

# Muhammad Ali: Power and Grace [C1]

Il capolavoro di Eig, documentato da più di cinquecento interviste e arricchito da un'ampia raccolta di documenti dell'FBI, svela l'enigmatica figura del leggendario pugile dei pesi massimi Ali Muhammad.



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New Yorker Jonathan Eig is the author of five books, three of them bestsellers. Crowning his career so far is *Ali: A Life*, probably the definitive biography of [heavyweight](#) boxer Muhammad Ali. The book is based on more than five hundred interviews, as well as thousands of pages of previously-unreleased FBI files. The novelist Joyce Carol Oates called Eig's work "an epic of a biography." Muhammad Ali died in 2016, but remains one of the most charismatic and controversial athletes of all time. To find out more about him, Speak Up contacted Eig. We began by asking him what made Ali such an [outstan](#)ding boxer. **Jonathan Eig (American accent):** Ali's boxing skills were unusual. It was rare to see a [heavyweight](#) fighter who could move as quickly as he did. He had an [astor](#)nishingly quick [jab](#), which helped him keep fighters away, and he moved like a [middleweight](#), or even like a [lightweight](#). He was just so quick. And he had a great ability [to dodge punches](#). Some of it was just instinctive. He just seemed to know where the [punches](#) were going [to land](#). He described it as just being able to

move his head the [tiniest](#) fraction of an inch. And he couldn't explain how he did it. But he managed [to avoid](#) a lot of damage. So it was this combination of speed and power that made him really unique.

## SHOOT THEM FOR WHAT?

When he refused to serve in the Vietnam War, Ali became an antiwar hero. However, when he returned to the ring after exile, he was more vulnerable as a boxer. **Jonathan Eig:** When he came back after three and a half years outside the ring, when he was exiled from boxing, he was not as fast, and he began to absorb more punishment, he began to get hit a lot more. And we could see how that damage was causing him brain damage in the [long run](#). But in the short run he was able to get by because he turned out to have a great ability to take a punch. He could absorb damage without being seriously hurt, without being [knocked out](#). So the second half of his career he really relied more on [guile](#) and less on speed, and he proved that he was a great strategist. Unfortunately, there was a price to pay for that when it came to the neurological damage that he was doing.

## FIGHTING FOR RIGHTS

Ali also participated in the fight for racial justice in the US. Just how important was he in the campaign for Black rights? **Jonathan Eig:** I think Ali is one of the most important figures in the 20th century when it comes to civil rights and Black rights in America. You can look at the progress, the evolution, in this country. You can look at what people like Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois did to [raise a consciousness](#) about Black rights in the early part of the century, and what fighters like Jack Johnson did, and then [ball players](#) like Jackie Robinson. Sports was a great way of testing a lot of these political theories because people who weren't ready to change laws saw that Black athletes and Black entertainers were changing culture, and the laws would [catch up](#). So if Jackie Robinson proved that Black people could play baseball with White people, and if Muhammad Ali proved that Black people could [stand up](#) and [speak out](#) for themselves in sports, then suddenly it became more difficult to defend the laws that were discriminating against Black

people. So I think Americans are more receptive to change when they see these brave figures challenging the status quo. And then you start to see the [pressure building](#) on [lawmakers](#) to legitimise, to legalise, some of those changes. **Frederick Douglass (1818-1895)** was an African-American abolitionist, newspaper publisher and author. Born enslaved in Maryland, he learned how to read and write in secret, and escaped from slavery in 1838. He became a national leader of the abolitionist movement in Massachusetts and New York, becoming famous for his oratory and anti-slavery writings. He wrote three autobiographies describing his experiences, and held several public offices. **W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963)** was an African-American sociologist, historian, author and activist. He helped create the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. An academic with a PhD from Harvard University, he had originally believed that social science could provide the knowledge to solve the race problem, but decided that in a climate of virulent racism, social change could only be [accomplished](#) through agitation and protest.

