

# Fighters and Fathers: Managing Masculinity in Contemporary Boxing Cinema

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In Antoine Fuqua's film *Southpaw* (2015), just as Jake Gyllenhaal's character Billy Hope attempts suicide by crashing his luxury sedan into a tree in the front yard, his ten-year-old daughter, Leila, sends him a text message asking: "Daddy. Where are you?" (00:46:04). Her answer comes seconds later when, upon hearing a crash, she finds her father in a heap concussed and bleeding badly on the white marble floor of their home's entryway. Upon waking, Billy's first and only concern is Leila. Hospital workers, in an effort to calm him, tell Billy that Leila is safe "with child services" (00:48:08-00:48:10). This news does not comfort Billy. Instead, upon learning that Leila is in the state's custody, the former light heavyweight champion of the world, with face bloodied and muscles rippling, makes his most concerted effort to get up and leave—presumably, to find his daughter. Before he can rise, however, a doctor administers a large dose of sedative and the heretofore unrestrainable Billy fades into unconsciousness as the scene ends.

Leila's simple question—"Daddy. Where are you?"—is central not only to *Southpaw* but is also relevant for most major boxing films of the 21st century.<sup>1</sup> This includes Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), David O. Russell's *The Fighter* (2010), Ryan Coogler's *Creed* (2015), Jonathan Jakubowicz's *Hands of Stone* (2016), and Stephen Caple, Jr.'s *Creed II* (2018). These films establish fighter/trainer relationships as alternatives to otherwise biological or "traditional" father/son relationships. Fatherless fighters become vessels for the prototypical teachings of ring-hardened and stereotypically masculine identities of the mid-to late-twentieth century as represented by the boxing trainer character archetype.

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<sup>1</sup> Leila's question is relevant for the United States as a whole, too, as a combined 27% of the nation's children live in households without their fathers and where the percentage of children living in fatherless households is markedly higher in poorer urban and rural communities—the communities that generally produce the fighting class. The report also indicates that 23% of American children live with their mother alone and that 4% of the nation's children live with neither of their parents (see [www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html)).

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Generally, the boxing trainer gets little consideration in scholarship, but this paper centers him and his teaching of masculinity, and it identifies his peculiar cultural significance on screen and for the real world.<sup>2</sup>

The boxing film genre—nearly a century old and comprised of more than 150 films—ranks alongside the Western and the detective film genres as among the most identifiable in American cinema (Grindon, *Knockout* 33). The genre's motifs, now familiar, consistently feature muscular fighters with something to prove; poverty in extremis; dingy gymnasiums; smoky arenas; crooked promoters; gangsters who predetermine the outcomes of fights, manipulate the fighters, and punish those who do not comply; and the ever-present toughness of men who take and deliver beatings in order to fulfill a cycle of success, failure, and redemption as audiences of the times deem appropriate. According to Leger Grindon, boxing films are motivated by four "conflicts:" body versus soul, opportunity versus difference, market values versus family values, and anger versus justice ("Body and Soul" 54). Audiences watching boxing films over the past century have experienced some variation of these conflicts.

Audience is key when it comes to film genres and individual films of which they are comprised because they "demand creativity and variation" and thus motivate filmmakers to explore their options while staying true to the genre's form (Jenkins 88). Further, "consumption of genre works also tells us a lot about the unique pleasures these texts afford" (Jenkins 89). In the case of boxing films, audiences of the past century have derived pleasure from watching tough fighters defeat not only their opponents, but the "odds" stacked against them as well. Regardless of the conflict motivating any individual example, the makers of boxing films alert audiences to the short and long-term stakes at play in every round of every fight. And audiences understand that every move a fighter makes in or out of the ring is loaded with potentially negative consequences just as they understand boxing is the only way out of whatever interminable situation the fighter inhabits at the moment—that a correlation exists between every punch a fighter endures and some unseen difficulty down the line. In many instances, filmmakers rely on the women in the fighter's lives to clue audiences in to the damage being done. The women who live with, and care for the men, who fight for a living see them struggling to walk or recall the names of their own children. Often, they plead with the men to not fight anymore; they ask them to look at themselves in the mirror and to consider a future in which they are only physically present (with their minds turned to mush) if they are present at all; very seldom do the men listen. Or, if they do listen and actually promise to quit, it is generally on the pretext that they will do so after one last cumulative fight.

