pitch-perfect narrative flow owes much to Carter's input - but the narrative voice rings true as LaMotta all the way. Had I not known this was an autobiography and been asked to guess at the identity of the author, I would have imagined an experienced novelist who'd done his research, not a pugnacious pugilist simply writing what he knew. Yes, it reads like a first-rate novel: the writing's that good, and Jake LaMotta's life story is that compelling. LaMotta opens his story, not in the ring or even in the gym, but in the streets of the Bronx slums; the first opponent to feel his wrath in these pages isn't a champion boxer like Sugar Ray Robinson or Marcel Cerdan, but an amiable

neighborhood bookie, Harry Gordon. It's not a fair fight, either; sixteen-year-old LaMotta sneaks up behind his victim, bashes his head in with a pipe, grabs his wallet, and leaves him to die in a vacant lot. It happens so casually, right there in the opening chapter, that we feel viscerally LaMotta's shock at the sudden and violent ease with which yesterday's small-time punk delinquent wakes up today a killer. When the cops haul him down to the station a couple of days later, LaMotta is so relieved to find himself arrested for an earlier bungled burglary, not Gordon's murder, that even the prospect of a few months away in reform school doesn't seem so terrible - that is, until he gets there. When he's caught trying to escape, the prison chaplain takes a special interest in him and arranges for him to work in the gym there, where he can hone his talents as a fighter. His skill at throwing a punch has helped him survive in the mean streets, but now he begins to dream of a career as a professional boxer. Instead of resuming his life of crime after his release, he devotes himself to hours of rigorous training. It isn't long before his career takes off, but his unwillingness to do business with the mob keeps him out of the running for the championship title both he and the boxing world at large know he deserves. In the meantime, although he's bringing in prize purses equivalent to nearly a million dollars a year in today's money, the legacy of his violent childhood proves harder to cast off than the poverty of the Bronx slums. Incapable of trust and accustomed to solving problems with his fists, he finds himself trapped in a cycle of rage, self-hatred, and regret. You don't have to know a thing about boxing to understand and enjoy "Raging Bull." My knowledge when I picked up this book was something like, "Weight classes (with funny names). Ring (even though it's square). Corner (which is where we get the idiom from). Ten-count. Knockout. Also, technical knockout, whatever the heck that is." It's not until about a third of the way into the book that there's any boxing action at all, and by the time I'd read that far, I was hanging on LaMotta's every word. To my surprise, I found the boxing scenes quite exciting, and I learned quite a bit about the sport - I was even inspired to read some more about it online (I know what a TKO is now) and look up some of LaMotta's fights on YouTube. Far more than a great boxing story, however, "Raging Bull" is a great human story, the rise and fall and redemption of a wounded champion. I can't remember the last time I read an autobiography so pragmatically and piercingly honest: this is, after all, a man who pulls no punches. LaMotta doesn't hold back from bragging when he's earned the right - he'll tell you straight-out there was a time when he was about as good a fighter as any man living - but never does he gloss over his faults or demand the reader's pity. He batters his wife and assaults his lifelong best friend in an unjustified jealous rage. His genial misogyny (women are broads, dames, dolls, fine to have around but never quite \*people\* entitled to the same basic respect he would offer any man) takes a sinister turn when he rapes an acquaintance ("I don't know how much responsibility I have to take for her

[descent into promiscuity and drunkenness], but I'll take it," he offers in a rather lame jab at repentance, "though I still swear I didn't know she was a virgin"). His regrets concerning his criminal past, including the attack on Harry Gordon, seem, at least on the surface, to spring more from some superstitious fear of karmic retribution than from actual guilt and remorse. To call this man a jerk would be putting it mildly. "Bastard" is more like it, and a certain seven-letter compound word that starts with an "a" would be more appropriate still if I didn't have rules about the use of profanity in reviews. LaMotta is by no means a sympathetic figure, but his unstinting honesty makes him an empathetic one. You may be repulsed by his actions, but on some level you can't help rooting for him. This is the voice of a man who has clearly worked hard to put the past behind him, but he hasn't turned into a saint and doesn't pretend to be, which actually lends him more relatability, and even genuine moral authority, than if he claimed to have shed his old skin and become a new creature entirely. In "Raging Bull," the former middleweight champion has proved his greatness in an altogether different field of endeavor. This is a book of great courage, a stunning, harsh, beautiful, compelling look into the mind and heart of a man who has known passion and pain, valleys and peaks, pride and regret, and lived to tell the truth about all of them.

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