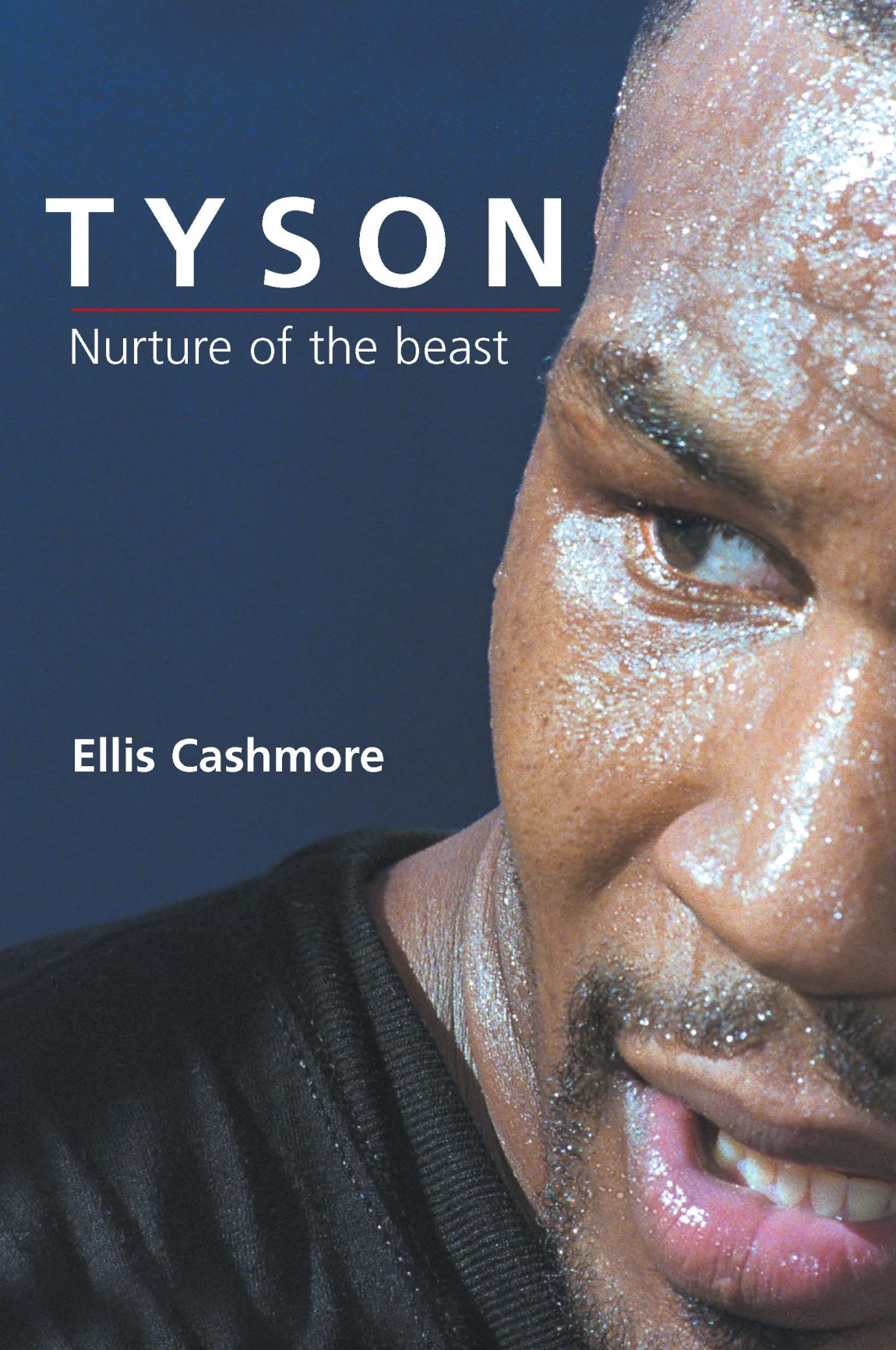


TYSON

Nurture of the beast

Ellis Cashmore



TYSON

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TYSON
Nurture of the Beast

ELLIS CASHMORE

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The initial idea for this book came from Marcus Ryder, of BBC Television, who read my earlier work *The Black Culture Industry* and suggested I adapt the approach I used for understanding black music to Mike Tyson. This is it.

James Jennings, of Tufts University, Massachusetts, is my friend, colleague and fellow boxing aficionado with whom I have regularly corresponded and exchanged views on Tyson throughout the writing of this book and beyond.

Michele Froman, of ESPN, has kept a vigilant Tysonwatch for me, keeping me updated, especially on Tyson's misadventures.

I'm 36 years old, going on 37. I never dreamed of living this long. I never dreamed of fornicating with as many beautiful women as I did and having as much money as I did. And having as beautiful and intelligent kids as I did. So, if I was to die tomorrow, I've won. I've won. *I've won.*

CNN People in the news, June, 2002

I expect that one day somebody, probably black, will blow my fucking brains out over some fucking bullshit, that his fucking wife or girlfriend might like me, and I don't even know she exists.