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<sup>2</sup> *Creed II* is also interesting for the way it centers Adonis's struggles as a father and for its portrayal of the toxic father/son relationship between the supporting characters of Ivan Drago and his own biological son, Viktor.

In this quest for the last good fight, contemporary filmmakers stack the odds against their protagonists. They tempt and tease their fighters and ensnare them when they falter. Edward Buscombe suggests this is because boxing films “are always about so much more,” than just boxing. That “especially, they are about social commentary more or less bound up with issues of masculinity” (qtd. in Woodward 122). The majority of contemporary boxing films privilege Grindon’s “anger versus justice” conflict and are extensions of the “masculinity crisis-postmodern cluster, 1993-2005)” which he has identified (*Knockout* 33). *Southpaw* is one example, and the most important text to this essay, but the others also merit attention. While the threat of losing a fight and what it might mean for the characters in these films is present, the real conflict is that in losing fights a boxer might just lose everything. Contemporary boxing films make it clear that a fighter’s family is ultimately what is at stake. *Southpaw* does this most explicitly. Frequently faced with injustice, Billy Hope rages against not only the man who he believes is responsible for his wife’s death, but also doctors, a social worker, and a judge—all who are stand-ins for the system that failed to protect him as a parentless youth. And in that film, as is the case in other contemporary boxing films, just when it looks like things cannot get worse for the fighters on screen, they do. And just when it looks like all the doors have closed on the fighters, filmmakers open one more that just so happens to lead to an old and unimpressive gym run by an always-at-the-gym crotchety one-time legend of the boxing game—the trainer. Very little attention has been paid to the men who operate these gyms in these films despite how important they are to the genre.

### “Up the Stairs”: Archetypes in Boxing Films

For Leger Grindon, “the boxer stands alongside the cowboy, the gangster, and the detective as a figure that has shaped America’s idea of manhood” (*Knockout* 33). Certainly, with more than 150 boxing films produced, a strong case can be made, but boxers do not materialize out of thin air—nor do their onscreen counterparts. Any appreciation of the boxer as one of a select few archetypal masculinities recognizes the work of the boxing trainer to create that individual as well. Contemporary boxing films consistently present the trainer as an older former fighter who will only train those willing and able to absolutely follow their very strict rules.

The archetype for this no-nonsense trainer character is Mickey Goldmill from the *Rocky* franchise. The inspiration for that character was a real-life trainer named Cus D’Amato who, by all accounts was a tough trainer interested in training champions regardless of their ethnic or racial background so long as they could adhere to his rules and “live straight.” In addition to the hundreds of amateur fighters D’Amato trained, he also discovered Rocky Graziano and trained two

world champions—Floyd Patterson and Jose Torres—at the Gramercy Gym. He would later train, and become the legal guardian for, one of the best-known fighters of all time, Mike Tyson.

The journalist Pete Hamill was friends with Torres and would frequent the gym as an observer; he got to know D’Amato well and in 1985 he eulogized the man in a piece titled “Up the Stairs with Cus D’Amato.” He begins with a description of D’Amato’s gym and his personality:

In those days, you had to pass a small candy stand to get to the door of the Gramercy Gym on East 14<sup>th</sup> Street. The door was heavy, with painted zinc nailed across its face and a misspelled sign saying “Gramacy Gym,” and when you opened the door, you saw a long badly lit stairway climbing into darkness. There was another door on the landing, and a lot of tough New York kids would reach that landing and find themselves unable to open the second door. They’d go back down the stairs, try to look cool as they bought a soda at the candy stand, then hurry home. Many others opened the second door. And when they did, they entered the tough, hard, disciplined school of a man named Cus D’Amato. (Hamill 312)

The inside of that gym was dingy and crowded with assorted worn-out punching bags. Its walls were covered in posters advertising upcoming fights or remembering those that had already transpired. Ira Berkow, writing for the *New York Times*, remembered that “Inside, the large room is like a small barn, containing two boxing rings with drooping ropes [...] The smell of sweat in the gym seems embedded in the woodwork” (Berkow). For a time, D’Amato, a “tough, intelligent man who was almost Victorian in his beliefs in work and self-denial and fierce concentration,” lived alone in the gym’s office (Hamill 313).

