

BookTalk

LYIN' KING

By Theodore Pappas

Only in America: The Life and Crimes of Don King

By Jack Newfield, Morrow, 352 pages, \$23

"Don, I'll pay you the money," moaned Sam Garrett. A small sickly man with tuberculosis, Garrett was a perfect match for the 240-pound hustler who had flunked physical education in high school and earned a reputation on Cleveland's East Side for refusing to fight men his size. When the police arrived, King gave Garrett one final kick to the head. Garrett lapsed into a coma and died five days later. "Donald the Kid," as he was called, had stomped a man to death because of a delinquent debt, just as twelve years earlier he had shot and killed a man who tried to raid one of his gambling dens. So begins this picaresque tale of the "life and crimes of Don King."

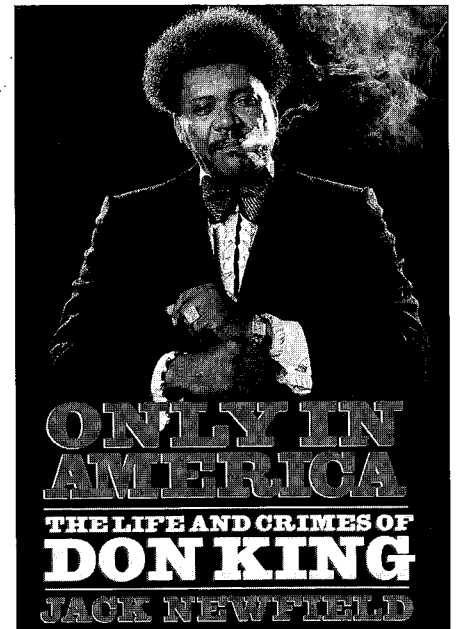
As a veteran journalist with the *New York Post*, Jack Newfield understands that the link between professional boxing and the underworld of crime was forged long before Don King left prison in 1971 and began his career as a fight promoter in 1972; he knows that gangster Owney Madden controlled heavyweight champion Primo Carnera in the 1930s, that Jake LaMotta took dives in the 1940s, and that mobsters John Vitale and Frankie Carbo owned Sonny Liston in the 1950s. But, as Newfield shows, none of the Runyonesque characters in boxing history ever controlled and corrupted the sport more thoroughly than Don King has since the late 1970s.

Newfield's information is not new. Some of his research was published years

ago in the *Village Voice*, and he clearly rehashes information from standard biographies of prominent fighters. But if the chapters, individually, are far from knock-outs, the cumulative effect of the narrative—of chronicling in detail the many fights and rankings fixed by King; the numerous kids from the ghetto swindled by King; the sports journalists, boxing officials, and referees bribed by King; and the media moguls, corporate executives, civil-rights leaders, and elected officials who fawn upon King and tolerate his thuggery because of the money he can make them—is staggering all the same. Score it a TKO.

Considering his wealth, pomposity, and famed coiffure (journalist Dick Schaap once quipped, "Don King's body did four years in prison, but his hair got the chair"), it is easy to see why King commands attention. He is the consummate Barnum, the sporting world's Reverend Ike, what attorney Thomas Puccio once described as the "smartest person I ever cross-examined in a trial or a deposition. And I questioned Ivan Boesky." King holds exceptional sway over poor black kids from the inner city, for he knows, in Newfield's words, "their language, their weakness, their psychology. He [knows] how to give them a self-image, an idea of their role in history, how much money they could make if they only had 'proper management'." A master of mind games and circumlocution, King will ingratiate himself with black fighters who have signed with white promoters by distributing copies of a book called *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*.

By presenting a big pile of cash instead of a check for 50 times as much, King knows, he can cozen the typical street kid into signing virtually anything. Even vet-



eran fighters who should know better have fallen for this tactic. When Muhammad Ali threatened to sue King for the \$1.2 million that King had shorted him after his fight with Larry Holmes in 1980, King shrewdly convinced Jeremiah Shabazz, the Muslim minister who had converted Ali to Islam, to visit the fighter in the hospital and to offer him a suitcase filled with \$50,000 in exchange for an agreement to drop the lawsuit. Severely brain-damaged even before King had talked him out of retirement and into fighting Holmes, Ali accepted the cash and dropped the suit.

Fighters signing with King often discover that they have actually signed away their entire careers, surrendering control over their future fights and earnings. (The government's recent case against King, which ended in a mistrial, in fact dealt with contract fraud.) The fighter also soon learns that King will charge him exorbitantly for every conceivable expense, from jump rope to protective cup. For instance, for his victory over Frank Bruno in 1986, Tim Witherspoon was promised \$550,000. But after King (who made \$5 million on the fight) had deducted "expenses," including \$275,000 for the fighter's "manager" (i.e., King's stepson Carl), Witherspoon was left

with a mere \$90,000. Mike Tyson has even paid King a bogus \$100,000 "sanctioning fee" before his fights.

