

# SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

*Ian Weir's pugilistic parable about a preacher who wants to KO the Devil would be a perfect follow-up vehicle for Mickey Rourke's *The Wrestler**



BY CHERIE THIESSEN

Daniel O'Thunder by Ian Weir  
(Douglas & McIntyre \$29.95)

Laced with blood, thunder, sex, murder, rape, mayhem and miracles, Ian Weir's first novel is about good versus evil.

It's the vibrant story of a has-been boxer named Daniel O'Thunder who makes a Lazarus-like comeback to fight for Christ.

Rocky Balboa goes to Dickensian London and gets religion.

★ Fighting with fists has

been a sport ever since the early Romans, and the Brits raised it to a national pastime in the 19th century when illegal bare-knuckle bouts were usually ignored by authorities unless a competitor was killed.

From multiple narrators we learn O'Thunder is a battered one-time boxer, an army deserter and a reformed drunk. When he's not preaching or consoling his mission of fallen souls, he fights for Christ with the gift of a golden voice and a fist like a thunder-bolt.

God helps him in both endeavours.

But every good screenwriter knows a good protagonist requires a formidable antagonist, so Weir pulls no punches in that department. O'Thunder hankers for a punch-up with Lucifer himself.

As the chief adversary in this *Book of Daniel*, the Devil is more of a presence than a person, a chimera rather than a character, but his influence is continuous and very real to the hero.

Reverend Jack Beresford, the most-heard narrator, recalls when he himself was a preacher in Cornwall in 1849. By 1851-52, when the bulk of this tale takes place, the not-so-reverend Jack has become Jack Hartright.

He claims the whole story really can be traced back to Biblical times when, for forty days and nights, the son of God spent some time in the desert with that tempter, the Devil.

As Milton has already made clear in *Paradise Lost*, all sensitive Satan ever really wanted was to be God's special companion, but he was pushed away, and we all know the results of that.

Most of Weir's characters will transform or reveal themselves in a different light by story's end.

John Rennert, nicknamed Jaunty, is a sleazy, ex-military man who sets up illegal boxing bouts to pay off his mounting gambling debts. He tracks down O'Thunder in an effort to lure him back into the ring.

Another strong voice belongs to Nell, initially the adolescent ingénue, but aged twenty-seven years by the end of the novel. Reduced to whoredom, the belle Nell is searching for the mother she never knew. Like almost everyone who meets him, outside the ring or in it, Nell is struck by O'Thunder's charisma.

A newspaperman in reduced circumstances, William Piper adds his penny-a-word viewpoint, as does his mother and his mother's aide, Dorcas.

From the outset, even if we haven't read the author's biography, we know we are in skilled hands. In the first chapter, Jack writes, "...to tell my story we must begin where it all began to go wrong." What reader can resist reading about all the things that have gone wrong in someone's life?



Son of B.C. author Joan Weir, Ian Weir has written more than 100 television episodes, several radio plays, and received two Geminis, a Jessie, and a Writers Guild of Canada Screenwriting

Award for his labours. He was also a writer and executive producer of the CBC series, *Dragon Boys*.

So soon enough you can relax, knowing he's going to hook you, reel you in, let you run, and then release you, only to throw some juicy bits over the other side of the boat to tempt you back.

Although the thinking in this novel is modern; the scope of the tale is Dickensian. How divine is O'Thunder? Can he really perform miracles? Will he get a chance to fight the Devil, if in fact the Devil exists at all?

Is Lord Sculthrope the Devil, and if he is, what does that make Nell? And who has been murdering those street women (prior to the days of Jack the Ripper)?

In addition to knowing the importance of jumping into the story at the height of the action, Weir also knows how to create a strong sense of place and how to weave a story that shows instead of tells.

While crafting a rollicking tale with a payoff, Weir adds research to match his wit. Several of the mid-19th-century pugilists in the novel were actual boxers such as Tom Cribb and the Tipton Slasher.

Pungent, repelling, frequently noxious—the smells and

sights of low-life London in the 1850s come through shudderingly strong.