A number of young amateur fighters who would later become actors (e.g. Tony Danza and Cliff Gorman) trained at D’Amato’s gym. Among this group is Burt Young—who would go on to play Paulie in the *Rocky* films. It is no coincidence then, that the gyms in the *Rocky* films all recall D’Amato’s Gramercy and that each of the gyms in these other contemporary boxing films look the same as well. No matter the technology available. No matter the upgrades. These gyms are all dingy. They are all sparsely furnished with nothing on the walls but old posters. All the equipment looks worn out and as if it literally could be the same equipment from the Gramercy Gym. In *Rocky*, when Rocky Balboa trained in Mickey Goldmill’s gym it looked like this. Forty years later, the gyms in contemporary boxing films still look the same. These gyms are presented this way in order to recall D’Amato’s “tough, hard, disciplined” masculine space and to suggest that that ethos persists—that it can be passed from generation to generation.

Consider the gyms in three major boxing films of the twenty-first century: The Hit Pit Gym from *Million Dollar Baby*; Front Street Gym from *Creed*, and Wills Gym from *Southpaw*. These three gyms, located in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New York look equally dilapidated from the outside and virtually identical on the inside. Each is run by a trainer who without question could be described as “tough,” hard,” and sincere about discipline and self-denial. Another trainer at the Hit Pit, Morgan Freeman’s character Eddie “Scrap Iron” Dupris lives in Spartan conditions in the gym and both he and Frankie Dunn dress as if they have not updated their wardrobes since the 1950s. This is especially true of Scrap, who wears bowling shirts and a homburg throughout the film. In *Creed*, Rocky—also attired as if he had not bought new clothes since the 1970s—takes Adonis to the Front Street Gym to train. The lights inside are either always off or just plain do not work. The walls of this gym are also plastered with old posters.

Lastly, Wills Gym in *Southpaw* has much in common with the other two just mentioned (dark, posters, crowded, old equipment) but, even more, this gym is situated atop a long and steep flight of stairs. On his first visit to Wills Gym in *Southpaw*, Billy hesitates before finally ascending the stairs to find a dark and crowded room full of boxers of all ages; he enters nervously. About his own stairs, D’Amato said “Any kid coming here for the first time who thinks he wants to be a fighter, and who makes the climb up those dark stairs has it 50 percent licked, because he’s licking fear” (Berkow). At this point in the film, this is just as true for Billy in *Southpaw*.

The trainers in contemporary boxing films are very conservative and almost militaristic in their approach. A common rule throughout: no girls in the gym. Also, no sex before a fight or, as Mickey Goldmill put it in *Rocky*, “women weaken legs” (01:20:22-24). Or, like in *Hands of Stone*, when Roberto Duran’s wife finds him in her hotel room before his rematch with Sugar Ray Leonard and she asks him, “Why are you here? If Ray [Arcel] finds out you’re dead” (00:45:16-20). Even more strict is Tick Wills (Forest Whitaker) from *Southpaw* not allowing swearing in his gym; a bad word earned fighters fifty pushups. When Billy asks for his help, Tick demurs saying, “Thing is, you couldn’t handle the rules here.” Billy responds, “I grew up in the system, I can handle the rules.” Then, within sixty seconds of screen time, Billy utters “fuck” three times in response to something Tick says. Clearly, Billy has work to do (00:57:36-00:58:20)..

