

# FIGHTING TRAUMA

Launching her new book in Bridport in March, **Anna Whitwham** talks to **Fergus Byrne** about how she elected to deal with trauma in a boxing ring.

When you are a teenager, sitting in A&E with a bloody nose after a fight can be a traumatic experience. But for Anna Whitwham, that particular episode has strange parallels to a path she took much later in her life.

A group of men were fighting outside a pub in South London and, infuriated when one of them punched her friend in the face, Anna marched up to him and told him he shouldn't punch a girl. He simply turned around and punched her in the face too.

The nurse in A&E gave the two blood-splattered young girls some friendly advice: don't get involved when men are fighting; they often don't know what they are doing. 'But of course, he did', remembers Anna. 'He did it twice!'

Today, as an author, lecturer, and boxer, she lives between London and Dorset with her daughter Sylvie. Although she was scheduled to have a boxing match at the end of March, she will instead be launching her second book, *Soft Tissue Damage*, in Bridport.

Following on from her award-winning first novel, *Boxer Handsome*, which was published in 2015, *Soft Tissue Damage* is about Anna's compelling need to physically participate in what many see as the somewhat unfathomable world of legally hurting someone while getting hurt in return.

The book examines the transformative impact of boxing and the many different relationships we can have with pain. At the same time, it is also the story of a long and painful goodbye to a mother who had been a powerful influence on Anna's life, and an exploration of how we deal with what can feel like a paralysing loss.

*Soft Tissue Damage* and Anna's entry into the world of boxing were born out of her emotional displacement after her mother's life was taken by cancer.

Although the stories of her mother's death and Anna's journey into a mostly masculine world of punch bags, sparring, bruising and blood are inextricably linked, we are immediately drawn to discuss boxing, why it happens, and the different reasons people are beguiled by it.

After her mother's death, Anna says she needed to reshape her life. By chance, she came across a white-collared boxing event when dropping her daughter off to dance practice in West London. One of the trainers asked her if she would like to box. Her instinct was to laugh. She was soon to turn forty, and the idea seemed a joke. But a stronger influence, a need for some

kind of jolt, a reset, took over. For most people the idea might seem extreme, but perhaps boxing could become a trauma to help salve another trauma.

'I started training and it just absolutely took over', she tells me. 'It was at a time when I really needed to actualise something about pain that I couldn't find a language for.' Without hesitation, though unsure of whether the comment might be too strong, she says, 'It really, really saved me. My trainer saved me. The fight saved me. The training saved me. And when I say saved me, that sounds a bit dramatic, but it really helped me to get to the next bit of grief.'

## *Soft Tissue Damage is an engrossing cauldron of bruising compulsions*

She had already written her first novel, *Boxer Handsome*, inspired by her grandfather, who had been a boxer in East London. It was an exercise that brought much of her family history to life. Boxing was already part of her life. A single mum since her daughter was one, the child's father was also a boxer. But with the death of her mother, Anna 'desperately needed to open up the map a little more'. She says she needed to return to her grandfather's world 'and, therefore, my mum's world.' She wanted to 'open up the layers of history' of her grandfather's life. After the loss of her mother, taking up boxing and learning about her family were ways of 'returning to the safety of my family.'

Anna doesn't fit the archetype perception of a boxer. Her long, slender hands constantly battle voluminous, unruly red hair. She is tall and slim, more model than bruiser, but still a shape that lends itself to a long reach and the potential to keep another boxer at bay. Today she points out her recent nail extensions, alluding to the possibility of a waning interest in whether to get back into the ring again. With the fight at the end of March already postponed, she looks at her nails, an unlikely addition for a boxer, and muses: 'I wonder if that book has now been written?'

But she knows boxing will never leave her. Its role in her life is too entangled. It's not only in her DNA, it is emotionally ingrained. *Soft Tissue Damage* is an engrossing cauldron of bruising compulsions that manifest in sometimes brutal but often illuminating questions—though not always answers.

In the book, Anna talks about a time in her youth when self-harm was part of a search for an understanding of herself. I ask whether taking up boxing, so much a part of her recovery from loss, is also a natural way for her to escape something else inside her. But no. If anything, it is an escape into, rather than out of something.

'Boxing is empowering', she says. 'It's definitely a sort of owning of the body and putting yourself in a space where you do feel bigger, and you do feel physically quite strong.' She's not saying boxing is the only way to do this, but 'it does give you a quiet power. When you walk into a ring, however symbolic, it feels like an empowered thing to do rather than a destructive thing. The self-harm was definitely about shrinking and diminishing and, yes, actualizing a pain, but it was about sort of erasing a self. Whereas boxing is about pronouncing "I am here" much more.'

Born in London, Anna describes herself as being 'awful' at school, but she went to Queens University in Belfast and loved it, doing a scholarship in Drama and English at the University of California in Los Angeles, followed by an MA. She now teaches on the MA course in creative writing at Royal Holloway in London. She has been surrounded by books all her life. Her father is a writer, and her sister is a literary agent. Writing became a natural path.

While her first book, the novel *Boxer Handsome*, is a brilliantly written story of blood, history and East End family power play, with strong characters from both the Irish traveller and Jewish communities, *Soft Tissue Damage*, although not without its own brutality, is closer to home. In this book she owns every word, every descriptive line, every emotion and every bruise.

But despite the bruising, she remembers the death of her mother and the process at the end as strangely 'ordinary'. The chat with the doctor when it was clear her mother's body no longer wanted food left Anna in a place of abstraction. Remembering and explaining how it felt, she unconsciously makes fists and immediately apologises for the body language. 'While my sister wanted time and prognosis and just absolute, absolute certainties, I was always in the abstract,' she says. She still brackets the experience in the abstract and feels that boxing 'is a way to punctuate some of it. Make it concrete. Make things finish and end properly.' While boxing is finite and a more 'complete narrative', she sees death as incomplete, reflecting that we don't know where our loved ones are when they are gone.

So often our experience of loss is linked to our nurtured beliefs and absorbed ideology. We need to know where that loved one has gone when they leave us. Is it really forever? Where is that energy that was once so powerful? Anna describes herself as a spiritual person but "place" still raises a question: 'I don't know about the certainty of another place, at all' she says.

Having gone through the process of writing a book inspired by her grandfather, she wonders if that place is in our grandchildren. She describes her daughter as having a great resemblance to her mother. Was there 'some sort of exchange?' she asks. She felt it with her own grandfather. An affinity that is hard to quantify. 'There's something about grandparents and grandchildren that is very powerful.'

That may be the answer. A part of them is in us and our children. In *Soft Tissue Damage*, Anna describes a moment with her mother "when death was still just in the abstract". She asked her how she might find her when she was gone. Her mother turned and with certainty, simply said: "I'll find you. Don't worry about that".

***Anna Whitwham will launch her new book, Soft Tissue Damage, at Mercato Italiano in Bridport on Thursday March 27th. The event is free to attend but tickets need to be booked at: <https://mercatoitaliano.uk/events>.***



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