Markle, Adrian. *Bruise*. Brindle & Glass, 2024. 220pp. $20 US/$ 24 CDN paper.

Reviewed by Duncan R. Jamieson, Ashland University

*Bruise* is a tightly written novel focused on Jamie Stuart, a thirty-something Mixed Martial Arts champion stripped of his title. Broken bones in his right hand make it impossible to fulfill his contractual obligation of at least one fight per year. He did not lose the title in the cage; he could not defend it.

Jamie had fled a dying fishing village in British Columbia to begin his career in the city as a cage fighter. He had to leave the city where he lived with his manager and trainer when he used the last of his earnings to buy a Greyhound Bus ticket home. When he stepped off, he found an almost inactive harbor, some broken down houses including the one in which he grew up before fleeing, a hospital and a bar filled with the fishers whose boats seem to spend more time tied up than working. He remembers when they went out in the morning and returned late in the day with the catch, but it seems those days are gone forever. He finds the bar is owned by a woman he went to school with, which does not bolster his ego. They live together above the bar where he serves as her bouncer and assistant, but neither the relationship nor the job last. The hospital is operated by a woman physician who cared for the family, and upon Jamie’s return she tries in as supportive a fashion as she can to convince him that his hand is not likely to heal which confirms—that which he denies—his career is over.

There are a few other characters developed, trapped one way or another in the village. Jamie’s older brother, Sid, still lives in their father’s house and works as an itinerant handyman with a sideline of drug dealing. Jamie’s younger brother, Dex, who seems to have had the most promise, died in an accident playing chicken with his two brothers. This is explored in one of several flashbacks that help set the stage. The brothers’ parents had separated before the novel begins, the boys living with their mother until her death. They then went to live with their alcoholic father whose attempts to remain sober failed. He died in mysterious circumstances, again before the novel begins. The other characters are a few fishers/bar flies who harass and cajole Jamie throughout the novel. Finally, though Markle never introduces them, Jamie’s manager and trainer were his roommates in the city where they stunted his growth and independence by taking care of all his daily needs and requirements, creating a sense of arrested development in Jamie.

Through flashbacks Markle explores how the father attempted to teach his sons manliness by taking them down to the beach where he challenged them, oldest to youngest, to throw him out of a circle he drew on the sand. The oldest, Sid, never succeeded in beating his father, but it is evident Sid saw his role as that of protector of his siblings. He could not protect Dex, who showed the most promise, and he felt guilt and failure when Jamie returned to the village, unable to escape.

This gritty novel grabs the reader at the beginning when Jamie steps off the Greyhound Bus, the village being its last stop, and refuses to let go. The reader is faced with Jamie’s repeated failures and his limited successes, his despair that overcomes almost completely any hope for a fulfilling life. Stunted at school Sid and Jamie quit, and Dex died before he had any chance at a future. Sid’s hopes that Jamie would find success when he left for the city were dashed when Jamie returned broken in body and spirit.

For me this is a brutal representation of the chasm between the haves and the have nots. I grew up in Queens Village, a working/middle class community in New York City. Like the other families we owned a single-family home where the neighbors knew one another and watched out for the children. I can’t remember ever carrying a house key because we never locked the front door. If somehow it was secured, no problem, the kitchen’s back window was not locked so we could always climb in! Both parents and two older brothers created a warm and comfortable environment. Even if I didn’t know what it was, there was never a time before I knew I was going to college after I graduated from high school. As an educated, privileged, white cisgender male with a successful career teaching in higher education, I have absolutely no real-life contact with Jamie’s life. We lived a few miles from Rockville Center where Doris Kearns (Goodwin) grew up. She like me became an historian who wrote of the pleasant, safe times for those of us in the suburbs she describes in her memoir, *Wait Till Next Year* (1997). While *Bruise* does not belie that environment, it does offer a counterpoint through Jamie’s diametrically opposed family life. Neither I nor anyone in my family ever struggled with alcohol or had any connection to illegal drugs. Rather than being remembered negatively we were respected and valuable members of the community. Through strategic flashbacks Markle lays out the more brutal traumas. None of Markle’s characters are living the dream, rather they seem to be stuck, at least for the time described in the novel, living the nightmare. Trying not to give anything away, is there a glimmer of hope? This reflects Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), view of the human condition: “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”

Markle creates a small cast of characters who jumped off the pages at me. He keeps their identities sparse, the same with the surroundings in which they live. For me at least, someone who grew up largely in a pre-television world listening to “The Lone Ranger” or “Big John and Sparky” on the radio, I used my imagination to bring the characters to life. I still prefer reading to watching television or going to the movies, where everything is presented to you, leaving little to the imagination. My image of Jamie may be vastly different from Markle’s, or yours, but that is what for me makes great literature. As I read *Bruise* I kept thinking of the wide gulf between my white privilege and Jamie’s relentless struggle to make sense of his efforts to make his way in the world. It occurs to me that Markle’s writing offers in words a view of the world similar to (forgive me—I’m an historian!) Jacob Riis’s photographs in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). Where Riis used photographs to draw attention to the plight of the poor, Markle uses words.

This is a fascinating portrayal of a young man’s struggles to overcome massive deficits to find himself. Run, do not walk, to get a copy!