Contemporary boxing films present a combination of strict rule following and exhausting and repetitive physical training as the path to redemption. This is best represented in the boxing film’s hallmark—the training montage. First popularized in the original *Rocky* during the “Gonna Fly Now” sequence, the training montage is a key component of contemporary boxing films. As inspiring music plays, fighters are shown doing roadwork (running), bag work, jumping rope, and all manner of calisthenics as weeks of intense training are condensed into a few

exciting moments—frequently these scenes are cut with images of trainers pushing fighters to exhaustion, shouting at them to go harder, or bouncing medicine balls off their abdomens as they complete countless sets of sit-ups. The work accomplished during these montages is the most important for a boxer, but they occupy very little screen time; however, they are often some of the most memorable sequences of these films.<sup>3</sup>

*Southpaw* features a montage like this, but the film also spends considerable time in a quieter training space: the darkened gym where Tick Wills slowly and methodically teaches Billy how to defend himself. There is no question Billy is a strong and indefatigable fighter and we understand that he has been fighting and winning fights his entire life. It is equally clear that Tick is the first adult male to teach Billy to defend himself and to use his head while in the ring—essentially, he teaches him to box rather than to fight. At one point after agreeing to train Billy, Tick tells him “I’m going to introduce you to something you never knew before. It’s called defense.” When Billy responds, “I have defense,” Tick tells him “stopping punches with your face is not defense” (01:15:23-01:15:36). Later, after informing him of a young trainee’s death, Tick asks Billy if he thinks he can win, to which Billy replies, “Not without you” (01:32:40). Thus begins the lead up to Billy’s big fight, his success in the ring, and his regaining custody of Leila. Billy’s willingness to trust Tick and learn from him demonstrates for viewers that he has matured and earned his shot at redemption; that he is ready to reclaim his masculine identities of Fighter and Father.

### The “Father/Son” Relationship in Contemporary Boxing Films

Boxing is inexpensive when compared to other sports or activities, and the majority of its participants come from impoverished backgrounds. Where boxing once countered “the mere womanishness of modern, over-civilized society” and “heralded the triumphant return of the Heroic Artisan as mythic hero,” it is now considered a poverty sport (Kimmel 102).<sup>4</sup> The economically disadvantaged communities from which thousands of real boxers come are the same as those that fictional characters like Rocky Balboa of the *Rocky* franchise (the rough and tumble streets of south Philadelphia), Maggie Fitzgerald from *Million Dollar Baby* (“the hills outside the scratchy-ass Ozark town of Theodosia”), Micky Ward from *The Fighter* (Boston’s gritty Dorchester neighborhood), Adonis Johnson from the

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<sup>3</sup> The advent of internet sites like YouTube allow individuals to access these montage sequences with relative ease. The user comments below are packed with everyday users proclaiming that they rely on the sequences to motivate themselves for their own life tasks and challenges (for *Southpaw*, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-3gcVjAW-U>).

<sup>4</sup> For a nuanced discussion of boxing and poverty see Nicholas Dixon.

*Creed* films (a group home for parentless boys), Roberto Duran from *Hands of Stone* (the slums of Panama City), and Billy Hope of *Southpaw* (a “child of the system”) come from, too.

The main characters of these films have all been forced into the adult world with insufficient parental preparation. In real life, the literature suggests that such premature exposure to the difficulties of the world frequently begets shame, which leads to anger and potentially violent behavior. In these films, the majority of the boxers first started fighting in response to acts of shaming or bullying. Were these young fighters in more stable family/social situations, they might have had access to interventions intended to curb the violent response (Pope and Englar-Carlson). These fighters inhabit mostly unstable home situations where the “paternal intervention,” in which adult men model appropriate behavior, is unavailable to these young characters. Ultimately, across these films, their trainers fill this paternal role. Only, rather than focusing on “violence-free” time, empathy counseling, or discussions on violence in the media, these trainers teach fighters to contain their anger and to use it in appropriate situations (e.g. the gym, the ring, in defense of something or someone important). R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt contend that “it is mens’ and boys’ practical relationships to collective images or models of masculinity, rather than simple reflections of them, that is central to understanding gendered consequences in violence, health, and education” (841). *Southpaw* and the other contemporary boxing films discussed in this paper put young people (mostly boys) into close contact with trainers to demonstrate that, in instances where fathers are missing, these relationships can achieve the same work as in relationships where the biological parent is present.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as boxing appears to become increasingly irrelevant in the United States, it is worthwhile considering why boxing films still resonate with contemporary audiences. Leger Grindon offers an answer, suggesting that:

Though few members of the audience ever step into the ring, the dramatic conflicts that characterize the boxing film depict vital problems experienced throughout the culture. The genre thereby addresses issues of fundamental concern and maintains an audience. Through its engagement with these films the audience grapples, often subconsciously, with important social issues. (*Knockout* 11)