Playboy, November, 1998

I'm not supposed to have a mind. I'm a monster.

Esquire, April, 1996

I understand these people. They want to crush me, they want me to cry, to get on my knees. And evidently, it is not in my nature to do that. And that is what people respect most. Not the fact that I'm knocking out everybody, not the fact that I contributed money. That's what people respect, the fact that I wasn't a chump that laid on his back and gave up.

Ebony, September, 1995

When you see me smash somebody's skull, you enjoy it.

Albany Times, January, 1986

INTRODUCTION: I WILL KILL YOU. DO YOU UNDERSTAND THIS?

Imagine this. It's 1982. Catskill, New York. Here, a rough-hewn training camp for boxers is presided over by Cus D'Amato, a white trainer who, in the 1950s, guided Floyd Patterson to the world heavyweight title. D'Amato senses that he doesn't have too long to live and craves for another heavyweight champion before he dies. He believes one of his young charges has the raw material. All he needs to do is shape it. The boy with the untutored talent arrived at the camp as a squat 12-year-old, weighing 186lbs. Like many other African American youths from the Brownsville district of New York, he already has an ample rap sheet.

The trainer with the responsibility for refining the coarse ability is a young white man with a reputation for being a perfectionist, a demanding taskmaster and an all-round disciplinarian. He listens to D'Amato, but is independent-minded enough to know what's what. Like the others at the camp, he sees the potential of D'Amato's protégé who has the swaggering manner of many black kids reared on the streets. He has a physical strength that belies his years and a willingness to learn that bodes well for a career in boxing. Yet the trainer senses a waywardness: the boy isn't rebellious, not even openly disobedient; but he has a defiant streak that surfaces every so often.

He suspects that D'Amato, in his quest to turn the boy into a world champion, allows him indulgences that he wouldn't extend to other members of the camp. On some occasions, he's suspended the youth from the gym as a punishment for threatening a schoolteacher or pestering girls, only to find himself

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overruled by D'Amato. For instance, the old man once allowed him to train in private after all the others had gone, despite the fact that he had been temporarily banned by the trainer. He thinks D'Amato is cutting the young man too much slack. While living in Catskill, the trainer marries a local woman and moves away from D'Amato's big house to an apartment.

One day, after the session, the trainer gets home to find his wife and her 11-year-old sister sitting at the kitchen table, both of them in tears. The sister-in-law reveals to him that D'Amato's charge, by then 16, has made unwelcome sexual advances toward her. The trainer flies from the apartment in a rage, heads to a friend's to pick up a .38 revolver, checks it's loaded, then speeds back to camp to wait for the boxer. On finding him in the empty gym, he pins him against a wall, jams the gun into the boxer's ear and delivers this message: "You piece of shit! Don't you ever put your hands on my family. *I will kill you. Do you understand this?*"

There is a pause, then a click as the trainer cocks the gun, a sound that usually means the gunman isn't bluffing. The young man seems strangely composed, unmoved. He glowers, his eyes never moving from his adversary's, never blinking in the face of danger. Then, he smiles derisively and answers: "No, mother-fucker." The trainer squeezes the trigger.

TRAINER KILLS BOXER IN COLD BLOOD reads one of the headlines in the local *Poughkeepsie Journal*. It doesn't rate a mention elsewhere. The trainer is found guilty of murder in the first degree and is sentenced to life. That was back in 1982. He's now eligible for parole.

This is a true story in all but one respect. "If he would have smiled, if he would have said no, I would have killed him," reflected the trainer, whose name is Teddy Atlas, in an interview with David Remnick in 2000. "I pulled the gun away from his ear and pulled the trigger. I fired. At that moment, he knew. He got very weak, I could see that in his eyes" (p. 36).

Atlas was looking into the eyes of Mike Tyson. If he'd have kept the barrel of the gun at his head when he fired, you would not be reading this book. Another African American male with a criminal record would have met his death at the hands of a

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gunman. It wouldn't have been recorded outside the local paper. It would have been just another statistic.

How much that incident affected Tyson, we'll never know. Atlas had been continually frustrated at the way D'Amato vetoed his attempts to discipline the teenage Tyson and D'Amato was concerned that Atlas would ruin his prize asset before it had time to ripen. D'Amato's priorities became clear after the incident: Atlas left and D'Amato assigned Tyson a new trainer, Kevin Rooney.

Atlas remains aware of his role in history. In 1992, with Tyson imprisoned for rape, he was quoted by Montieth Illingworth in the book *Mike Tyson: Money, myth and betrayal*: "Maybe Cus was right. If we did it my way, Tyson might never have become champion" (p. 54).

What would have happened if Atlas had been allowed to exercise more control over Tyson, or even killed him back in 1982? It's difficult to picture the late twentieth century, and perhaps even the early twenty-first, without Tyson. He has been such a prominent feature of our cultural landscape. At one point, he vied with Nelson Mandela as the most famous man in the world. His recognition rating was globally high. His name and image were inescapable. If you weren't aware of Tyson, you must have been a recluse.

