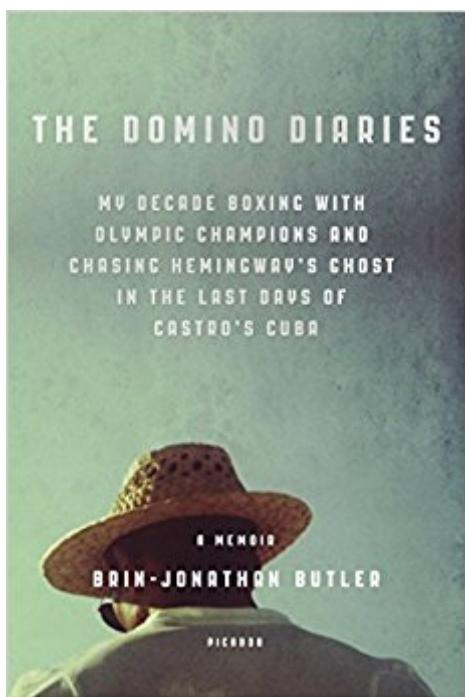


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# The Domino Diaries: My Decade Boxing With Olympic Champions And Chasing Hemingway's Ghost In The Last Days Of Castro's Cuba



## Synopsis

A powerful and lively work of immersive journalism, Brin-Jonathan Butler's story of his time chasing the American dream through Cuba. Whether he's hustling his way into Mike Tyson's mansion for an interview, betting his life savings on a boxing match, becoming romantically entangled with one of Fidel Castro's granddaughters, or simply manufacturing press credentials to go where he wants, Brin-Jonathan Butler has always been the "act first, ask permission later" kind of journalist. This book is the culmination of Butler's decade spent in the trenches of Havana, trying to understand a culture perplexing to Westerners: one whose elite athletes regularly forgo multimillion-dollar opportunities to stay in Cuba and box for their country, while living in penury. Butler's fascination with this distinctly Cuban idealism sets him off on a remarkable journey, training with, befriending, and interviewing the champion boxers that Cuba seems to produce more than any other country. In the process, though, Butler gets to know the landscape of the exhilaratingly warm Cuban culture—and starts to question where he feels most at home. In the tradition of Michael Lewis and John Jeremiah Sullivan, Butler is a keen and humane storyteller, and the perfect guide for this riotous tour through the streets of Havana.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A writer with less integrity might have concluded that Fidel Castro’s experiment had failed. But [Butler’s] time in Cuba provided this talented and ambitious writer with all he needed to introduce readers to the complex and contradictory island he

loves. The Boston Globe "Far more than a sports memoir, this terrific book explores the world of Cuba's famed boxers, who have chosen to live in dire poverty in their home country even as multi million-dollar paydays await them elsewhere....[Butler] provides a rich (if quirky) portrait of contemporary Havana, a decaying city that remains, even in tatters, one of the most soulful and bewitching places on the planet." Chicago Tribune "Butler deftly bobs and weaves his way through Havana past and present in his gonzo-poetic blend of sports journalism, political philosophizing, and gorgeous first-person travelogue...this is a book that pulls no punches." Passport Magazine "Gripping." Sports Illustrated "In this striking memoir, writer and filmmaker Butler examines his bittersweet love affair with Cuba through the lens of boxing...More artist than journalist, Butler approaches his material slantwise, and much of his prose is fluid and searching....He has produced a book worthy of Cuba's beauty and sorrow." Publishers Weekly "[Butler's] gritty portrayal of the island is an authentic glimpse into the lives of those who live it every day. In many ways, the book acts as a hands-on travel guide to Cuba, infecting readers with an urge to visit. His passion for the island is contagious. With the United States embargo against Cuba likely soon to be lifted, the island is on the verge of what could turn out to be radical change. The Domino Diaries is one last look inside Fidel Castro's Cuba." The Globe and Mail "People lament that this is no Golden Age of boxing writing. Hogwash, I say....I recommend writer Brin-Jonathan Butler. [He is] principled, intelligent, and can collect big picture thoughts and philosophy and render it accessible." The Sweet Science "This memoir is particularly timely....You can embrace this book with an eye toward its cultural commentary or you can focus on the sport of boxing. Either way, there's plenty to learn." Beth Fish Reads "Butler is a sensitive observer, imparting in a most visceral way the smells, sounds, visuals, and, most gloriously, the unblushing sexuality of a Cuba on the precipice of another, larger, perhaps most fatal American invasion: tourism." Booklist "Colorful writing and insightful analysis....A nuanced portrait of the grays where reality lies between the black and white." Kirkus Reviews "In The Domino Diaries, Brin-Jonathan Butler writes like a heavyweight champion: Tyson's power, Ali's elegance, and Joe Louis's humanity, all of them are on display here. Writing, like boxing, is a solitary endeavor, one that gets displayed nakedly, for better or worse, to the world. This engrossing work not only looks at the sweeping world, it delves into the darkness of being alone with your aloneness. A total knockout." Charles Bock, New York Times bestselling author of Beautiful Children "There's nothing in the world like America's grasping, oversexed, blundering, blustery and oft-deadly relationship with Cuba. Charting

