

Raging Bull

© Jami Bernard

"The A List: The National Society of Film Critics' 100 Essential Films," 2002

Reprinted by permission of the author

It is unfathomable, particularly with the benefit of hindsight, that in 1980 "Ordinary People" won the best picture Oscar over "Raging Bull." At the time, both pictures were considered shocking, although certainly not equally so. "Ordinary People" seems today like a TV movie with its easy psychology and barely disguised sentimentality, whereas "Raging Bull" has never ceased to deliver that punch to the gut of fowl recognition. It splattered the screen with variations on the word "fuck" like the blood that spewed from Jake La Motta's pulped face onto the ringside judges. "Ordinary People" had Judd Hirsch's comforting wool cardigan to clutch like a baby blanket, but there is nothing warm and fuzzy in "Raging Bull," no pat explanations, no miraculous redemption. Jake's self-destruction is an unrelieved plunge, and we ache for him not because we like him but because we recognize him, thanks to Robert De Niro's awesome performance and Martin Scorsese's visceral direction. "Ordinary People" was also in its way about sibling rivalry, but if you want the real deal, you go to "Raging Bull," a movie that also serves as a lesson for biographers that the surest way to the heart of a character, at least on film, is from around the edges and not by the book.

In fact, the movie is very little like the self-serving autobiography on which it's based. The relationship between Jake (De Niro) and his coulda-been-a-contender brother Joey (an amalgam of two characters from the book, played by Joe Pesci) is the heart of the movie. The boxer's actual triumphs in the ring are of little moment save to flesh out a portrait of a man caught in the undertow of his own nature. The ring was the only place where such thanatos could be appreciated and rewarded, even enshrined with the jewel-encrusted middleweight championship belt. Outside the ring he was a mess, unsuited for polite company, in thrall to his inner demons, fearful of the women in his life, suspicious, bad-tempered, unable to make moral choices or weigh consequences. (That he has no idea what in his life is of value is nicely brought home when he smashes up his belt to pawn the jewels, which turn out to be worthless without the belt itself.)

Scorsese may have been robbed of a directing Oscar that year, but De Niro wiped the mat with award upon award. As the Energizer-bunny champ whose inarticulateness is a poetry of frustration and despair, De Niro famously put on an extra 50 pounds (on pasta and milkshakes in Italy)

for two months while production shut down. Then he returned to shoot the scenes of Jake in his later years, his belly blocking his brother's view of the broken TV or hanging out from his pants and undershirt like the ignored black sheep of the family. The extra weight was the capper to the man's disintegration from boxing phenomenon to the last tender of his own myth, long after he had driven away everyone who loved him, most particularly the brother who managed him and served as his actual and metaphorical punching bag.



*Robert DeNiro as boxer Jake LaMotta.
Courtesy Library of Congress*

It was De Niro who brought La Motta's book to Scorsese's attention while the latter was making "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore." But it was hardly a straight shot to the screen. De Niro had to pressure and harangue his mentor. Scorsese frankly wasn't all that interested, couldn't relate to the world of boxing, didn't care for the endless script revisions (he eventually brought in Paul Schrader for a script overhaul), and was having a hard time in his personal life. Depressed, overworked, and overmedicated, he made his first emotional connection with the project from a hospital bed after a collapse, where he realized that, like Jake, he was circling the drain and spending every ounce of good will he had banked over the years. The idea of the boxer's (or filmmaker's) inchoate howl of despair held a fascination for him that turned "Raging Bull" into a personal odyssey, which he nevertheless thought would put the kibosh on his career. After all, "Raging Bull" was an evil twin to such competing boxing movies of the day as "Rocky 2." Further, it was filmed in elegiac black and white, which added to its beauty but which Scorsese, who was just getting heavily involved in the preservation of color film stock, feared would be mistaken for pretentious. (His decision on black and white may have been hastened when Michael Powell, to whom

he deferred, commented on early rushes that Jake's boxing gloves were "too red.")

The script was still too dark for the studios, and no one could understand putting a guy like Jake at the center of a movie. An early draft of the script had Jake wondering where to dump the body of his wife, who he thinks he has hit too hard and killed. Scorsese and De Niro holed up on St. Martin (of all places) to work on the script, and when they came back, it was presentable enough for a nervous green light.

It's the movie's inner violence that's tougher to take, the way Jake steels himself for punishment both as a matter of pride and ongoing self-torture. He browbeats Joey into bunching him in the face to prove a point. He goads Vicky (Cathy Moriarty), the blonde teenage treasure he picks up at a neighborhood pool and marries (and tortures with his jealousy), into getting him aroused before a fight when they both know he won't follow through. (He plunges himself into ice water to preserve his juices.) The self-immolation is spectacular. "Did you fuck my wife?" he asks Joey, the ultimate accusation for the ultimate transgression. To capture Pesci's reaction so perfectly, that combination of disbelief and revulsion, De Niro surprised Pesci during one take with, "Did you fuck your mother?" That take was a keeper, and the fraternal symbiosis is finally, irrevocably destroyed.

During the 1970s, the new crop of American directors like Scorsese were truly making the films they wanted, and there was both a public appetite for them and a studio checkbook to fund them. The way Jake bawled like a baby after purposely taking a fall was probably how any of the bright lights of the 1970s directing fraternity felt about doing a movie simply for commercial considerations rather than artistic ones. But director power was

like yesterday's bell-bottoms as the 1980s ushered in an era of the producer, the bean counter, the movie packager. Even distribution was changing so that movies could no longer take their time cultivating an audience. As Peter Biskind put it in his book "Easy Rider, Raging Bulls," "Raging Bull" was a whale from the 1970s beached on the shoals of the 1980s. The time for such daring, personal movies was over. The new taste was for the slick, bland, and predictable, when "Ordinary People" would be as safely daring as things got.

"Raging Bull" was recognized as a masterpiece by a number of critics, but it buckled at the box office and was not acknowledged until years later as being one of the great movies, possibly Scorsese's best. It could probably not be made now. For all the violence, it is excessively talky by today's standards and totally eschews dime-store psychology. We know Jake and Joey are alike, acorns that must not have fallen far from the tree. They are shown against the backdrop of a rough-and-tumble borough neighborhood where brawls spill out of bars and couples scream at each other, more acorns, similar trees. The implication is that Jake was not fundamentally different from anyone in the 'hood, he just had more of whatever it was they had and he found a way, at least for a while,

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Jami Bernard is an author and award-winning film critic for The New York Post and The New York Daily News, and the founder of Barncat Publishing. She is a frequent guest on TV and radio shows, with appearances on Oprah, The Today Show, and Lynn Samuels on Satellite Radio. Her work has been published in Entertainment Weekly, Seventeen, Glamour, and Self. More about Jami Bernard at <http://www.jamibernard.com/>