But it wasn't just his name, or his face, or even his body that made Tyson universally famous and, later, infamous. It wasn't even anything Tyson did in the ring. Of course, he knocked people out and he did so in a fashion that sent shudders through his audiences. There seemed a primal force at work when Tyson attacked an opponent. This was not an ordinary boxer dispatching his opponents. It was more a natural predator descending on its prey, its instinct determining its actions. No conscious control was necessary.

There was something else. Perhaps it was his behavior away from the ring. Not just the lavish indulgences, the multiple homes, several dozen cars, pet tigers, traffic-stopping shopping blitzes and other extravagances that made the lifestyles of other rich and famous look gray and uninteresting. Maybe it was the live-by-the-sword philosophy, acting fast and often perilously,

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never far from a scrape with the law, always poised to crash into the headlines, whether for wrecking a car, knocking someone out in a nightclub or groping an unwilling woman. Or, worse. It could have been the elliptical path he cut, like a comet soaring upwards only to return on itself. Having earned hundreds of millions of dollars over nineteen years in professional boxing, he filed for bankruptcy, listing among his main creditors the Internal Revenue Service. Or it could have been all these things, plus one other.

The other reason is that Tyson was, in the eyes of the world, resistant to the most basic civilizing influences. The popular view of Tyson was captured by Jake Tapper, of the *Washington City Paper*, who, in 1998, observed that Tyson “has become the saddest, most frightening, most damning evidence of man’s capability for bestiality” (December 11).

The adage that “you can take the man from the ghetto but never the ghetto from the man” never seemed truer than when applied to Tyson. He was a living fulfillment of age-old images of African Americans, images that had their sources in the brute nigger archetype of yore. Blessed with a superabundance of brawn, Tyson was a fearsome figure; his apparent lack of intellect and self-control made him more frightening. Yet, as his ex-wife Robin Givens acknowledged when talking of her own fascination with Tyson, that was “part of the attraction.”

Following the misadventures of Tyson made the follower party to something primitive and uninhibited. It also provided crucial evidence that was to comfort and soothe white American consciences: that, given the opportunity, even the most spectacularly successful blacks are prone to self-destruction. In this respect, Tyson was the perfect cipher for a culture eager to rid itself of the legacy of pre-civil rights segregation yet uneasy with the prospect of accepting African Americans as fully fledged equals. Without realizing it, Tyson performed in what the scholar Jan Nedeerven Pieterse once called a racial psychodrama.

Tyson wasn’t just a symbol in the eyes of white America, he was a theatrical enactment of what all African Americans were like once the patina of civilization, the thin crust of culture had been scratched away. He might have more money than he knew

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how to spend, wear designer clothes, have three or four mansions, countless Ferraris and a personal zoo, but, lurking not too far beneath the surface, was the beast. It was the same beast that slaveowners once sought to tame.

On December 3, 2002, Tyson walked into a Las Vegas jewelry store and picked up a diamond-encrusted gold chain. Price: \$173,706. He didn't pay for the item; it was simply added to the \$23 million of debt specified in the Chapter 11 petitions he filed just over eight months later.

Tyson was well known at Jewelers Inc., where his credit rating was good. "He had open credit with me," confirmed the store's owner, Mordechai Yerushalmi. "He's been through his ups and downs. He will make good on it."

For sure, Tyson had been through his ups and downs. At his nadir, he spent three years in an Indiana prison – three of what might have been his peak boxing years, in which he could have earned as much as \$300 million and remained champion of the world. At his zenith, he was among the best-known and best-paid figures in the world, respected as the best heavyweight since Muhammad Ali and envied for his opulent lifestyle.

And it *was* opulent. In the 1995–7 period, Tyson had six fights and netted \$112 million. He blew just under \$5 million on cars and motorcycles, plus a further \$1.7 million on maintenance and insurance. The lawn care alone for his three estates totaled \$750,000. His monthly clothes and accessories bill came to \$95,000. His love of pigeons dates back to his childhood, but he would never have dreamed that he'd eventually spend over \$400,000 on them. The monthly bill for his pagers and cellphones was about \$7,300. Personal security was \$385,000. Per diem expenses, or loose change, came to about \$236,000 per month (read it again: \$236,000 per month). His thirtieth birthday party in 1996 cost nearly \$411,000. Then, of course, there were hidden costs, like the \$229,000 for child support, the accountant's fee of just over a million dollars and the Internal Revenue Service's slice, \$32.4 million. Even then, he still managed to fall behind on his taxes. Among the debts specified in August, 2003, was \$13.4

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million owing to the IRS and a further \$4 million payable to Britain's tax authority, the Inland Revenue.

