

Yxta Maya Murray. *What It Takes to Get to Vegas*. New York: Grove, 1999. 308 pp. \$24.00.

Rita Zapata's fascination with boxers begins at age thirteen when aging "contender" Carlos the Bull offers her a smoke and squeezes her knee at a schoolbus stop in East Los Angeles. By age sixteen she's "set [her] sights on snagging a fighter" and "not just any old street fighter: I'm talking a champ." It's this angle on boxing, a woman trying to get to Vegas by scouting out the next champ, that makes Murray's novel stand out for me, a femme fatale telling the tale, *The Natural* from the point of view of Memo Paris instead of Roy Hobbs.

Rita pays a heavy price for this piece of glory, but her attitude is boxers' wives are "just chicas with hard-luck stories and long legs who struck pay dirt." Her eye for talent is not perfect, however. She sleeps with most of the street fighters who meet at a dead end called Rabbit Street before she finds her natural, Billy Navarro, a stranger with a dark past who has the drive and a punch to go with it: "this man was a magician, and we watched amazed while his Houdini hands unlocked the mysteries of Chuco's bones and cracked open the seal of his skin." Soon Rita and Billy are lovers, and Billy has left street fights for the world of Ruben's Superbox, described by Rita in a passage reminiscent but not up to the standard of Budd Schulberg's description of Stillman's gym in *The Harder They Fall*:

Everywhere I looked there were boxers punching, jumping, drinking water, stretching their long brown arms, taping their beautiful hands ... The crazy-making thing about Ruben's, though, was this wicked smell. If you've been around the block you'd know it's 100 percent hombre-sharp and wet, like burned leaves and lemons. (99-100)

Murray's eye for detail also shows the fate of the has-beens as it doesn't take Ruben long to become Billy's manager and to start cutting off the wannabes in favor of a new stable of "sharpshooters." One telling scene involves ex-contender Eddie Martinez, "whose claim to fame was fighting Julio Cesar Chavez once at Caesar's Palace." Martinez tells Ruben he must "give you back all your shit" and proceeds to strip off all his boxing gear, which gets the boxers excited until they see what's left of Martinez's body underneath the Superbox T-shirt he always wears: "It was like pulling back the wings of a lamed hawk and seeing the thin cracked bones, the fragile heart thumping under the ripped feathers."

Billy gets his shot at the lightweight title in Vegas against "The Hammer," and Rita gets her shot at a pay-per-view moment. But their relationship is failing, and though she's bought herself an engagement ring with his money, though she forges one of his checks to gamble away in Vegas, her dream of being the champ's wife is disappearing even as he wins.

Billy has the title and the money and the girl, only he no longer seems to want Rita to be that girl, telling her that he'd hungered for a woman in the past and had been jilted by her: "You reminded me of her, okay? Hustling around in them sexy clothes, both of you wanting the city and money and all that. But the thing is, you were different then.

And now a lot of other girls are reminding me of her." When Billy dumps Rita completely, she loses it completely, trying to cut up "his brand-new baby doll" with a pair of scissors and then going for Billy with a gun. It's Roy Hobbs again, only Billy doesn't get to make a comeback. It's actually a well-done scene, with Billy taking the gun from Rita, saying he's a good boxer "because I'm fearless" and then, to prove it, giving the gun back to her. He then confesses to having killed the woman from his dark past, says "I suffer so bad" and tries to choke Rita before she shoots him in the stomach. The suffering hero, the bullet in the gut, come to think of it, this does sound like *The Natural*, doesn't it? But the boxing story works, told to us by a femme fatale for whom we can feel much sympathy.

Phil Wedge