

The Sweet Science
By Jack Newfield

If A. J. Liebling, who was born 100 years ago on October 18, had been a fighter, he would have been a skilled craftsman, renowned for his improvising intelligence.

He would have been Bernard Hopkins or Archie Moore.

Despite his obese, un-athletic body, and small, delicate hands, Mr. Liebling boxed himself in his younger days. And he cultivated friendships with the wisest trainers and cornermen of his era.

Together these two things gave Mr. Liebling the insight that boxing was partly geometry—essentially about angles and distances. Mr. Liebling appreciated the chess match aspect of boxing, its timing, spacing, pacing, rhythm, adjustments and side-to-side foot movement to acquire better angles to hit and not get hit.

If Mr. Liebling's boxing writing had a secret weapon, it was the insider wisdom he received from trainers like Charley Goldman, Whitey Bimstein, and Freddy Brown. They were his graduate school professors, and he dedicated his book, "The Sweet Science" to these three spit bucket Spinoza's. He called them, "My explainers" in the dedication.

All three were hard core, New York characters, who worked out of Stillman's Gym on Eighth Avenue and gratified Mr. Liebling's passionate urbanism. Mr. Goldman had sculpted Rocky Marciano into an invincible hitting machine.

I have recently re-read all of Mr. Liebling's boxing pieces (and most of his other work), and I discovered that I appreciate them much more now than when I first read them during the 1960s. When I was younger I was unduly intoxicated by the Hemingway and Jimmy Cannon school of drama, lyricism, and tough guy sentimentality.

Now I am better equipped to savor Mr. Liebling's sense of history, his wry stylistic grace, his leisurely pace and historical digressions. I also find that I can now better appreciate Dostoyevsky, Cervantes, Al Smith, Johnny Cash, and Ted Williams. Standards seem to matter more once you become immune to trendiness.

Mr. Liebling did not inflate a fight with false meaning, or cosmic significance. A fight was usually just a fight to Mr. Liebling, not some universal metaphor for racial empowerment, or foreign policy, or the destiny of a particular ethnic group. He was a diligent reporter and lucid thinker who described what he saw. He heard what was being whispered on the lower frequencies, as Ralph Ellison put it.

Mr. Liebling did not tend to see a fight as a test of character and will, or in psychological terms involving the unconscious. This was more the school

of writers influenced by trainer Cus D'Amato, who tutored Norman Mailer, Gay Talese, Pete Hamill, and myself in his 14th Street gym. Abbot Joseph Mr. Liebling invested his faith in technique and preparation – when it came to both writing and fighting.

Mr. Liebling was splendid on the seedy, marginal atmosphere of boxing – the gyms, the training camps, the gamblers, the saloons, the sparring partners, and the con men like Doc Kearns, who could have been Earl Long's other brother. Boxing was – and always will be – a convention of low life. And Mr. Liebling was the Gibbon of the grifters.

I have come to think of Mr. Liebling as one of the three best-ever American writers about boxing, along with Norman Mailer and Budd Schulberg. And it does come as a shock to recognize that America's three best boxing writers are liberal Jewish intellectuals.

There was also W. C. Heinz of the old New York Sun, who wrote the unforgettable boxing novel, "The Professional. Jimmy Cannon was always a deadline poet with an instinct for tragedy in the loser's dressing room. And Murray Kempton's occasional boxing columns are extraordinary.

But Mr. Liebling's essays from the 1950s pass the test of time. They are like the old grainy footage of Sam Langford and Gene Tunney. There is a subtlety and serenity that makes you resent all the modern self-promoting bombast.

Mr. Liebling's versatility and productivity (18 books) also made him among the best press critics, war correspondents, food writers, and memoirists of Manhattan, although in this low-life realm, he might have felt he could embellish and pipe a few quotes in the direction of emotional truth, which was the ethical norm for his era.

For a fight, Mr. Liebling would take the subway to Yankee Stadium, buy a mid-priced ticket, and sit among the paying fans and banter with them as the action ebbed and flowed. Then he would compose a piece that even fans that had already watched the newsreels of the match, would learn something new from.

