Knockout: The Sexy, Violent, Extraordinary Life of Vikki LaMotta by Thomas Hauser

Vikki LaMotta wrote her brutally honest life story 18 years ago but was so shocked by the finished manuscript she insisted it be withheld until after her death (she died in February, 2005). She describes a life lived among such celebrities as boxing champion Jake LaMotta, Johnny Carson, Frank Sinatra, Sam Giancana, Robert De Niro and Hugh Hefner. It was a life marked by violence, sex and betrayal, but ultimately her story is one of personal triumph and fulfillment.

My Personal Review:

Every sports fan middle-aged and up remembers Jake LaMotta, former middleweight boxing champion of the world.

Every sports and movie fan middle-aged and up remembers Robert De Niro's star turn playing Jake LaMotta in the biopic Raging Bull.

And, if you happen to be a sports, movie, and Playboy magazine fan, middle-aged and up, then you definitely remember a certain heart-racing pictorial from the November 1981 issue, featuring Jake's former wife, Vikki LaMotta, the aptly-named "Knockout!"

Vikki LaMotta was probably the most breathtaking Playboy model ever. It wasn't just her perfect hair, face, and body that appealed to us young men of the time. It was the fact that she was 51 years old, but looked 25! "Move over, Mrs. Robinson," we said. "Move WAAAY over!" Oh! She was hot.

Those of us who recovered sufficiently to actually read the short biography accompanying Vikki's pictorial were further impressed by her fortitude, considering her poverty-stricken childhood and the later, tempestuous
relationship with Jake LaMotta. We were impressed because Vikki actually looked and felt better later in life than before.

This was important. Young people can't help thinking, at certain crucial times, "What's going to happen to me? What will I look like? Will I be trapped, stuck doing this or that? I don't want to 40 and 50! Ugh! Who's going to want me? It's not fair to get old and fat and ugly and tired. Life's not fair."

True, life isn't fair, but the very fact that someone like Vikki LaMotta existed and flourished as she did despite the odds, Vikki was proof positive that life can indeed get better as you get older...if you're willing to learn from experience and take charge of your life. Like all the greatest sex symbols, there was actually much more to her than looks.

As I've indicated, it was a milestone article and pictorial; Vikki LaMotta became an icon to millions of young men. If we could find real-life girlfriends who looked/acted even remotely like Vikki, we'd be doing just fine!

Of course, young men have a way of becoming middle-aged. So too do our heroes and inspirations get older, and ultimately pass on, as did, regrettably, Vikki, in 2005.

As you might expect, Vikki's famous Playboy article really only scratched the surface of her life. Everyone knows Jake LaMotta's whole story, but it would be 25 years before we heard Vikki's whole story - and her encounters with such luminaries as Babe Ruth, Johnny Carson, and Frank Sinatra, to name but a few.

While Vikki had actually finished writing her story back in 1987, it seems that, after much serious self-debate, she finally decided it should only be published after she passed on. And so it fell to the esteemed sports biographer and novelist Thomas Hauser (Muhammad Ali, Missing) working with Vikki's son from a second marriage, Harrison Foster, to prepare her manuscript.

We'll never know how much of the resulting text is really Vikki and how much is tweaking by Hauser and Foster, but, ultimately, this doesn't matter. The finished work is immaculate - both text and pictures are laid out in a pleasing, organized fashion; not too little, not too much. Easy on the eyes, you might say.

Hauser and Foster have done an excellent job in presenting Vikki's story as one of self-discovery, but not in some sickly-sweet cloying way. Even if you've seen Raging Bull, you can't predict many of the turns this story takes; you will not have read anything like it. You'll smile at the good parts, cringe at the scenes of abuse, and, most importantly, you will keep reading, even when Vikki's at her lowest points.
Speaking of that, readers might well wonder, as I did, "Why did she stay in these abusive relationships?" Well, why does anybody? In Vikki’s case it had something to do with women's roles in the 1940s and 50s. Vikki was both a devoted partner and a sexy showgirl, and it seems that Jake could not reconcile the two in his mind, hence the mammoth jealousy. Vikki’s hesitancy to take charge any sooner than she did reflects more the gender roles of the time than a lack of courage. Once she made her mind up about this guy (and the ones that followed) she did not change it. As to how she did it, you'll have to read the book.

Among the images beautifully evoked here: the sweat, smoke, and noise of the Bronx in the 40s as well as the overripe colors and whoopee-party life of Miami nightclubs and hotels in the 50s. Vikki's personal growth as the book goes on is completely enthralling: she's never quite sure what she's doing next, nevertheless, she always seems to strike a wise, admirable balance between caution and fun (despite the many shake-ups in her life) and her kids are always her first concern. This quiet strength extends successfully to her later years with her own cosmetics business and the legendary Playboy pictorial. In particular, Vikki's anxieties about the photo shoot itself are beautifully described ("I felt deformed", she says, incredibly, of her nude shots).

By journey’s end you may find yourself, as I did, almost moved to tears at the sheer courage and warmth of someone you have never met. From the time she was a little girl named Beverly Thailer, the conditions she often lived in would've turned most people into a sociopath. Not our Vikki. For her, it was, "No! I'm gonna go outside and have adventures. Maybe I'll hang out with those nice taxi drivers. I wanna do something." I believe Vikki’s choice to look for another way, her choice to be inquisitive, actually saved her life, over and over again.

It all makes me wish I’d seen Vikki in action, I wish I'd heard her voice. ...And yet, damn it, I HAVE met Vikki LaMotta, through this wonderful book (Movie producers, take note!).

I loved it. You don't absolutely have to be a serious sports, movie, or even Playboy fan to get into this. Simply put, anyone who loves a unique, well-told story of survival should pick this up.

Not liking this book and this extraordinary woman would be as wrong as not liking the sun.

For all I know, Vikki LaMotta IS the sun.

And, as anybody can tell you, there's a lot more to the sun than just being hot.
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