Kasia Boddy echoes this, saying that “the symbolism of boxing does not allow for ambiguity” (7). Kath Woodward suggests that “traditional masculinities could be on the ropes elsewhere, but men’s boxing would surely be a place where they are fighting back and hegemonic masculinity might be holding on” (10). Writing on the “Manly Art” of boxing, Elliot Gorn identifies what is meant by “traditionally masculine” behaviors relating to prizefighters: “composure under pressure,

unflinching fortitude, and heroic stoicism, all in the name of masculine prowess” (251). Historically, the absent father is a common motif in boxing cinema; however, a man’s inability to parent, and a child’s inability to access a proper male role model, are the central masculinity crises present in *Southpaw* and the other twenty-first century boxing films using the “anger versus justice” conflict analyzed in this paper. These are the important social issues, tethered to real-life analogs, waiting to be redressed in these films through the boxing trainer character.

Filmmakers imbuing trainers with these character traits show audiences how recognizably “traditional” masculine behaviors are passed on to others. They achieve this through the trainer’s unyielding insistence on selfless and unambiguous adherence to rigid and sometimes arbitrary rules and regimes including respect for the trainer and his code of conduct, self-control in and out of the gym, unquestioning loyalty to the trainer and his process, and dedication to grueling, limit-testing, physical training sessions. These films, somewhat troublingly, suggest proper fathering is the mechanism by which impoverished individuals might transcend their current disfranchised position in society. The main characters in these films, to varying degrees, need to discover and enact fathering and accept, as the veteran trainer Tick Wills in *Southpaw* put it, that they’re “here to train them so they can grow up to be men” even if it is hard or confusing, or both (00:57:55-00:58:00). Generally, the trainer and fighter relationship accomplishes this learning. On the surface these films are about boxing and boxers, but underneath they argue that hard work and strict-rule following can ameliorate generational difficulties.

*Southpaw* is a film about an orphan, Billy Hope, who defies the odds to become both a family man and the light heavyweight champion of the world only to see it all crumble away as a result of his own unyielding machismo. We first see Billy in the middle of a particularly tough fight where it is made clear that he has never been a defensive fighter, instead relying on his brute strength and endurance to outpunch his opponents. After this fight, in which he was badly hurt but ultimately won, Billy’s wife Maureen implores him to leave the profession and return home to co-parent their young daughter, Leila. Troubled by the physical beatings he endures, Maureen’s true concern is Billy’s quality of life moving forward. By this time in the film it is clear Billy will have mental and physical difficulties his entire life as a result of his career. Billy, acutely aware of the physical toll boxing has taken on his body appears receptive. However, after the challenger Miguel Escobar insults Maureen at a charity event by saying “How bout I take your belt, then I take your bitch” (00:26:21-00:26:25). Billy, against Maureen’s wishes, engages the man in a fistfight that ends with a member of Miguel’s entourage misfiring a pistol and killing Maureen.

The first two-thirds of the film depict Billy’s fall. He loses his boxing license after headbutting the referee during an exhibition bout. He loses his cars, his multi-



million-dollar contracts, and his mansion. Despairing, he pulls a gun on his rival's wife and intends to kill her if not for her children being there. And, most painfully, he loses custody of Leila who is remanded to the state's custody—Billy's worst fear for his daughter and the ultimate symbol of his failure as a parent. At a hearing a still-bloodied Billy pleads with the judge, crying out that "I want my daughter back! I'm her father!" To which the judge, echoing Frankie Dunn in *Million Dollar Baby*, answers "That's not enough" (00:49:57-00:50:02).<sup>5</sup> Though it is clear Billy loves Leila very much—he frequently declares his love for her and has her name and birthday tattooed on his chest—the fact is that Billy is not a good father. Even when Maureen was alive he was primarily interested in remaining the light heavyweight champion of the world while she raised their daughter. Once Maureen dies, Billy is forced into single parenthood. An orphan himself whose first boxing manager was a crook, Billy has no one to emulate or look to as an example of appropriate fathering. As such, he quickly fails Leila, focusing instead on revenge and suicide while ingesting pills and copious volumes of alcohol. Importantly, Billy sports other tattoos including two large script tattoos on his forearms. On his right arm: Fighter. On his left: Father. By the midway point of the film, however, minus his professional license and his daughter, it is clear Billy is neither.

