

Alter Egotists

The strange, perfect relationship between Howard Cosell and Muhammad Ali.

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Bad hair day: Muhammad Ali toying with Howard Cosell's toupee in 1972.

SOUND AND FURY

Two Powerful Lives, One Fateful Friendship.
By Dave Kindred.
Illustrated. 368 pp. Free Press. \$27.

By BUDD SCHULBERG

IN a time when nonfiction has been hit a punch below the belt by James Frey and his "Million Little Pieces" (or "Million Little Lies"), when a "freyed memoir" may take its sorry place in our American language, it is reassuring to have a biography — indeed, a rare dual biography — that passes every test of journalistic reliability. "Sound and Fury" happily lives up to its promise in defining "two powerful lives" and "one fateful friendship," telling the interwoven stories of the two most colorful and controversial sports figures, the most celebrated and self-celebrating prize-fighter and sportscaster who ever lived, Muhammad Ali and Howard Cosell. Amusingly insulting each other while at the same time not so subtly blowing their own horns on national television over the years, they achieved a unique place in our popular culture. They were America's Punch-and-Judy show, two bizarre figures bigger than life who magnified each other by their theatrically contrasted juxtaposition.

Theirs was a tale waiting to be told, and Dave Kindred's credentials make him the ideal testifier to this odd couple's verbal sparring. A respected sportswriter throughout his long career, Kindred has been friends with Ali

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since the mid-1960's, when the former Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. was the brash young heavyweight champion and Kindred a fledgling sportswriter for Ali's hometown newspaper, The Louisville Courier-Journal. Kindred was also one of maybe only three sportswriters, along with the distinguished Robert Lipsyte and Jerry Izenberg, who not only respected Cosell for his pioneering sports journalism but actually liked him.

And yet this is no fawning eulogy. Kindred sees Cosell, warts and all, with the clear eyes of a trained observer — and no man had more singular warts than Cosell. The author also expresses love, admiration and awe for his longtime friend Ali. But the dead-on honesty that has characterized Kindred's career, from The Courier-Journal to The Washington Post to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and his many sports books, is reflected in his view of Ali the man, with all his flaws and his inflated narcissism. He is the black man who famously tells the white world, "I don't have to be what you want me to be," and if some innocent and not-so-innocent women and some well-meaning men are blindsided by his runaway hubris, well, Kindred is not afraid to say, that's the price one may have to pay when entering the trajectory of this human meteor.

If Cosell and Ali formed an odd couple — Jew versus African-American, Brooklyn versus Louisville, middle-aged versus young, couch potato versus athlete, skeptic versus believer, late bloomer versus teenage prodigy — Kindred also reminds us of the many ways in which their characteristics overlapped. Both were world-class egomaniacs. Both were modern-day Columbus, daring to discover new worlds. There had never been a heavyweight champion who saw his title as a diplomatic passport to go forth and consult with the leaders of the world. This reviewer — whose work the author generously cites — remembers how startled he was in 1964, the morning after the defeat of the "big ugly bear," Sonny Liston, when the 22-year-old wunderkind told us his new name, Cassius X, and announced his global mission.

At the same time, young Cassius — on whom the Nation of Islam leader, Elijah Muhammad, later bestowed the name Muhammad Ali — was ready to play a role he had been preparing for since he was a child boxer already pronouncing himself "the greatest." The born egomaniac, as Kindred recognized early on, had the matchless skill and original mind to make truth of hyperbole. No heavyweight had ever moved like that in the ring and, Allah knows, no heavyweight had ever moved like that outside the ring.

Cosell's career was as revolutionary in its

own way as Ali's. The former Howard Cohen came to radio and television sports in a time when the human voice was purposely neutral. No black voices, of course, and no ethnic inflections. Cosell's loud, nasal Brooklyn inflections were a no-no, and he struck out miserably the first time he tried. But Howard had an ego that could hold its own with Ali's. Almost from the beginning, he saw himself as a crossover star who could bring intelligence, a social conscience and a crusader's agenda to a sportscasting world bogged down in carefully restricted factuality. "Ali's extravagant performances had taught Cosell the value of unbridled egotism," Kindred writes, "and no one played the role of Howard Cosell, unbridled egotist, with more delight than Howard Cosell." But even when Cosell had begun to put his stamp on sports reporting, his full-throttle ambition could not be satisfied. It was not enough to use his trademark polysyllabic vocabulary as a means of making clear his intellectual superiority to his ex-jock fellow anchors on "Monday Night Football," the straight man Frank Gifford and goofy Dandy Don Meredith. As Kindred tracks this runaway ego, Cosell declares the sports world "beneath a man of his intelligence, achievement and distinction. What Ed Murrow did, what Cronkite, Huntley and Brinkley did — that was broadcast journalism."

LIKE Ali's, it was an unlikely quest, and yet — to the dismay of his army of detractors — one that he achieved beyond even his most grandiose dreams. A favorite target of sportswriters — the gifted columnist Jimmy Cannon skewered Cosell as the only guy who ever "changed his name and put on a toupee to tell it like it is," and the boxing historian Bert Randolph Sugar said, "He demonstrated again and again that he knows very little about the game but is not afraid to describe it" — Cosell received "the ultimate honor in his business," as Kindred puts it, when he was the first sportscaster elected to the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame, joining Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Johnny Carson and, "more important to him, the newsmen Walter Cronkite, Edward R. Murrow, Eric Sevareid, John Chancellor, Chet Huntley, David Brinkley and his old boss Roone Arledge." The man so many of his listeners loved to hate was up in television heaven at last, and his verbal sparring partner, who, in his most virulent Nation of Islam days, had been demonized by white America, was soon given the ultimate honor of lighting the 1996 Olympic torch in Atlanta. As Kindred quotes George Plimpton: "My God! That white shimmering figure. The hand trembling, Ali, again!" And as a second sportswriter says, "He's America's only living saint."

The book opens with an apt quotation from Edith Wharton: "There are two sources of light, / And the mirror that reflects it." The homely kid from Brooklyn and the black Adonis from Louisville alter-egged each other so perfectly that each seems both candle and mirror to the other.

A note at the beginning states the author's intention: "My ambition was to recover Muhammad Ali from mythology and Howard Cosell from caricature." With the Niagara of words that has been pouring over these two superstars for more than 40 years, that's a heady assignment. But Kindred is up to it. Mission accomplished. □

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