Ghosts of Manila
The Fateful Blood Feud between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier

by Mark Kram

Reviewed by Daniel Pipes
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Kram, a longtime writer for Sports Illustrated, is interested primarily in two subjects. One is boxing (about which he waxes nearly lyrical) and the other is Muhammad Ali (about whom he is decidedly skeptical, condemning his “brainless exhibitionism,” calling him a “religious fake,” and comparing him as a positive social force to Frank Sinatra). But in his mostly first-hand description of the growing animosity between the two heavyweight champs, Ali and Frazier, he by-the-by reveals important information about the Nation of Islam (NoI), especially in the 1960s.

We learn that the organization offered the boxer Sugar Ray Robinson a bribe to convert. The NoI saw Ali as a “useful idiot with a name” and exploited him as an ongoing theme. Turns out that Ali’s most famous political utterance, “I ain’t got nothing against them Vietcong,” was not his own but was slyly dropped into his presentation by a NoI watchdog to burnish the NoI’s revolutionary credentials. His NoI handlers fleeced Ali financially. When Malcolm X was expelled from the NoI, Ali laughed and scorned him. At one point, Ali feared being killed by NoI assassins, much as Malcolm X had been – and the night of the latter’s murder, a fire was set in Ali’s apartment.

Another theme has to do with the attractions of the NoI for a man like Ali. Those were two-fold. The NoI gave expression to his resentments and suspicions of whites, swathing them with a religious and even theological justification that deepened and solidified them. Less known, NoI customs neatly justified Ali’s desire to have his way with women. As he understood the NoI doctrines, they posited the “inferiority” of women, their obedience to men, their extreme modesty outside the house, and their acceptance of polygamy. All this ideally matched Ali’s interests.
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Ghosts of Manila has 29 ratings and 3 reviews. False said: My review's...aren't. Notes to myself. I have long loved the non-fiction writing of James Hami... Ghosts of Manila is a haunting novel set in one of the world's most violent cities. It opens in a wasteland near Manila Airport, where a factory produces marketable human skeletons from the bodies of derelicts - and the victims of police death squads. The violence that follows, rendered in often breathtaking prose, affects a diverse group of characters: an English televisi