Sports Illustrated writer Richard Hoffer, in trying to fathom how such a big earner landed in debt, quoted Tyson's reply to his inquisitive accountant: "I can't have it and not spend it." That was Tyson's elementary but revealing explanation, leading Hoffer to a Micawber-like conclusion: "Here's how to go broke on \$112 million: Spend \$115 million" (May 20, 2002).

Tyson's list of creditors was formidable. Seven law firms were owed \$600,000. One financial manager alone was due \$500,000. A music producer was owed \$450,000 (Tyson had a brief foray into the music business). He owed \$23 million in total, despite a professional boxing career that, since 1986, had brought him \$400–500 million.

In March 2004, Tyson, then in his thirty-eighth year and completely broke, announced that he had no thoughts of retirement and would continue his quest for a world title. It surprised nobody. Tyson had died a thousand deaths and had resurrected himself every time. He had rarely shown much respect for the conventions of boxing and was not about to start.

Tyson's is an epic story indeed, one of abundance and prodigality, growth and decay, trust and treachery, defilement and castigation. But these are elements not only of Tyson's life, but of the world he lived in and the times he lived through.

Popularly depicted as a monster, a psycho, a reprobate, and, most repeatedly, an animal, Tyson demanded our attention. Not because he wanted it: for the most part, he hated the persistent intrusions into his life, despised the caricatures drawn of him, resented the way in which he was used as fodder with which the media could feed their gluttonous, celebrity-fixated consumers.

Still, it could be argued that he turned himself into coarse feed. After all, interest in him might easily have waned after he'd lost his world title in February 1990. Tyson's unexpected descent to the ranks of mere mortals was greeted with surprise spiced with some satisfaction, the satisfaction that comes of watching the world's most intimidating man's public humiliation.

Interest didn't subside so easily. Residual thoughts of the Tyson menace remained. None of his contemporaries could

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excite imaginations as Tyson did. Not even the likes of Michael Jordan, a towering, iconic presence, though too pure and wholesome to stir the passions like Tyson. The rape allegation, the trial, the imprisonment, the comeback, the upset defeat, the ear-biting, the assault, the press conference brawl, the divorce and, of course, the barely believable declaration of bankruptcy: these were all parts of the grand Tyson narrative. It was a narrative in which we were all involved and it took place in a context in which tranquillity and change seemed to vie.

Tyson's life doesn't reflect its context. Rather, it's an integral part of that context. It seems an audacious claim, but no account of late twentieth- and early twenty-first century Western culture can exclude the presence of Tyson. Like him or, as is more likely the case, loathe him, he has been right there, occupying headlines and commanding our thoughts. He has precipitated all manner of moral dispute, moving people to march in the streets either in protest or exultation. And, of course, he has made us watch him. Even in the twilight of his career, having edged past his best and at an age when many men think of walking the dog as exertion, Tyson remained the most precious metal when it came to boxoffice. What other athlete in history has exerted such magnetic power?

Tyson has made his presence felt in three separate decades. He has appalled and enthralled us in roughly equal proportions. Breaking through the 1980s like some terrifying fiend from another age, he slid perfectly into the emerging celebrity culture, his globally publicized relationship with Robin Givens the most prominent athlete/actor liaison since Di Maggio and Monroe. He continued to engage us throughout the 1990s, mainly with his well-known transgressions, but also with his preternatural ability to bring mayhem to the most predictable of situations. The buzz was that anything could happen where Tyson was concerned. He wasn't subject to the same mechanisms of control as the rest of us.

Exceptional figure that he is, Tyson deserves something other than the conventional sports biography. This book situates Tyson in his social context. It might have been called "The Life and Times of Mike Tyson," the times being as important as the life.

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Tyson is neither consistent nor coherent, nor is his life and nor is the story of his life. I have written a book that conveys the fragmentation of Tyson. His life began in a commotion of disorder and will probably end that way. I've tried to impart a sense of the confusion without collecting all the crises into a single plot pattern. Many sports biographies bring together the lives of their subjects with the cozy ordinariness of a tv soap. Tyson's life, like his times, is extraordinary. In an effort to reflect this, I have ditched a linear format and written of a fragmented life in a fragmented way.

The story begins in the present and proceeds back to the mid-1960s, occasionally transferring the reader to unusual destinations. There are frequent segues out of Tyson's life, some deep into history, others into the lives of figures who shaped Tyson, still others into episodes that affected the culture of which Tyson is both a product and producer. I have arranged events in a way that displays a narrative constantly interrupted by events over which Tyson had no control, but which influenced the course of his life. And our lives.

The thing about Tyson's life is: we know what happened next. Looking back, there are no surprises. We probably all suspect we know how it will end too. Tyson himself certainly does. What we don't necessarily know is why everything happened. The hidden causal links in Tyson's life become visible when we work backwards through the drama. Not that I'm suggesting everything in Tyson's life has a material cause. His life was no more predetermined than anyone else's. He is, after all, a willful and frequently wild spirit, one that moves in mysterious though not unfathomable ways. There may appear to be a reasonless inconsistency in his thought and behavior. But there has often been logic in Tyson's apparent lunacy, as I hope to reveal.