this fever dream, this illness of love and fear, requires a poet's ear, an outsider's eye, a boxer's clinical cruelty, and an unhealthy attraction to breakage. I give you Brin-Jonathan Butler. Anyone can--and, especially now, will--tell you what to think about Cuba. But no one can show you better how the place makes you feel. *•••* S.L. Price, Sports Illustrated Senior Writer and author of *Pitching Around Fidel: A Journey into the Heart of Cuban Sports* *•••* "You don't have to be a boxing fan to enjoy Butler's book. The discussion of sport takes a back seat to the fascinating cultural insight and comparisons to American culture. *•••* Vice on A Cuban Boxer's Journey *•••* "A subtle and powerful examination of Cuba, as seen through the eyes of its most celebrated boxers. Filled with memorable characters caught in the middle of an existential struggle. *•••* Steve Fainaru, Pulitzer Prize *•••* winning coauthor of *The Duke of Havana: Baseball, Cuba, and the Search for the American Dream* on A Cuban Boxer's Journey

BRIN-JONATHAN BUTLER is a writer and filmmaker. His work has appeared in ESPN Magazine, Vice, Deadspin, The Wall Street Journal, Salon, and The New York Times. Butler's documentary, *Split Decision*, is Butler's examination of Cuban American relations and the economic and cultural paradoxes that have shaped them since Castro's revolution, through the lens of elite Cuban boxers forced to choose between remaining in Cuba or defecting to America.

A Left Hook and Upper Cut. Very very very good. I grew up in Miami and my husband's family used to live in Cuba, we both agree this is one of the best books we've read about Cuba, the people and Sport: mano a mano.

Blew my socks off! Brin-Jonathan Butler has writing talent to burn. Lots of naked truth here, delivered in one punch after another. What a page-turner!

It arrived on time and was in great shape and has been read and enjoyed A very good read about Cuba and boxing

I love this book for many reasons. Brin-Jonathan Butler writes a beautiful account of Cuba's final years in the US boycott. As US-Cuban relations improve by the day, the time capsule that has been Havana since 1959 will soon be a thing of the past. Butler brings the reader into this world unknown to most in the US. It's also an intelligent memoir with chapters that begin with quotes from various works of literature. He writes about Hemingway's Cuba, which--as Butler informs the reader--was

surprisingly bereft of politics, unlike Hemingway's previous stints abroad. And there's also the boxing part, which is more a personal account of people who have choices to leave it all behind for obscene amounts of money. Some boxers he met outside Cuba have defected, while others he met on the island decided to stay. The end of the book reads like a thriller. I also appreciated his personal story before and during his trips to Cuba. Too often memoirists don't delve into their own stories, but that's not the case in "The Domino Diaries." This book is special because it appeals to men, women, sports fans, and people who can't be bothered with sports.

