



Thrown

Kerry Howley

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With empathy and introspection, Howley describes the dark culture of MMA fighting and her search for inner ecstasy.

Why would a young intellectual woman involved in the serious study of philosophy interrupt her life for three years to follow two mixed martial arts fighters as they search for the fleeting moment when the referee holds up their arms in victory? Because that young intellectual, Kerry Howley, was bored with the phenomenology conference she was attending and walked through halls of a Des Moines hotel until she reached a conference room with the sign “Midwest Cage Championship” outside. She stepped inside and watched her first MMA fight. Howley experienced such ecstasy that she immersed herself in the sweaty, stark world of MMA and has written about her experience in *Thrown*.

To the director of her graduate studies, she explained that infiltrating the world of MMA was her project of “ongoing study of the phenomenological basis of ecstasy.” The first fighter Howley meets is aging, overweight, rundown legend Sean Huffman. With a precise, observant eye and detached empathy, Howley becomes Huffman’s most dedicated “spacetaker,” a constant in the fighter’s inner circle.

In her role as spacetaker, she becomes a shadowy spectator to whatever is happening to the fighter and relays these events with detachment as she explores the fighter’s motives, the philosophical implications of their choices, and her own need to hand her academic life over to the brutal world of MMA. When Howley realizes that Sean is struggling to recapture the success of his early career and even to survive, she looks for another fighter who might usher her deeper into the MMA culture. A graceful, powder-white fighter named Erik Koch becomes her alternate object of study. The opposite of Sean, Erik is a long-limbed young fighter on his way up in the MMA world.

Howley follows the paths of both Huffman and Koch, paths which zigzag through the Midwest, New Jersey, and Vegas, in search of their moments of ecstasy, and she notes all the sacrifices involved just to experience it. While chronicling the defeats and successes of the two fighters, she recognizes that she is searching for that same feeling—to be outside of one’s self, in pure bliss—and shunning anything or anyone that prevents that from happening. With sly humor, Howley examines the duality of mind and body through Sean and Erik, but she also introspects on the sacrifices she is willing to make simply to experience the ecstasy of either one winning. *Thrown* is an engrossing story told by a would-be philosopher who fell in love with the men of the octagon.

MONICA CARTER (Fall 2014)

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