## **SHOWING THE REAL ALI**

Books about public figures can change, or help to change, people's attitudes towards these figures. Eig's biography reveals new aspects of Ali's character. **Jonathan Eig:** Often with Ali, and with a lot of other famous men and women, we tend to celebrate them to the point that we ignore their [flaws](#). And I think that's a mistake. We turn our heroes into superheroes. We turn them into these [cartoon](#) figures. And I think it's important to remember that our heroes don't have to be perfect. I really wanted to show that Ali was brave and brilliant, but he was also flawed. He was stupid when it came to managing his money, he treated women very [poorly](#), [he turned his back](#) on friends like Malcolm X. I believe he could have possibly saved Malcolm X's life, and chose not to. So I wanted to create an [accurate nuanced](#) image of Ali. I wanted to give people a sense that he was human, because if we expect our heroes to be perfect, then nobody is ever going to try to be heroic.

## ALI IN AMERICAN EYES

Public opinion about heroes can fluctuate over the years. Ali was loved and hated at various times of his life. The boxer's image has changed radically since his death in 2016. **Jonathan Eig:** We've softened Ali in the public image. We've turned him into kind of this [teddy bear](#). When he suffered from Parkinson's and he could no longer speak, he became this sort of angelic figure, and we turned him into a bit of a saint. And I worry sometimes that we've softened him and lost sight of his radical nature. You know, it's gotten to the point where everybody loves Ali. He's on T-shirts, he's on posters, he's on [billboards](#)... and he's become this almost sainted figure. And it troubles me a little bit because I think we need to remember just how controversial he was. He was the most unpopular man in White America for a long time, and now we've kind of forgotten that side of him.

## ALI'S TOP 10 QUOTES

Muhammad Ali was almost as [proficient](#) with his mouth as he was with his [fists](#). He [sang his own praises](#), often predicting the round in which he would win a fight. He could [be boastful](#), funny or [down-to-earth](#). He made words

1. "I'm gonna float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. His hands can't hit what his eyes can't see."
2. "I am an ordinary man who worked hard to develop the talent I was given."
3. "I'm the champion of the world. I'm the greatest thing that ever lived."
4. "It's just a job. Grass grows, birds fly, waves [pound](#) the sand. I [beat people up](#)."
5. "This is the story about a man with iron [fists](#) and a beautiful [tan](#)."
6. "It's hard to be [humble](#) when you're as great as I am."
7. "I know I got it made while the masses of Black people are [catchin' hell](#), but as long as they ain't free, I ain't free."
8. "Boxing is a lot of White men watching two Black men beat each other up."
9. "Don't count the days. Make the days count."

10. "Impossible is just a word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing."
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# Glossary

- **to land** = cadere
- **long run** = lungo termine
- **cartoon** = cartone animato
- **poorly** = male
- **teddy bear** = orsetto di peluche
- **be boastful** = presuntuoso
- **down-to-earth** = con i piedi per terra
- **ball players** = giocatori di baseball
- **pressure building** = fare pressione
- **astonishingly** = sorprendentemente
- **jab** = pugno diretto
- **he turned his back** = voltare le spalle
- **beat people up** = picchiare, pestare
- **punches** = pugni
- **tiniest** = minima
- **guile** = astuzia
- **accurate** = fedele
- **billboards** = cartelloni pubblicitari
- **lightweight** = peso leggero
- **catch up** = aggiornarsi
- **nuanced** = ricca di sfumature
- **proficient** = abile
- **fists** = pugni
- **pound** = colpire
- **tan** = abbronzatura
- **heavyweight** = peso massimo
- **middleweight** = peso medio
- **speak out** = esprimere
- **accomplished** = raggiungere
- **knocked out** = messo al tappeto
- **raise a consciousness** = aumentare la consapevolezza
- **catchin' hell** = passare un inferno
- **outstanding** = eccezionale

- **to dodge** = schivare
- **to avoid** = evitare
- **stand up** = alzarsi
- **lawmakers** = legislatori
- **flaws** = difetti
- **sang his own praises** = cantare le lodi
- **humble** = umile