In *Southpaw* Billy Hope is motivated by Grindon's "anger versus justice" conflict. In this conflict, the "anger, frustrated in the face of injustice, generates violence, which becomes distilled, redirected, and displayed in the spectacle of boxing. The anger experienced by the boxer is not simply a response to his malaise but also expresses his rage at being unable to expose its cause, or if revealed, to vanquish it" ("Body and Soul" 56-7). Here, the sources of Billy's substantial malaise are obvious. His wife has been killed, he has medicated with drugs and alcohol, lost his boxing license and his fortune, and has been deemed unfit to raise his daughter by the State. Billy rages at individual representatives of these groups. He headbutts a referee during an exhibition bout. He thrashes about a courtroom like a petulant child during a family court hearing. He attempts to murder the wife of the man he holds responsible for his wife's death. But, violence—his go-to coping mechanism—fails him in all these instances. In fact, this randomly applied violence complicates Billy's life. Only when he directs that angry energy into a sanctioned boxing match with Miguel Escobar can he resolve his anger versus justice conflict.

As the film progresses, Billy's big fight becomes twofold. First, he fights to regain custody of Leila. Second, there is the literal fight against Miguel Escobar. The former being tied to the result of the latter. Down and out, Billy ultimately falls in line and works to fulfill the societal requirements necessary to resume custody of his daughter (anger management classes, sobriety, proof of employment). All

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<sup>5</sup> In *Million Dollar Baby* Frankie says this to Maggie at 00:03:36-00:03:41.

this is in an aim to also regain his boxing license. While cleaning the toilets at the gym might satisfy a court as an example of “gainful employment,” Billy knows it is not enough to support Leila. Billy literally has no other options but to fight again where winning in the ring will require humbling himself, self-denial, and obedience in much the way winning back Leila will.

Despite the film’s title, Billy Hope is not a southpaw (lefthanded) fighter. He fights from an orthodox stance during his entire bout with Miguel Escobar right up until the final moments when, as he and Tick discussed, he flips his orientation and lands a devastating left hook that Escobar never saw coming. Symbolically, his left forearm—the one dealing the blow that will enable him to win Leila back—bears the tattoo “Father.” Ultimately, Billy wins his big fight and regains custody of his daughter.

There is no denying that an amateur and professional career in which Billy absorbed literally thousands of blows to the head will negatively impact his quality of life. This is what Tony Williams recognizes as happy and unhappy endings colliding in boxing films and that “the boxing movie’s semantics involves the presence of disturbing elements generally repressed from the American cultural consciousness which make ideologically viable syntactic associations extremely difficult” (Williams 306). Redemption of this sort in boxing films plays well on screen—and particularly so in *Southpaw*—but any serious thought about what happens next reveals that these characters’ difficulties are not resolved just because the film ended on a high note. *Southpaw* is the best film for this analysis because it shows both Billy (the fighter) and Tick (the trainer) doing their respective work at fathering. Still, it is just one example of a larger set of 21-st century boxing films in which audiences witness the protagonists’ tragic and total falls from grace; are given space to consider what the protagonists have done to arrive at what Rick Altman calls their “generic crossroads” (145). In boxing cinema audiences “enjoy the ritual satisfaction of overcoming social problems [...] while at the same time reinforcing traditional family values that support the prevailing ideology” (Grindon, “Boxing Film” 408). In twenty-first century boxing films, the protagonist’s path back to respectability is codified in adherence to severely conservative and/or rigid and culturally-sanctioned behaviors put in place by the fighter’s “old school” trainer, or “surrogate father”—a man who is himself trying to reclaim his masculinity (fatherhood).

Further, *Southpaw* is an interesting text in that its protagonist experienced a fatherless life as a ward of the state and still managed to become an outwardly recognizable masculine personality. In this regard, Hope seemingly embodies “positive” hegemonic traits of “bringing home a wage, sustaining a sexual relationship, and being a father” (Connell and Messerschmidt 840). Only after Hope loses his wife, his child, his fortune, his titles, and his future earning potential—all

his ostensibly masculine markers—do audiences see how gilded his façade really was.