In the interests of clarity, I'll provide an outline of the method I use to slice up Tyson's life. Even though the chapters cover periods of time, there are shuttles back and forth. As I stated before, the book begins in the present. Chapter two takes us back to June 2002, when Tyson and we were finally disabused of any notions that he was still the best heavyweight boxer in the world. It was 17 years and three months after Tyson's first professional

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fight. His humbling defeat at the hands of Lennox Lewis and his demureness in the wake of the fight suggested a passage from one era to another.

Chapter three takes us further back, to early 2002, prior to the press conference to announce the Lewis fight, a press conference that culminated in typical Tyson mayhem. In this chapter, there is a detour into the life of Monica Turner, whom Tyson befriended while in prison, married shortly after his release in 1995 and was divorced from in 2003. But, the main period covered is winter 2001/2 to summer 2002.

An incident in March 1998 serves as an emblem for countless other similar incidents in Tyson's life. Allegations of boorish behavior are often leveled at prominent athletes, though Tyson seems to have attracted much more than his fair share. Maybe it was because Tyson was, as he once described himself, "penis-centered." Whatever: women seemed to line up to accuse him of misconduct of some kind. Chapter four opens with the 1998 incident and examines the spiral of allegations that have affected Tyson. It closes at the end of 2001, briefly deviating away from Tyson to take account of the murder of Amadou Diallo, someone whom Tyson didn't know, but to whom he was unknowingly connected. Span: spring 1998 to winter 2001/2.

Chapter five covers the period from October 1996 to early 1998, a period that includes the Grand Guignol of the two fights against Evander Holyfield, the second of which featured the infamous ear-biting. Earlier, Tyson had expressed an affinity with Sonny Liston, the late heavyweight champion to whom he has been compared. It's a justifiable comparison, as the chapter suggests.

Two crucial events bookend chapter six: the O. J. Simpson case of 1994/5 and the killing of Tupac Shakur in September 1996. The chapter deals with Tyson's release from prison and the subsequent passage back into active competition under the guidance of Don King. Tyson may not have known Simpson, but he certainly knew Tupac Shakur and, indeed, shared many of the experiences of growing up in the ghettos and finding fame and fortune thanks to a talent for which others were prepared to pay. The main phase of the chapter is fall 1995 to fall 1996.

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Chapter seven concentrates on the events leading up to the rape of Desiree Washington in July 1991 and the ensuing trial, which resulted in Tyson's imprisonment. During the trial, Tyson's own defense resorted to dehumanizing him in a way that made him seem a lower order of being. It was an unsuccessful strategy and one that left its impress on Tyson for years after. While the chapter dwells on the trial, the whole period covered in this chapter stretches from summer 1991 to summer 1995.

Between March 1990 and June 1991, Tyson was a man searching for a way back: his world title gone and his reputation damaged, though not irreparably, he was showing glimpses of his best form. In March 1991, Rodney King was stopped for speeding by Los Angeles police officers. Four white officers administered a brutal beating, setting in motion a chain of events which would culminate in rioting across the USA. Chapter eight examines Tyson's attempted rehabilitation against the fiery background of the King case.

Chapter nine explores the period between December 1988 and February 1990. For most of this time, Tyson was regarded as invincible. There was nothing to suggest that any fighter in the world could pose a threat. In February 1989 he brushed aside the challenge of Frank Bruno, then ended the hopes of Carl Williams. Then an ordinary fight became extraordinary. In perhaps the biggest upset in sports history, James "Buster" Douglas pounded Tyson to his first ever professional defeat. It was an astonishing fight that threw up many more questions than it answered. There was a sense almost of relief when Tyson was finally dispatched, the reasons for which probably lie in events far removed from the fight itself, in particular the events surrounding the cases of the Central Park jogger and Charles Stuart.

In the 22 months that separated January 1988 and November 1989, Tyson's life was transformed by two people, both of whom sought a measure of control over him, neither of whom appeared to serve his best interests. Tyson first announced his relationship with Robin Givens in spring 1987 and they married in February 1988; a month before Givens had announced she was pregnant. They were divorced a year and a week after the wedding. On

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March 23, 1988, Tyson's co-manager Jim Jacobs died. Sensing a vacuum, Don King rushed in. He didn't expect to meet with resistance from, of all sources, Tyson's new mother-in-law. Chapter ten explores the conflicting interests of Givens and King and how both massively affected not only Tyson himself, but our perception of him.

In November 1987, Tawana Brawley's disappearance shocked many almost into disbelief. This was a scandalous case toward which Tyson was drawn. It brought him into contact with the Reverend Al Sharpton, who was to become a prominent figure on the political scene, not least because of his support for Tyson. Chapter eleven opens with this case, concentrating on the period between fall 1986 and the end of 1987 when Tyson unified a heavyweight title which had hitherto been divided among the various boxing organizations, each of which recognized its own champion. Tyson's campaign was designed to ensure his undisputed right to call himself the champion. The campaign was conducted while the USA was in racial turmoil.

