

Coffee table book nirvana

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New, beautifully illustrated doorstoppers on boxing, glaciers, antique postcards, modern India, and New York City.

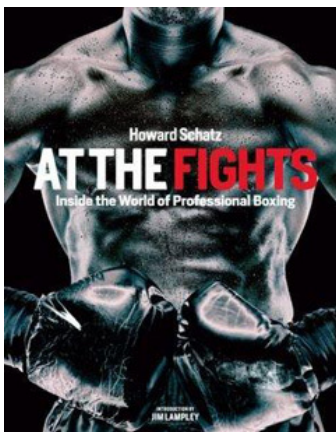
By Lawrence A. Armour, contributor

FORTUNE -- Coffee table books typically dominate the publishing world at this time of year, and 2012 is no exception. Hundreds of new titles have appeared in recent weeks, all vying for your gift shopping dollars. From this vast selection I chose five very different but equally sumptuous volumes.

First up: Howard Schatz's *At The Fights: Inside The World of Professional Boxing*. An 11-by-14-inch work of art that weighs in at a healthy seven pounds, six ounces, it includes 320 photos of current and former boxers and interviews with more than 50 boxing insiders. It's a one-two punch that anyone with the slightest interest in photography or the sport of boxing should be thrilled to find in his or her stocking.



Schatz devoted six years to the book. As multi-talented as you can get, he spent 23 years as a retina specialist, clinician, and professor of ophthalmology before swapping his medical practice in San Francisco for a photography studio in New York. That was in 1995. Since then he's won dozens of prestigious photography awards. His work appears regularly in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Vogue*, and other major publications. (*At the Fights* was produced by Sports Illustrated Books. *Sports Illustrated* and *Fortune* are both published by Time Inc.) Assisted by his wife Beverly J. Ornstein, he has also created a small library of books.



At The Fights, his 19th published work, grew out of an earlier book that focused on athletes in general. "When I was working on it," Schatz says, "I saw how different boxers are from other athletes. The courage to box is beyond anything I can understand. It is fascinating."

Schatz's interview subjects include trainers, judges, referees, managers, promoters, writers, announcers, commissioners, and physicians. Brutality is a common thread. So are skill and performance. "You can see a million guys go 20 or 30 minutes shooting basketballs," says Emanuel Steward, a trainer, "but nothing is as devastating as seeing someone who can slip and slide punches."

Nigel Collins, an ESPN analyst and former editor of *The Ring* magazine, provides another perspective: "I love boxing. If you're in love with a dangerous woman, it's very exciting. But because you know the facts about that woman doesn't make you stop loving her. That's how boxing is with me."

The fighters have their say. "To me, boxing is the most gentlemanly sport there is," says heavyweight Chris Arreola. "There's two guys that don't know each other, go in the ring, beat the living shit out of each other, and after they're done they shake hands like nothing ever happened. I don't hate the guy, and he doesn't hate me. We both know it's a sport, and you both know you're going to go home and kiss your kids."

As good as the words are, the pictures tell the tale, including powerful shots taken at ringside. Schatz is a studio photographer at heart, however, and he convinced most of his subjects to visit him at his place of work. "My major goal," says Schatz, "was to use each boxer to make art, to create remarkable and unique images that surprised and delighted me."

He does that and more, starting with straightforward studio portraits and moving on to kinetic action shots. Schatz gets amazing results by dousing boxers with water or having them punch their way through sheets of salt and powder. And his stroboscopic multiple exposures of fighters jumping rope and hitting a punching bag are out of sight.

The book includes a seven-foot gatefold with images of 37 former and current champs. It also features dozens of shots of muscular boxers doing their thing, plus studio portraits of Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray Leonard, Lennox Lewis, Leon Spinks, and Joe Frazier. My favorite is a two-page spread that contains 55 photos of Shane Mosely, swinging and swaying his way across the page.

Like *At the Fights*, James Balog's *Ice: Portraits of the World's Vanishing Glaciers* is actually two books in one. The first showcases strikingly beautiful photographs of glaciers in Greenland, Iceland, Alaska, Canada, the Himalayas, the U.S. and Canadian Rockies, and other locations around the world. The second consists of time-lapse photos that record the changes the glaciers experienced over a six-year period.

To make it happen, Balog and his team embedded some 40 cameras in strategic spots in and around the glaciers. Programmed to take one picture during every half hour of daylight, year-round, the cameras recorded roughly 8,000 frames a year, working through temperatures that dropped to minus 35 degrees Fahrenheit, winds of up to 160 miles per hour, dozens of feet of snow, torrential rain, rock falls and more.

"We are in the midst of a gigantic, unplanned, uncontrolled experiment involving the entire planet," Balog says in the introduction. His time-lapse photos provide stark and irrefutable evidence of what the results of climate change look like. A similar story is told in *Chasing Ice*, a feature-length documentary that Balog and his team produced about their work. It brings the melting glaciers pictured in the book to the big screen. The film, which opened earlier this month, just might make it to the Oscars.

Balog is an award-winning photographer who has produced five other books and shoots for publications like *National Geographic* and *Vanity Fair*. He started work on *Ice* following a 2005 *New Yorker* assignment to photograph Icelandic glaciers. In addition to making an environmental point, the photos in the book display the grandeur and majesty of centuries-old ice and snow sculptures in a way I've never seen. Many are breathtakingly beautiful.

The Postcard Age, published by the Boston Museum of Fine Art, introduced me to another world I knew little about. It began in 1869, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire authorized the post office to deliver mail without envelopes. Postcards became an overnight hit. They were the new media of that era, playing the role that e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and the like

handle today.

The difference, of course, is that each snail mail card came with a bonus flip side that showcased a picture, a painting or