After his wife's death, audiences recognize that Hope is not anything like the kind of "positive" man his successes belied. He abuses drugs and alcohol, turns paranoid and lashes out at his friends, and he even comes near to completing a retributive murder. This is Billy's "big fight," one of ten moves Grindon considers central to the masterplot of the boxing film genre. Specifically, Billy Hope's travails are an extension of Grindon's "Move 9: Big Fight 2" where "In an extended bout, the boxer suffers terrible punishment, but in a late round he regains his will and defeats his opponent" (Grindon, *Knockout* 13). Audiences familiar with boxing films, having now seen the real Billy and the sins he commits, expect him to atone for his shortcomings and do the necessary work to reclaim his masculinity and his titles of fighter and father. Since *Southpaw* is a boxing film, this means Hope must humble himself before his first real father figure—a no-nonsense trainer with one blind eye who teaches him discipline, defense, toughness, accountability, self-control, and humility—to win back his daughter and any attending trappings of material success.

## Conclusion

Palookaville, the figurative landing spot for could've-beens and wannabes, is where Marlon Brando's character, the boxer Terry Malloy, from Elia Kazan's crime drama *On the Waterfront* (1954), finds himself after a life of squandered promise. It is a destination all fighters, real or fictional, strive to avoid. Doing so, however, is far easier wished for than actually achieved. A small percentage of fighters are successful enough to make a living wage in the ring. And, the American Association of Neurological Surgeons estimates that 90 percent of boxers end up brain damaged. As many as 15-40 percent of fighters suffer from symptoms of chronic brain injury (AANS) and as many as 1 in 5 ex-fighters suffers from "dementia pugilistica"—a result of repeated blows to the head. Even titans of the sport—the "successful" fighters—luminaries like Joe Louis (knocked through the ropes by Rocky Marciano), Muhammad Ali (years lived with a debilitating condition), and Mike Tyson (myriad calamities) face ignominious defeats in and out of the ring. This is not to mention the broken hands, noses, ribs, jaws, and eye sockets; the ruptured ear drums; or the detached retinas fighters endure. Joyce Carol Oates put it most eloquently in her book *On Fighting*:

A boxing trainer's most difficult task is said to be to persuade a young boxer to get up and continue fighting after he has been knocked down. And if the boxer has been knocked down by a blow he hadn't seen coming—which is

usually the case—how can he hope to protect himself from being knocked down again? and again? The invisible blow is after all—invisible. (13)

Trainers teach boxers to stand up and continue fighting when every instinct in their body is telling them to run; it is most unnatural to continue throwing punches with a broken hand. Perhaps, even more so to continue absorbing punches with a fractured jaw, but this is what fighters do. And, it is the work of trainers to convince them to do this and to never quit. It is their job to take the anger fighters feel and focus it to achieve what film audiences believe they are due—redemption, in whatever form that might take.

Boxing films motivated by the “anger versus justice” conflict are loaded with dramatic “rock bottom” instances like in *Southpaw*. Often occurring early in the diegesis, these moments exposit what drives the fighters or trainers (or both; mostly male) in contemporary boxing films toward redemption. Moviegoers watching these films witness these characters descending lower and lower—each low seeming the lowest—until one final bad break or bad decision sinks the character to absolute rock bottom. It is the act of finally recognizing this ground level that ultimately stops the descent and awakens these characters to the damage they have done to themselves and the people they love. This recognition opens the door to their “shot at redemption.”

Once awakened, these characters are able to see their path—long and arduous though it may be. They pour out their alcohol and dispose of their drugs. If they have any left, they humble themselves before their friends and families. They isolate themselves, sometimes with great difficulty, away from negative influences. And, the final, most important act is finding an “old school” trainer and surrendering to their rigid demands. It is through this process that these characters ultimately earn one last fight such that they can be assured of their roles as contenders and breadwinners. Likewise, if trainers can turn a talented but troubled young fighter around, they can demonstrate that their domestic rigidity was simply good fathering and that their children chose to ignore them or were unable to follow their rules. This latter act might also work to ameliorate any feelings of guilt or inadequacy present in the trainers; it might, for the narrative’s purposes, even serve to validate whatever wrong it was that pushed their biological children away in the first place.