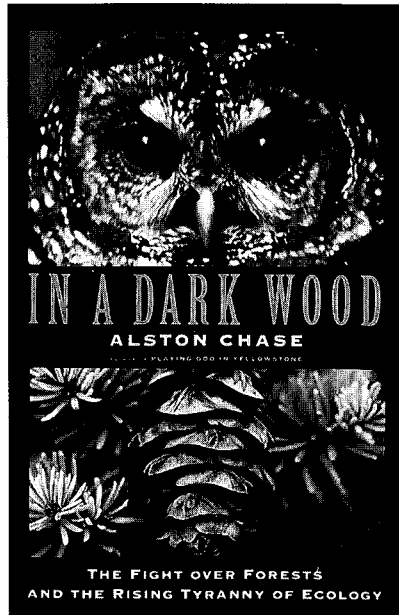
Not surprisingly, over 100 lawsuits have been filed against King since 1978, but only two have been successful. When fighter Ernie Butler threatened to sue, King told him to drop the idea, "or else." When heavyweight champion Larry Holmes threatened to change promoters, King promised to have his legs broken. "Not for a single minute," says Holmes, "did I think it wasn't a real threat." As Newfield puts it, "Boxing is the only sport in which the lions are afraid of the rats."

The rat in this case may have his own predator to fear. King's ties to the Mafia are well-documented, and the FBI knows through informants (such as the Reverend Al Sharpton) that King met with John Gotti in December 1982. According to one source, Gotti slapped King for not "paying his debts to us on time...that guy's got to be taught a lesson and John will take care of it." This wasn't the first time that King had been roughed up. When King tried to swindle Trevor Berbick's promoter, James Cornelius, in 1981, Cornelius and four large friends tracked King down in the Bahamas and administered a professional beating, breaking his nose and punching out teeth.

The FBI believes that King has fleeced his fighters so ruthlessly over the years because he has owed so much money to his silent partner, the mob. Larry Holmes posits a psychological reason: "With Don, it was making money off [fighters], sure, but there was something more to it.... I believe deep-down Don King hates fighters, is jealous of them, because we can do what a fat old bullshitter like him can't do—and that's fight. That is why he wanted to have such power over us, to humiliate us." Holmes never did like carrying King's luggage through the airports.

Tim Witherspoon, on the other hand, could care less about what ultimately motivates Don King. To him, it's a simple matter of race and robbery: "Don's specialty is black-on-black crime. I'm black and he robbed me."

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CLEARCUTTING ENVIRONMENTALISTS

By Karl Hess, Jr.

In A Dark Wood: The Fight Over Forests and The Rising Tyranny of Ecology,
By Alston Chase, Houghton Mifflin,
479 pages, \$29.95

In the euphoric afterglow of Earth Day 1970, who could have predicted that a warm and fuzzy species protection act would catapult the Pacific Northwest into social and economic turmoil? Probably no one, though according to Alston Chase the writing was on the wall—or, to be more accurate, nesting high in a tree in a dark wood.

In a Dark Wood is Alston Chase's riveting account of the epic contest between loggers and greens for the ultimate environmental prize: the coastal old-growth forests of northern California and Oregon. These are where the world's tallest trees—the redwood and the Douglas fir—grow, and where the northern spotted owl unleashed the Endangered Species Act and shut down the Northwestern rural economy.

Chase's account of this timber war is intriguing: "It is a tale without heroes or villains, in which the bad guy isn't a person at all but an idea." The idea is biocentrism—the view that all living things have equal value. It is, Chase claims, the battle cry of greens out to topple humanism and science in favor of ecological theory.

Well before the spotted owl felled its first timber harvest, Chase was busy debunking the ecology of natural regulation and other aspects of green cosmology in *Playing God in Yellowstone*. That book is a landmark. It was the first to take the Park Service to task, and it moved me to write *Rocky Times in Rocky Mountain National Park*. But where Chase ascribed Yellowstone's dying willows, aspen, beavers, and grizzlies to the faulty ideas of eco-philosophers, I faulted the political incentives facing the Park Service.

Chase is right that the Pacific timber war took a toll in human suffering. As environmentalists hammered away at timber sales in the courts and through guerrilla protests, men and women lost their jobs, alcoholism and abuse soared, children lost the safety net of functional families, and entire communities fractured. If human sympathy was all that mattered, Chase's book would tower like a Douglas fir. But it isn't—and the book doesn't.

Chase begins by debunking old-growth forests as environmental fantasies and biological deserts. They were rare, he claims, until the advent of fire suppression and the removal of native Americans. Prior to settler meddling, fire swept through western forests at intervals of 80 to 100 years. Nature was in constant rebirth, and old growth was merely a fuel source for forest regeneration.

Chase has the sweep of history right, but the details of forest ecology wrong. Old growth is not a biological desert. True, the forest floor is relatively sterile when 100- to 250-year-old trees are tightly packed. But as the forest matures, trees die, the canopy opens to sunlight, and a rich diversity of species not found in younger timber emerges. Sadly, Chase's treatment of old growth is stuck in the 100- to 250-year age rut where trees look old but the forest is still young.

A bigger problem is Chase's claim that old growth is uncommon in a natural regime of frequent fires. The Yacoult burn in 1902 and the Tillamook burn in 1933 show how devastating Pacific Northwest fires can be. But the fact is that even in an environment where big fires happen, the dominant age class of unlogged stands of redwood and Douglas