

## A Boxing Writer's Lost Novel, and the Agent Who Floats Like a Butterfly

by Steven Zeitchik, PW NewsLine -- 3/1/2005

Nat Sobel remembers the first time he contacted F.X. Toole. The agent had spotted a short story by the unknown in the niche San Francisco literary magazine *Zyzzyyva*. Sobel asked Toole if he had anything else, and it turned out the author, really a 69-year-old L.A. corner man named Jerry Boyd, just happened to have a collection of short stories he'd never showed anyone. "It's almost like he was waiting for someone like me to come along," recalls Sobel.

Since then, karma and other words not normally associated with boxing have kicked in. The book was bought at Frankfurt by Geoff Mulligan, editorial director at the U.K.'s Secker & Warburg, on the basis of one story, and later by Dan Halpern at Ecco after some fierce stateside bidding. Both turned it into the collection *Rope Burns*. Shortly after, a story in the book, *Million Dollar Baby*, was optioned and turned into a movie by producer Al Ruddy, a movie which, of course, went on to pick up the Best Picture Oscar this past weekend.

Toole died in 2002, before the film even started shooting. But the biggest karmic turn may be yet to come. It turns out that author had 850 pages of a novel called *Pound for Pound* that Sobel and a book doctor have been polishing with the approval of Toole's three children. Sobel says it's still several months away from being finished, but he's preparing to take a piece of it to London and hopes that the opus, like the Oscar, becomes posthumous vindication.

The book tells of an aging Irish-American boxing trainer and a young Mexican-American boxer he reluctantly takes on. According to Sobel, it deals with "the pain a boxer must push past in order to succeed."

Sobel says Toole worked on the title "up until the day he died." The agent describes his author, fondly, as a little "cranky," which, Sobel says, actually helped him to negotiate on behalf of a Hollywood unknown. Toole, for instance, wanted his film deal structured so he could "get the money now," citing his age. He also wanted, and won, assurances from producer Ruddy that the studio wouldn't change the not-quite-Hollywood ending.

Toole was famously careful about separating his literary and boxing lives; he preferred that Hollywood and publishing people called him Toole, not Boyd. When Ruddy first went looking for Toole in the L.A. boxing world, nobody knew who he was talking about.

A few golden statues have, of course, changed that. And the karma keeps coming, as another Hollywood figure has bought and optioned the title novella from *Rope Burns*. The obscure figure? Taylor Hackford, the Oscar-nominated screenwriter and director of *Ray*, who sources say has already sent a script to Toole's children.--Steven Zeitchik