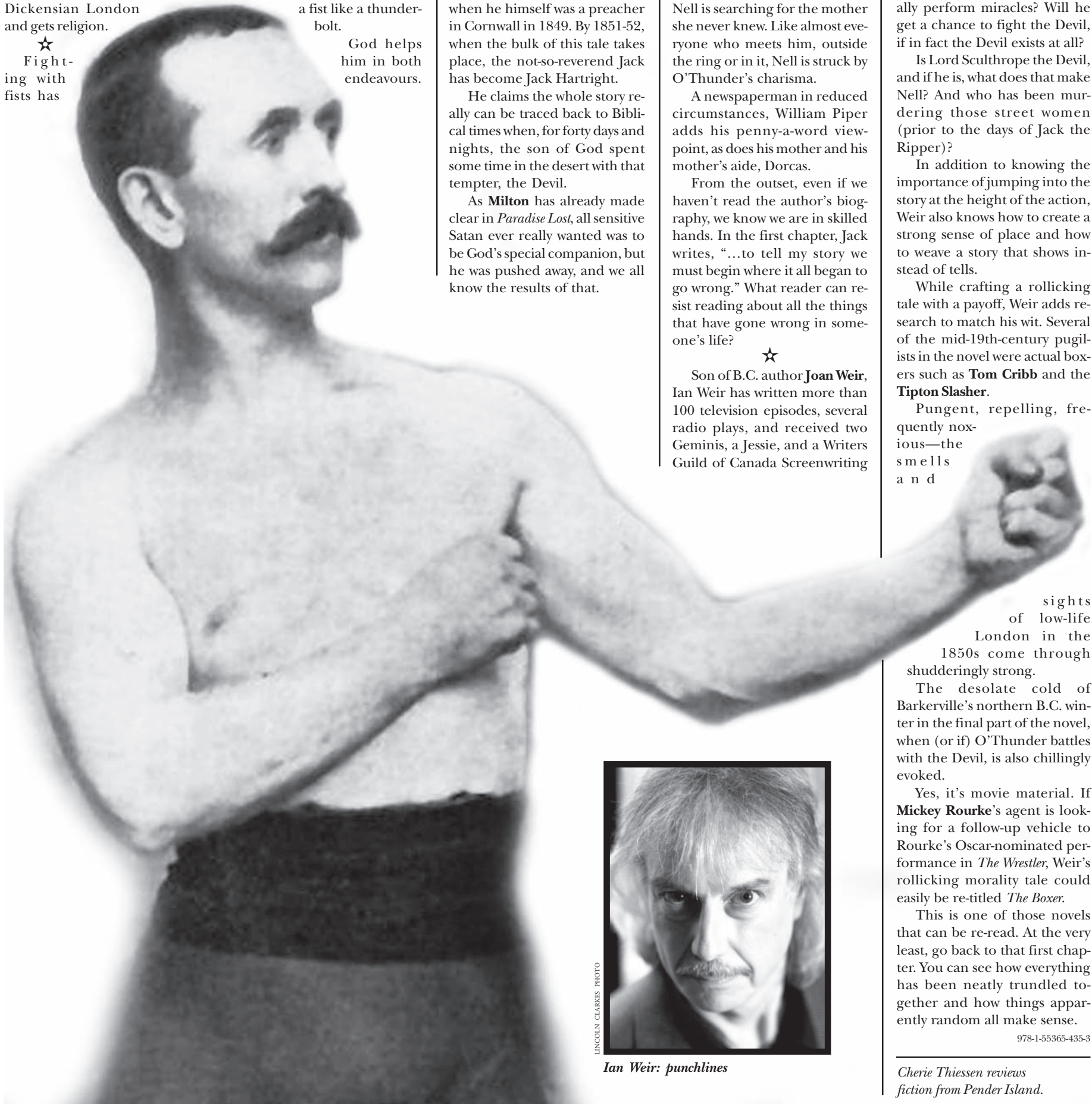
The desolate cold of Barkerville's northern B.C. winter in the final part of the novel, when (or if) O'Thunder battles with the Devil, is also chillingly evoked.

Yes, it's movie material. If Mickey Rourke's agent is looking for a follow-up vehicle to Rourke's Oscar-nominated performance in *The Wrestler*, Weir's rollicking morality tale could easily be re-titled *The Boxer*.

This is one of those novels that can be re-read. At the very least, go back to that first chapter. You can see how everything has been neatly trundled together and how things apparently random all make sense.

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Cherie Thiessen reviews fiction from Pender Island.



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Ian Weir: punchlines