



[Muhammad Ali ? fifteen rounds with the greatest](#) | [Charles Dickens ? Hard Times and Great Expectations](#) | [John Lennon- the story of the original Beatle](#) | [J.K. Rowling ? the mystery of fiction](#)

Books Reviewed:

[Muhammad Ali ? fifteen rounds with the greatest](#) [1]

Books Reviewed:

[Charles Dickens ? Hard Times and Great Expectations](#) [2]

Books Reviewed:

[John Lennon- the story of the original Beatle](#) [3]

Books Reviewed:

[J.K. Rowling ? the mystery of fiction](#) [4]

Issue:

[190](#) [5]

Reviewer:

[Ted Percy](#) [6]

Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

3

Argyll is a Scottish imprint and the 'Inspirations' series editor and some of the authors here are senior household names with the (Glasgow) **Herald**. The series styles itself as 'well written, pacy, intelligent biographies' created with the bright teen in mind?. Let's see how they do.

Hugh MacDonald is a leading **Herald** sports writer. His is an appropriately snappy, jabbing style as he tells the story of Clay/Ali the gifted fighter and draws our attention very clearly to the two levels on which he chose to fight. Not only was he one of the ring's finest athletes but he saw himself as an ambassador for black supremacy and separateness. All the time he was boxing he was kicking against the pricks of the moneymaking white establishment, which mean he went on too long. MacDonald tells a straightforward story in (wait for it) a punchy style. He's a professional sports writer so names are dropped like June-time apples and 'legendary' characters and events abound. His tale will be readily understood and enjoyed by fight fans.

Charles Dickens lives with all of us ? we may not know his stories but Micawber, Twist, Fagin, Scrooge and Squeers inhabit our everyday converse. But what of their creator? Ex-librarian and now **Herald** uber-lit-meister Taylor uses household words to present a Dickensly readable account of his subject's life. In doing so he skilfully points up

episodes and circumstances that influenced Dickens' development of plots and characters. He also makes us aware that, in the times on which Dickens put his hand, writing was a physically strenuous and draining process. Dickens' relentless personal drive allowed him to succeed on a rock-star scale against odds that - had he a lesser strength - would have stopped Master Humphrey's clock for good and all. Truly a writer for all the year round, Charles John Huffam, the ex-blackening boy, is well served here.

I never liked John Lennon His caustic rudeness ? increasing in later life ? seemed to sour all his music; I could not align with all the adulation that many of my peers accorded him. I was hoping that this ?Inspiration? might change my mind about this. No. Dolan tells Lennon's life-story all right, confirming the spiky persona and prick-kicking attitude that made him a punk before their time. We are shown how the fractured family life may have shaped (or warped) his undeniable talent. Unfortunately there's something in the way Dolan's narrative lurches along that is profoundly irritating. This is mainly down to authorial or editorial carelessness ? characters and places appear without any explanation of their identity or significance and dates of cardinal events are largely absent. Proof reading errors abound too, as do geographical misconceptions. And ?Ain't that a shame? was recorded by Fats Domino, not - as Dolan has it - by Fats Waller! And the Beatles ?kick-started world music? ? what rubbish! But the bright teen (you know what I mean) won't be bothered by such slippages. For him or her it will take more than a headful of nits to make a book lousy ? but can't buy me, love.

Harry Potter is a true phenomenon of our time ? to many of us more real than the rest of the world. We all know the story of how the young wizard was allegedly conceived in an Edinburgh café, but know little of Harry's modest creator. And this, it seems, is how this creator wants it. Fair play to her. Fraser has had a ringside seat at the Potter circus and, while telling us as much as is prudent about J.K. Rowling's life story and character, gives us a highly informative and - to many ? revelatory insight into the intricate world of publishing and selling children's books. And this is this the book's main strength, for it delineates the landscape through which developing authors like Rowling must negotiate the way and in which Castles Dangerous and Sloughs of Despond abound. Luckily Rowling is Mrs Worldly Wisewoman and has, thanks to her underlying strength of purpose and character, most empathetically made it. We are shown too not only the modest negotiator, but the upstandingly forthright philanthropist and committed parent. This is very skilfully delivered story and a great read.

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Links:

- [1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/muhammad-ali-?-fifteen-rounds-with-the-greatest>
- [2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/charles-dickens-?-hard-times-and-great-expectations>
- [3] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/john-lennon-the-story-of-the-original-beatle>
- [4] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/jk-rowling-?-the-mystery-of-fiction>
- [5] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/190>
- [6] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/ted-percy>