Many writers have mistakenly credited Mr. Liebling with inventing the phrase, "the sweet science," but it was actually coined by Mr. Liebling's great hero, Pierce Egan (1772-1849). Mr. Liebling gladly and often attributed the phrase, "the sweet science of bruising," to Egan, who he called, "The greatest writer about the ring who ever lived. Hazlitt was dilettante, who wrote one fight story."

Mr. Egan, who wrote about bare knuckle bouts in England from 1812 to 1828, shaped Mr. Liebling's style the way Ray Robinson shaped Muhammad Ali's. Egan's style was reportorial, meandering, anecdotal, dandy-ish, intimate with the fighters, and finely tuned to the late fluctuations in betting odds. Mr. Liebling described Egan as a self-educated shakedown man, which was a compliment.

Mr. Liebling wrote, "Egan's cockney characters, and his direct quotes of how they talked, were a direct gift to Dickens, who, like every boy in England, read the author Boxiana."

It is an irony that the classic fistic essays collected in *The Sweet Science* were written between 1951 and 1955, just at the start of boxing's long slow, steady decline, caused first by free home television, which was killing off the local clubs, where apprentices could learn their craft. Mr. Liebling called television, "An electronic gadget that peddles razor blades."

Another irony is that these pieces were published in the *New Yorker*, which was not exactly a working class tabloid, although boxing has always been an immigrant working class sport – with an intellectual cult fringe.

But William Shawn let his star writers follow their passions, even if he didn't understand them. By most accounts Mr. Shawn loathed violence, but not as intensely as he appreciated exquisite prose.

When Mr. Liebling died at age 59 in 1963, boxing vanished from the pages of the *New Yorker* for 25 years.

Mr. Liebling's most memorable pieces were accounts of the major bouts of his era: the bleeding Ray Robinson's comeback KO of Randy Turpin; the invincibly conditioned Marciano's knockouts Joe Louis, Joe Walcott, Ezzard Charles, and Archie Moore; and Archie Moore's off-the-floor KO of Harold Johnson. He knew what fighters and what fights to write about.

The sweet science occupied such a large part of Mr. Liebling's emotional life that he worked it into most of his best non-boxing books and magazine pieces. There are pugilistic digressions in "The Honest Rainmaker," in "Chicago, the Second City," and in "The Telephone Booth Indian,"

In "Between Meals," there is a dazzling digression describing a fight in Paris in 1927. And in his masterpiece, "The Earl of Louisiana," there is a flashback to a Pete Herman fight he saw in Madison Square Garden in 1921 when he was still at Dartmouth and about to be expelled.

"The Earl of Louisiana" opens with the memorable sentences, "Southern political personalities, like sweet corn, travel badly. They lose flavor with every hundred yards from the patch."

If there is one weakness in Mr. Liebling's boxing canon it is that the mob does not exist – and gangsters ran boxing in the 1950s. He let Jimmy Cannon in the *Post*, Dan Parker in the *Daily Mirror*, and novelist and screenplay writer Budd Schulberg expose the gangsters who fixed the fights and cheated the fighters. Mr. Liebling liked low life, but not the really sinister criminal dark side.

In contrast, Mr. Liebling's populist press criticism had more of an irreverent

, crusading edge; he was much more skeptical of newspaper publishers than of boxing promoters. He tracked the influence of money on newspaper content better than he tracked the influence of money on which managers got their fighters on TV, or received preferential treatment in getting championship opportunities.

(Mr. Liebling's most quoted line comes from his "Wayward Press" column that freedom of the press only belongs to the man who owns a press.)

After immersing myself in Mr. Liebling's writing, I see that he and his New Yorker colleague, Joe Mitchell, invented what others branded, "the new journalism," and credited to Tom Wolfe and Hunter Thompson.

If there was anything new after the 1940s it was the innovative elaborations of Norman Mailer, Jimmy Breslin, and Gay Talese.

But the real leap forward into long form, personal, literary narrative writing was started by Liebling and Mitchell. They opened a new house for the rest of us.

A wise man once told me that the definition of craft is the ability to make something hard look easy.

This is what A.J. Liebling did. He made writing a sweet science.