

A Fighter Disarmed

Mike Tyson is done with being a poster boy for bad behavior—but don't ask him what comes next.

Allison Samuels

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When "Tyson" debuted at the Cannes film festival last May, the audience jumped to its feet—and stayed there, clapping, for 10 minutes. "Tyson" is indeed an extraordinary documentary. James Toback, the film's director, essentially turns on his camera, pulls in tight on boxer Mike Tyson's world-weary face and just lets him talk. Tyson spends the next 90 minutes narrating his roller coaster of a life: the heavyweight championship he won at 20 (making him the youngest champ ever), the trainers, the wives, the stint in prison. Tyson, dressed in a loose-fitting shirt and slacks and speaking in a monotone almost devoid of emotion, cries at times, especially when he mentions his time behind bars. But mostly he seems at peace, which, considering the heartbreaking story he's just told, is reason enough for blasé *cinéastes* in France to cheer. Tyson was so shaken by the reaction that he turned his back on the crowd—but not, as many assumed, because he was overcome by tears or embarrassment. Far from it. "You know how you hear those voices in your head?" he says. "One of those voices was saying the whole time at Cannes, 'These white motherf—kers are clapping, but they still don't like you.'" His confused reaction—in which people who are cheering appear to be enemies—reflects his fragile state of mind. What's compelling is that he appears to be conscious of that struggle. "Whenever stuff goes well for me, I just wait on the bad stuff to come."

Taking the good with the bad—now, there's a good title for Tyson's six-word memoir. The idea of making "Tyson" was Toback's. The two have known each other for two decades. Toback decided that turning on the camera and just letting it roll—in all, he shot 30 hours of film—was the only way to get Tyson unplugged. He also decided to shoot Tyson two years ago, while the boxer was trying to get clean in drug rehab. "I knew that would mean less distractions for him and give him time to think and talk about the things he's wanted to clear up about himself and his life," Toback says. Tyson certainly doesn't hide from much in the film. He talks about not knowing if the man who lived with him was his father, how he was a fat kid who used to get beaten up until he started robbing people on the streets of Brooklyn, even how it felt to fight with a burning case of gonorrhea. (Bizarre fact: Tyson's second wife, Monica, is the younger sister of Michael Steele, the new chairman of the Republican National Committee.) You get the sense that he believes he's finally got nothing left to lose—though, despite all the misdeeds he admits to, Tyson still insists he did not rape Desiree Washington 17 years ago. "I'm just telling the story of my life with no expectations of what people will think," he says. "I've never been anybody to idolize, and I know that."

Still, this Tyson does not seem like the same man who chomped on Evander Holyfield's ear—twice. I've interviewed him many times over the years, in the best and worst of circumstances. I remember sitting with him in his Ohio home following his release from prison after his rape conviction. He was angry at having lost three years of his life, but there was also a sense of hope and the future, all laced with humor. The Mike Tyson who sat across a table from me in a Las Vegas hotel room a few weeks ago seemed distant and lethargic. He's gained weight. His biceps don't seem so imposing anymore. His most imposing physical attribute now is the menacing swirl of a tattoo that looks as though it's threatening to swallow his face. He perked up a bit when he talked about how much he hates changing his 3-month-old daughter's diapers and about how he's finally in a relationship where he doesn't want to cheat: "She treats me good. I just don't want to." The rest of the time Tyson seemed like a man who was taught only one thing—how to fight.

I still can't help wondering: now that the fighting is over, what happens to Iron Mike? It's clear he doesn't know. But at least he's grown weary of being the poster boy for bad behavior. Maybe he's just slowing down in middle age—after all, he is 42. He often said he never thought he'd live to see 40, and he's outlived many of his friends, including Tupac Shakur and John Kennedy Jr. "I don't know why I'm here, sista," he said, "I really don't." I asked him about the books he received a decade ago in jail, signed by Kennedy, Maya Angelou and others. We once spent an afternoon in his basement looking through them, and they'd be just the kind of mementos to cheer him. He gave a chilling answer. "I didn't like that Mike Tyson, so I gave all that stuff away," he said. "He wasn't a good guy. He was just somebody I created to give people something to talk about." And now he's gone.

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