

WHERE LITERATURE MEETS SPORT

Heather Kerr

A testament to the lack of overlap between the worlds of literature and elite sport can be summed up in one word on the cover notes of *The Bone Cage* – speed. One of the novel’s protagonists, Sadie, is described as “a 26-year-old speed swimmer”, presumably to distinguish her preparation for the Olympics from the leisurely breaststroke in bathtub-temperature community pools by those in floral caps. Anyone serious enough to do a flip turn in a sport that the novel proclaims to be “the only thing more boring than long-distance running” just calls those laps, *swimming*.

This is what makes Angie Abdou’s first novel – a rare literary portrayal of sport – noteworthy. Abdou is a Ph.D candidate in the University of Calgary’s creative writing program, and a former university and current Master’s-level swimmer who teaches English at Cranbrook BC’s College of the Rockies. Her pedigree comprises a previous collection of short stories (*Anything Boys Can Do*, Thistle-down Press, 2006), a father who was recently inducted into Lakehead University’s sports hall of fame, and brother who wrestled for Canada in the 1996 Olympics. She is among those best poised to masterfully write the sensuality and emotion of swimming and wrestling, which readers of all backgrounds can appreciate in *The Bone Cage*’s story. Its window of insight into the long periods of toil and fleeting moments of recognition that are elite sport leaves athlete readers thankful for the realistic representation of their quixotic lifestyle. Non-athletes are afforded an uncensored glance into this bizarre world, from the safe distance of words on paper.

Like their creator, *The Bone Cage*’s protagonists, Sadie and Digger, defy pigeonholing, setting many stereotypes about athletes on their heads with regard to fame, relationships, happiness and identity. Swimmer Sadie, and Digger, an 85-kilo wrestler are in preparation for the 2000 Olympics in Sydney. Through her characters, Abdou explores the athletes’ tumbles from ascetic grace in pursuit of excellence, clichés in hand as mantras to tune out distraction. Sadie draws on autobiographical elements of the author’s own experience, having obtained an English degree while swimming competitively, reciting verse to herself during laps and toting around a copy of *Paradise Lost*.

The Bone Cage could easily be a transposition of Milton’s classic into a modern-day Eden at the University of Calgary’s Kinesiology complex, home to the characters and their codependent coaches.

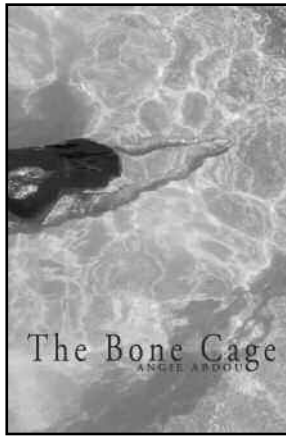
Abdou gives numerous examples of athletes’ love/hate relationship with authority, and is unafraid to put patronizing medical professionals and coaches in their places. *The Bone Cage* creates an ironic paradise full of verbal abuse and social deprivation, a chosen wonderland where the inhabitants have a distant memory of the happiness that drew them there in the first place. From their cages,



Angie Abdou

Sadie and Digger begin to allow themselves glimpses outward, to a world where bodies fail and merit is decided on more blurry factors than time or points.

Rather than declaring sport as evil, Abdou invites the reader to vacillate between the worship and devastation of sport by competitors, coaches, media and the athletes’ family members. The hells of intense training and emotional train wrecks wrought by broken dreams contrast with the perfect, singular focus of Abdou’s swimming and wrestling scenes. “Autopilot,” is how Sadie describes her state of nothingness during competition, “[...]more like mind control, turning off the senses you don’t need. Zoom in. Close the doors to everything else.” Abdou’s hallmark kinesthetic writing for her less-familiar sport of wrestling was achieved by submitting to multiple gut-wrenches by her Olympian brother. As with the ultimate temptation that results in



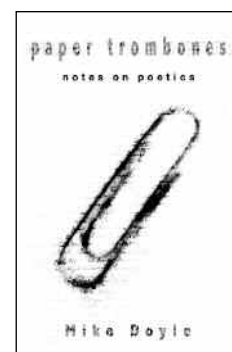
The Bone Cage.
Angie Abdou.
Edmonton: NeWest
Press, 2007

Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, Abdou’s athletes face the very human struggle to resist all detractors from the paradise of superhuman achievement, and the daunting task of defining themselves and their relationships after retirement.

A defiance of of the body’s authority is what begets these achievements, as the novel’s title – a nod to Beowulf – implies. *The Bone Cage* offers the unacquainted a unique opportunity to step into an athlete’s body for the duration of their read. The strong narration of two different omniscients, a coarse, jesting wrestler and a more lithe, (mostly) literary swimmer, alternates each chapter, between Sadie’s and Digger’s stories, evolving from dogmatic to ambiguous as the athletes’ directions post-Olympics become less clear. Olympic wrestlers’ and swimmers’ freakish physical features – large hands, broad shoulders and hairy legs, for both Sadie and Digger – are a celebrated bonding ground. Along with the protagonists, the reader itches and exhales, feels washes of relief and stabs of injury, and walks the perilous tightrope of good, exertional pain over the mire of injury. Abdou spares the reader no insight into the vulgarity of an athlete’s being – these characters are real, from their prowess right down to their odour. Shades of Abdou’s short story collection, *Anything Boys Can Do*, appear in her novel’s female characters, who find themselves at times unable to transcend their vulnerability to the body’s cravings, unabashedly going after sexual conquests as though they were medals or personal bests.

The numerous tensions in the minds, bodies and lives of Sadie, Digger and their fellow athletes are well-crafted by Abdou, who avoids straying into melodramatic one-sidedness. The refreshing self-awareness of Digger and Sadie makes this novel accessible and appealing to a broad audience, which was a goal of Abdou’s. In doing so, however, the conspicuous explanations of her characters’ clichés somewhat hinder their irony. Regardless of a reader’s life experience, *The Bone Cage* offers an honest and non-linear search for wholeness, recognizable by anyone who has been dealt a change of life focus.

Heather Kerr is a graduate of UBC’s School of Rehabilitation Science who competes in swimming and triathlon.



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Paper Trombones: Notes on Poetics

a memoir by Mike Doyle

In *Paper Trombones* poet and scholar Mike Doyle shares musings on poetry – his own and others’ – drawn from informal journal notes of the past thirty years. As a poet and academic on three continents, Doyle recalls fascinating encounters with prominent literary figures – from Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath to Basil Bunting, Anne Sexton, Robert Creeley, James Wright, Robert Bly, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, George Woodcock and various Canadian poets. With candid commentary on his wide reading in poetry, philosophy and criticism, Mike Doyle is a personable guide to the currents of contemporary literature. An accessible journey through a personal landscape of poetry, *Paper Trombones* will appeal to those interested in the art of poetry and the dialogue on contemporary literature.

Mike Doyle’s first poetry collection *A Splinter of Glass* (1956) was published in New Zealand; his first Canadian collection is *Earth Meditations* (Coach House, 1971), his latest *Living Ginger* (Ekstasis, 2004). He is recipient of a PEN New Zealand award and a UNESCO Creative Artist’s Fellowship. He has also written a biography of Richard Aldington and critical work on William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, James K. Baxter, and others. He has lived in Victoria since 1968.

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