Chapter twelve is concerned with the term spring 1980–fall 1986. Cus D'Amato took custody of Tyson from June 30, 1980, the date of Tyson's fourteenth birthday. Tyson had been training at his camp in Catskill for a while before, but the adoption constituted the start of a new period in his life. Six-and-a-half years later, Tyson was approaching his first world title challenge. The poverty of his early years had long since been left behind and Tyson was already contemplating the millions he would earn as heavyweight champion. The chapter also segues into the life of D'Amato, who was a formative influence on Tyson, though not without his critics.

Almost a year before Tyson was born, an incident on August 11, 1965, contributed to a climate which transfigured the USA's cultural landscape and so affected not only Tyson, but perhaps every child born after that date. Chapter thirteen takes account of the event, which sparked the "race riots" of the mid-1960s, and then moves through Tyson's first fourteen years as a member of what some writers called the black underclass. Looked at one way, Tyson was utterly unexceptional: just one of hundreds of thousands of ghetto-born children virtually con-

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demned to a life of petty larceny, imprisonment and/or early death. In another, he was truly exceptional: one of the few that managed to escape. Of course, many have suggested, he merely exchanged one type of confinement for another.

The fourteenth and final chapter asks: how will Tyson be remembered? The whole of this book suggests one way, of course. But, I consider the perspectives already on offer from a number of writers who have analyzed, examined and evaluated a man whose unmistakable presence will be felt long after he's finished boxing. In concluding, I return to the scenario with which I opened this chapter: what would life have been like without Tyson?

IF YOU'D BE KIND ENOUGH, I'D LOVE TO DO IT AGAIN

On the night of June 8, 2002, a conspicuously defeated Mike Tyson shuffled meekly to the center of the ring at the Pyramid Arena, Memphis, his face grotesquely distended, blood seeping from a cut over his right eye. Comprehensively beaten and, in the eyes of many, humiliated, Tyson had failed in his attempt to regain the heavyweight championship of the world, his bid subsiding in the eighth round, with Tyson lying helplessly on the canvas. He looked and sounded pitiful as he praised his conqueror Lennox Lewis as “splendid . . . a masterful boxer.” There was an almost contrite quality in Tyson’s voice as he admitted his gratitude to Lewis. “The payday was wonderful,” he feebly acknowledged. “I really appreciate it.”

Who or what was speaking? A voice that had the tone, cadence, even the lisp of Mike Tyson; not the words, though. Surely an imposter had snatched his body. Then, as if to confirm that this was not Tyson at all, the voice humbly submitted a proposal: “If you’d be kind enough, I’d love to do it again. I think I could beat you if we tried one more time.”

If this didn’t astonish enough, the imposter, after hugging Lewis, moved away. As he did, he must have seen a smear of his own blood that he’d rubbed onto Lewis. He reached across and, with an almost caress-like movement, wiped the smudge away.

This was not Mike Tyson. Mike Tyson had gone, replaced by a simulacrum, a replicant maybe, like those in *Blade Runner*, but without the dissidence. Maybe someone had given him the *Stepford Wives* treatment, stripping away every characteristic that made him an individual and leaving just a hard outer covering.

If You'd Be Kind Enough, I'd Love to Do It Again

This simply could not have been Tyson, the man who had earlier promised to eat Lewis' children (if he had any – he didn't), who, following a routine demolition of Jesse Ferguson in 1986, revealed that: "I tried to punch him and drive the bone of his nose back into his brain." The man who once proclaimed about opponent Razor Ruddock, "If he didn't die, it didn't count. If he's not dead, then we'll have to do it all over again." Who confessed to his sometime confidant José Torres that: "I like to hurt women when I make love to them . . . I like to hear them scream with pain, to see them bleed. It gives me pleasure." And who once boasted that the best punch he ever threw was the one that sent his ex-wife rebounding off every wall in the apartment.

What had happened to the terrifying, primeval creature, that minatory fiend which wrung its diabolical deeds, cruelly and abominably, leaving a pitiful trail of victims hurt and helpless? "If you'd be kind enough . . ." What kind of words were these from the fiend that seemed to close in from the outer reaches of the imagination, one so offensive, so repugnant, so sickening, so nauseating?

"I'd really appreciate it." *I'd really appreciate it.* There was a time when to acknowledge appreciation would have been a confession of moral, if not physical weakness. The words wouldn't have formed in his mouth. Surely, this was not Mike Tyson. A pod maybe from *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*.

"You wanted to ask Tyson for ID," wrote Rick Reilly, of *Sports Illustrated*. "Where was the madness, the rage? Why wasn't he in the locker room swinging at cops, smashing watercoolers, demanding a rematch?" he asked in his article "Unlike Mike" (June 17, 2002).

