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April 02, 2007

Ready To Rumble

A rowdy traveler roams the world looking for a fight

L. Jon Wertheim

A FIGHTER'S HEART

by Sam Sheridan

Atlantic Monthly Press \$25, 304 pages

AS HIS 30s were approaching, Sam Sheridan already claimed a résumé that would make Hemingway look like a homebody. The Harvard grad had served in the merchant marine, worked construction in Antarctica in--118 weather and fought fires in the American West. But still lacking the constitution for an office job—and still hungry for adventure and self-knowledge—he set out on a new journey.

This odyssey had a twist: At every stop he indulged his fascination and facility for combat sports. So it was that Sheridan bled profusely—"leaked mud," in the fighters' locution—at a mixed martial arts academy in Bettendorf, Iowa. He studied, quite literally, at the foot of kickboxing yogi Apidej Sit-Hirun in Thailand, sparred with 2004 Olympic gold medalist Andre Ward in an Oakland gym, learned jiu-jitsu holds in Brazil and head-butting techniques in Myanmar.

The result is *A Fighter's Heart*, by turns a self-discovery journal, blood-stained travelogue and series of thoughtful if at times disjointed essays on age-old themes: violence, combat, pain, masculinity. "Fighters go into the arena stripped to their core, naked for the world to see and judge," Sheridan writes. "They go in the face of a highly trained man whose goal is to break them down and destroy them."

Sheridan is no dilettantish "participatory" sports journalist. Each time he enters the ring, it's with the intention of giving worse than he gets. The guy once KO'd a former Japanese karate champ in a kickboxing match in Thailand.

Sheridan's authenticity as a storyteller, however, resides not in his ability to throw a left cross but in an eye for detail and a gift for writing. He watches the hands of a shadow boxer as he "gently knifed the air, carving through hooks and uppercuts, effortless." His characterization of the colorful mixed martial artist Jens (Little Evil) Pulver as "vampiric" is hilariously accurate. And like an expert fighter, Sheridan has an instinctive gift for positioning. He is brutally self-effacing without sounding falsely modest. He romanticizes fighting without turning a blind eye to the troubling moral underpinnings of inflicting harm on someone else.

Capable as Sheridan is as a tour guide, he pulls his punches, as it were, in describing the actual experience of fighting. The account of his bout on a mixed-martial-arts card in Ohio, the source of the book's gruesome cover image, barely fills a page. Perhaps this was intentional. One can practically hear his mentors' tranquil voices extolling the virtues of the journey, not the destination. But as most of us will never have this experience, it would benefit the reader were Sheridan to describe what it feels like to face another man whose singular purpose is to break you down and destroy you.

That's a minor quibble, though. In the end, *A Fighter's Heart* has plenty of "fighter," and an abundance of "heart." Sheridan's gifts as an athlete are matched by his gifts as an aesthete. He's written a fine book. And we'd be making the same pronouncement even if he couldn't kick our ass.

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