On film, and in real life, aimless fighters are ineffective fighters; discipline is key to winning fights and to avoiding serious, potentially life-threatening, injury. Often in boxing films audiences are made to understand that the fighters they see have raw talent, but lack the discipline to achieve world champion status. Some fighters introduced this way include Maggie Fitzgerald in *Million Dollar Baby* who has a winning amateur record, but once in the gym it is clear she does not have the discipline or training it takes to beat “real” boxers; Adonis Johnson, in *Creed*, who

blusters into the gym where other seasoned fighters train only to learn that he does not understand how to fight other professional boxers; he bristles at attempts to correct this; and, both Roberto Duran in *Hands of Stone* and Billy Hope in *Southpaw* who are introduced as aggressive, strong-chinned, and viciously talented fighters who do not generally need strong defensive skills because they physically dominate their opponents to such a degree it is unnecessary. These films identify these shortcomings early so that audiences know the characters they watch must improve if they plan to transcend their liminal status.<sup>6</sup> Key to this is the understanding that it will take a seasoned and serious trainer to instill the necessary discipline.

In *Southpaw*, Billy Hope yearned to prove to the State of New York and to his daughter that he was a good father. In *Creed*, Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa character takes Apollo Creed's son, Adonis, under his wing out of a sense of what is right (Rocky is still guilty over Apollo's death in the ring from *Rocky IV*) and as a second chance at being a good father since his own son will have nothing to do with him. The Roberto Duran character in *Hands of Stone* similarly finds a father figure in Robert DeNiro's Ray Arcel character who tenderly combs his hair between rounds long after his own father—an American soldier—abandoned his Panamanian mother and her children.

In each of these instances, one thing remains clear—although the men in these movies might feel an inherent drive to parent these young people it is not so easily done. If any hope exists, for the characters in *Southpaw*, it is that Billy will not teach Leila to fight or encourage her to enter the ring or the boxing business at all. Though, despite all the lessons learned, one cannot be too sure. A deleted scene from *Southpaw* titled “Leila’s Fight” depicts Leila being bullied in the group home in which she has been placed. When another girl teases and threatens to steal her nightlight, Leila punches the girl in the nose (breaking it in the process) with a sharp right cross. Leila is stunned by the punch’s effectiveness and stands looking at her balled fists in wonder; she is a natural. Tellingly, the punch stops the bullying. Later, in a meeting to discuss the incident with Leila and her social worker, it is impossible for Billy to hide how proud he is of Leila for standing up to her bully. He asks, “so you broke her nose?” She replies, “and I still have my light” (00:00:50-56). Billy tries to act as he is expected and tepidly chastises Leila, but it looks as if he would rather congratulate her.

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<sup>6</sup> When audiences first see Billy Hope he is in the midst of a light heavyweight title defense, which he wins despite employing virtually no defense. After winning the fight the audience sees the terrible physical toll his style has on his body—and mind. Worried his quality of life, his wife Maureen implores him to quit fighting. Billy cannot, and it is understood that if he is to continue his next fight it would be against Miguel Escobar, a challenger that would likely obliterate the defensively-challenged Hope. Nevertheless, Billy ultimately learns he must discipline himself to win back his boxing license and, ultimately, his daughter effectively reclaiming his masculine identities as Fighter and Father.

While unclear what Billy's "paternal intervention" with Leila will be absent a maternal counterpart, it seems likely he will inculcate his daughter with the same masculine qualities that he honed while training under Tick. When *Southpaw* and other contemporary films end with the fighters winning and the trainers being validated, filmmakers reinforce the notion that young disadvantaged people need only "live straight" and follow the rules to better their standing in society. It is true, though, that these fighters do not always win the big bout at the end of the film. Still, audiences derive pleasure from the fighter's generic crossroads and in seeing the fighters for whom they have been rooting affirm society's prevailing mores with the help of a father-figure trainer. Perhaps, just as much, audiences respond to trainers whose troubled fighters afford them their own last chance at fathering, win or lose.

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