The appeal of boxing lies in its simplicity. It is bare, stripped down, and always points to the truth. Butler's writing on boxing often reflects this, and he is undoubtedly one of the best boxing writers working today; though anyone expecting this book to be a simple, straight forward, boxing memoir may be a little disappointed. This is a book about something deeper than sports, and nothing about it is simple or straightforward. The start of the book is admittedly a little muddled. Butler's family recollections and portraits of his early forays into boxing are erratic and skittish as he begins like Ali in the first round against Liston, leaping around here and there, landing little of significance. It's when he first visits Cuba that he really plants his feet and lets his hands go, and that's when this memoir comes into its own. Butler first discovers the island as a young man in his early twenties, an amateur boxer intoxicated by literature and the romance of Hemingway. He ends up training with Hector Vincent, two time Olympic gold medalists, and encounters various characters along the way (including a memorable meeting with Gregorio Fuentes, the inspiration for Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*). Eventually he is pulled into the orbit of the legendary Guillermo Rigondeaux, perhaps the greatest fighter ever to come out of Cuba, and one of its most infamous defectors. Butler follows Rigondeaux's professional career in the US, and examines the seismic repercussions of his defection, both on the political landscape of Cuba, and for those he left behind. He visits Cuba again and again, interviewing family and friends of Rigodeaux, and becoming more enmeshed and fascinated with his story as the years roll by. He's kind of like *the man in black* in *Westworld*, wandering through a world frozen in time looking for answers and meaning, surrounded by hosts trapped in loops, who know they are unable to leave, and seem to grow more self-aware and frustrated by the minute. The end of the river for Butler is meeting the great Tennessee Williams. For boxing fans like myself this is the hold-your-breath, 'Willard meets

Colonel Kurtz', moment... The three-time heavyweight Olympic gold medallist is the Muhammad Ali of Cuba and arguably its 2nd favourite citizen after Fidel. Unfortunately the Stevenson Butler finds is far removed from the great idol of yesteryear, now a hopeless alcoholic in tracksuit bottoms, spouting crumbling platitudes, as dusty and broken down as the American car rusting in his driveway. The man famous for turning down millions of dollars to fight in America is unable to even afford tyres for his car and the video footage of him asking for money before submitting to an interview is sobering and heartbreakingly. As endings go though it asks far more questions than it answers. It could be viewed as a scathing attack on the Cuban system, though Joe Louis, one of America's most revered champions, was treated far more ruthlessly by a capitalist society than Stevenson ever was. In Cuba an athlete does not have the freedom to fall as far as some American champions have, but maybe that is a tragedy in itself? Butler clearly has the heart of a pugilist and the soul of a poet, and this is a book imbued with a rare passion and insight. Ultimately though Cuba and its people remain an elusive quarry and resist any attempt at simple explanation. It doesn't matter what lens Butler chooses to view Cuba through it stubbornly refuses to come into sharp focus and remains a place of mystique and beguiling ambiguity.

Brin is an amazing storyteller. This book seamlessly weaves together his encounters with boxing luminaries such as Mike Tyson, Teofilo Stevenson and Guillermo Rigondeaux and his own backstory as he makes his way through Cuba chasing the ghost of Hemingway and filming his boxing documentary. Each vignette is powerful, informative and modern journalism at its stunning best. If this book doesn't make you want to visit Cuba - I don't know what will. Highly, highly recommend.

Excellent, inside view of Cuba, and how its people find ways to survive, and the inside scoop on the Cuban Boxing world. Best book on Cuba out there.

This is an excellent book. It reads almost like a blend of Paul Theroux's travel writing, mixed with Hemingway's economical athletic prose and Leonard Gardner's illuminations of the underprivileged. It's brilliant and you need not be a fan of boxing or Cuba to enjoy it.

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