An hour after the Lewis fight, Tyson sat in his dressing room, bruised and bloodied, his eyes hideously swollen, but surprisingly content. In his arms he held his two-month-old son, Miguel. Looking at the baby, he explained: "I didn't quit. I nearly got murdered in there, so maybe I should've."

The precautions before the Lewis fight were reminiscent of the scene in *Silence of The Lambs* when Hannibal Lecter is wheeled off the plane and onto the runway strapped in the kind of conveyance that porters use for heavy luggage. A leather mask

covers his face. Even the breathing space across the mouth is barred. Tyson had been likened to Hannibal the Cannibal before, of course. In Memphis, he wasn't physically secured, though he was contractually bound to stick to procedures that ensured no physical contact with Lewis prior to the fight.

A decoy in disguise was sent ahead of the real Tyson, who landed in a small private jet in a remote Arkansas airfield. Tyson eventually emerged, sporting a tribal tattoo on the left side of his face. Such was the fascination with Tyson that an expert on the significance of tattoos was brought in to explain that it signified a warrior spirit.

Tyson wasn't even allowed to approach his opponent when receiving the referee's instructions, as is customary in boxing. Instead, the referee visited each boxer in his dressing room and delivered his directives. Only after the first bell was Tyson permitted to get within punching distance of his foe. Even then, he didn't get too near after the first three minutes.

He didn't do any of the things people had half hoped for; any of the things ringsiders had coughed up \$2,400 a seat for: he didn't bite, or headbutt; but he didn't cause his opponent to crumble either. In fact, he didn't do much at all, save for taking a beating like a stalwart. "There was something seriously wrong with the whole scenario," wrote Duke Eatmon, of *Community Contact*. "Tyson at no time threw any punches with 'bad intentions.' No combinations, no hooks. He offered no defense, no bobbing, no weaving; only a stationary target for Lewis to hit at will . . . he didn't hit low, break arms or bite ears" (June 20, 2002).

Perhaps most disappointing of all was the measured reflection that came after. "I got this reputation of being a dirty fighter," said Tyson. "But, it's not me that's a dirty fighter. I just had to fight [Orlin] Norris and [Evander] Holyfield. They fought me dirty. But, Lewis? I knew he wasn't dirty." All the same, both boxers had a clause in their contracts stipulating that an "onerous foul" disqualification would mean a \$3 million forfeit. To the disappointment of fans, they kept their money. Tyson never seemed so stable, so restrained, so humdrum.

"Tyson is a despicable character," declared Reilly. "A rapist, a thug you would not want within an area code of your daughter.

But it's going to be just a little harder to despise him now." Only a little harder.

"I'd be crazy to ask for a rematch," said Tyson once his head had cleared. "He's too big and too strong." He still owed the IRS as well as sundry other creditors, of course. While he may not have wanted a rematch, he was forced into considering one. Still, there are always other ways of earning money for a figure like Tyson, if indeed there has ever been a figure quite like Tyson. Fox Sports signed him for an advertising campaign for its show *Best Damn Sports Show Period*, which ran in fall, 2002.

In the slyly humorous advertising spot, Tyson, himself the father of five children, babysits the infant of one of the show's hosts and sings a sweet lullaby. The ad was pulled after a week of protests. The *New York Times* and *Advertising Age* were among the several publications that condemned the commercial as offensive. As Brian Mulhern, of Clifford Freeman & Partners, Fox's advertising agents, explained with a hint of disingenuousness: "We knew that Mike Tyson would be very, very controversial. We didn't know that he would be very, very, *very, very* controversial." The gigantic coverage that followed Tyson's promise to devour Lewis' progeny was surely enough to alert him.

The episode secreted a little more information about the attitude of middle America than perhaps Fox or its ad agency recognized. The directors of the commercial were the Hughes Brothers, best known for their mainstream feature films like *Menace II Society* and *From Hell*. "We've hated him enough," Allen Hughes said of Tyson, acknowledging to *Advertising Age* that "half the problem with Mike Tyson is himself and what he's done and the other half is the way he looks; it scares people" (September 30, 2002). Actually, there was another problem and a deeper one that Hughes himself realized without giving it the weight it deserved: "The baby is white. If there was a little black baby in his hands no one would have a problem with that."

His title gone, his once-formidable skills conspicuously eroded and his fearsome reputation perhaps unsalvageable,

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Tyson could still cut an image to horrify. Even in self-mocking mode, he represented a quality of terrifying *Otherness* that mainstream culture could not accommodate. The black man's access to mainstream culture is conditional: a servant, or entertainer who doesn't dare threaten the status quo, an anodyne, sexless character, like a scholar, minister or color-free politician, or a beast that's capable of being tamed. Tyson, having been locked up, punished, disciplined and castigated, was still not completely crushed. Sheepish in defeat, contrite in expressing remorse, Tyson could still conjure images that chilled the soul of white America. He remained beyond the pale, a black male incapable or perhaps unwilling to assimilate – an Other, whose unchangeable difference made him something of a metaphor, a mirror. In the mirror, whites could see not just an image of what blacks were really like once the pretense of culture and civilization was effaced, but a reflection of what they *were not*.

For a time in the 1980s, every move, every little move he made, every word he uttered was framed in notions of savagery, fear, peril, even death. Verging on a fantasy character, Tyson necessitated distance. This was something in our midst, but not in our universe – neither in real nor psychological terms. Intriguing, perhaps: you wanted to read about him, see him on television, look at him fight. He was there as delectation. But you wouldn't want to think of him as part of the same species as yourself. Or, if you did, you'd want to add incontestable qualifications. He may be a member of *Homo sapiens*, but he was only distantly related to the particular branch of humanity of which you liked to think you were a part. You wouldn't want to have a drink with him, less still invite him round for dinner. If you did, you'd be careful to alert the police first.

The attraction and the repulsion were twinned. Seeing Tyson was a little like watching a slasher movie: this was fright made flesh. An accessible monster who would, given the chance, devour both you and your family. Yes, accessible. You could experience the Tyson terror without actually leaving your home. Pay-per-view and bigscreen tvs made it possible to look this menace in the eyes, sense his power, almost feel his breath, yet never actually come into contact. The dread that Tyson

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brought was experienced vicariously from a position of absolute safety.

Eight months after his humiliation, Tyson began to sound more like his normal self. "To do what I do you have to have heart and character and discipline," he reminded reporters, following his 49-second knockout of Clifford Etienne. "There's so much more to fighting, but who cares if a nigga dies in the ring?" he asked rhetorically. "Nobody."

Gathered to collect a few quotes on the fight (far from Tyson's fastest: he'd finished off five other fighters more quickly), reporters were treated to a diatribe. "You reporters, you white doctors. You never stole a loaf of bread in your life. So, what do they care about me? They hope I go to prison and die there."

However Tyson thought white America regarded him, he could be in no doubt about one thing: white America paid handsomely to see him perform. For returning to the same Memphis arena where he had been discredited, Tyson received a million dollars up front and a percentage of the profits, which probably came to around \$4.5 million. For a 36-year-old fighter who had lost his previous fight so abjectly and who was fighting a mediocre opponent, this was very good money. Even the most generous of observers couldn't have believed that Tyson was anywhere close to being the fighter of the eighties and early nineties. Yet, he could fill the Memphis Pyramid and move the pay-per-view buys like no other entertainer in history.

Tyson knew it; which is probably why he equivocated so much in the lead-up to the fight, certain that, wherever he went, people would follow, whatever he did they would report, whatever he said they would listen to. Stories of Tyson's absence from the gym circulated two weeks before the Etienne fight. This was excused by the fight's promoters as owing to sickness, though trainer Jeff Fenech threw up his hands in disgust and flew home to Australia after Tyson's umpteenth missed training session. Tyson decided to pull out of the fight, then changed his mind, whereupon Etienne pulled out, only to change *his* mind.

There was no abatement of intrigue. As the CNN news reporter put it, in June 2002: "Even just walking from the car into a building, he makes news" (*CNN Live Today*, June 4). This was

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sixteen years after he'd first won the world title. Sixteen years. He had no title, had been humbled in his last fight and, at 36, was slipping into middle age. Yet, his power to engage people was undiminished.

Even his conqueror tacitly affirmed this when he issued a \$20 million lawsuit against Tyson. Lewis was furious when Tyson pulled out of a promotion scheduled for Los Angeles in June 2003. Lewis was due to defend his title, while Tyson was to meet Oleg Maskaev on the same bill. Tyson's withdrawal persuaded television network HBO that even a world title defense by Lewis was not worthy of pay-per-view. Tyson was the real attraction. Even the site fee paid by the Staples Center dropped by \$4 million purely because of Tyson's absence.

In a gesture hardly befitting a champion, Lewis offered to give Tyson more time to prepare, but Tyson was unmoved. \$8 million, it seems, was not enough to get Tyson into the ring. That was what Tyson stood to earn for his labors. Incensed, Lewis also filed a \$100 million lawsuit against King, alleging that the promoter was trying to pry Tyson from a projected rematch.

Instead, Lewis suffered the ignominy of a pay cut and a troublesome defense against Vitali Klitschko, while Tyson, almost without trying, kept creating big news. The day before Lewis raised his leaden arm of triumph over Klitschko, Tyson was arrested following a brawl outside the Brooklyn Marriott, New York, and charged with third-degree assault and disorderly conduct. The other two men involved in the incident were charged with menacing behavior. Tyson was pondering whether he'd face yet another jail sentence.

"Mike is a branded man," Tyson's spiritual advisor, Muhammad Siddeeq, told CNN's *People in the News* in 2002 (June 1). He wasn't referring to the Maori facial tattoo that Tyson affected around that time. The stigma was as much ascribed as earned. Tyson was reminded of its indelibility probably every day of his life.

Tyson deserves his place in history. He offered a form of entertainment and an ideology with special appeal to all those who lived in the afterglow of civil rights: those who felt a sense of