

The Library of America interviews George Kimball and John Schulian about At the Fights: American Writers on Boxing

In connection with the publication in March 2011 of [*At the Fights: American Writers on Boxing*](#), edited by George Kimball and John Schulian, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

Sign up for the free monthly e-Newsletter at www.loa.org.

In his preface to At the Fights Colum McCann makes a persuasive case that boxing and writing are metaphorical twins: the ring, the page; the punch, the word; the bell, the deadline. What is it about boxing that has inspired so much great writing?

Schulian: There's an almost electrical charge to boxing that separates it from every other sport. Boxing is elemental, visceral. It's the closest thing to combat that most writers ever see. One on one. Primitive. Savage. And yet beautiful and ennobling and capable of inspiring a kind of sweat-stained poetry. It's not a humane sport by any stretch of the imagination, but it is wonderfully human, and that factors into what is written about it. The most quotable, accessible, big-hearted athletes I've ever covered are prizefighters. Doesn't matter whether they're choirboys or ex-cons. They all talk, they all share pieces of their lives that athletes in other sports would never reveal. The important thing to remember, though, is that this is life in microcosm. It's beautiful, messy, profane, funny, sad, cutthroat, brutal—and yet heroes rise from it even if their hands aren't always raised in victory. When I think of what I've written about boxing, so much of it feels like noir fiction, and yet I was there, I saw it happen. And if I hadn't seen it, when I'd read somebody's account of it, I'd want a taste the next time a big fight came along. Because, as every writer who's been there will tell you, there's nothing in all of sports that compares.

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

At the Fights kicks off with Jack London's account of the epic 1910 battle between Jack Johnson, the first African American heavyweight, and James Jeffries, the fighter London dubbed the "Great White Hope." Does this event mark the beginning of the long love affair between writing and boxing? Was this when boxing came into its own—or was it just when writers started to pay attention?

Kimball: Yes and no. Johnson–Jeffries wasn't even the first heavyweight title fight *London* covered. (He'd been, almost by accident, in Australia when Johnson won the title from Tommy Burns.) Fights had been covered from the days of John L. Sullivan. Nelly Bly, the most popular newspaperwoman of her day, had written a profile of Sullivan. But, charged by the racial angle, the fight in Reno was the first full-fledged media circus. Virtually every newspaper in the country was represented, often by celebrity correspondents like London and Rex Beach. Western Union transmitted more copy from that fight than for any single event until Lindbergh landed in Paris seventeen years later. Not only was boxing legitimized as a subject worthy of front-page news, but many reputations were forged by the coverage of that event. Within a year New York had legalized boxing (albeit temporarily), and men like Damon Runyon and Gene Fowler and W. O. McGeehan came to New York to cover it.

Schulian: Being the boxing historian he is, George answered this question admirably. I would suggest, however, that boxing writing didn't really flourish until after World War II. Before then, great writers could be found at ringside, from literary types like H. L. Mencken and Richard Wright to upwardly mobile newspapermen like Heywood Broun and Paul Gallico. But too many of the era's sports pages were filled by hacks and drunks and guys waiting for a bribe from the local fight promoter. That changed when key post-war sports editors—Stanley Woodward at the *New York Herald Tribune*, Larry Merchant at the *Philadelphia Daily News*, Jack Mann at Long Island's *Newsday*—began putting a premium on trenchant reporting, stylish writing, and irreverent wit. The best of the writers who were turned loose in this uprising became legends: Red Smith, Jimmy Cannon, W. C. Heinz, John Lardner.

Soon enough, in 1954, the young writers who embraced those giants as role models had not just newspapers to work for but a glossy magazine called *Sports Illustrated*, and *SI* became a bastion of great fight writing by Budd Schulberg, Mark Kram, Pat Putnam, Bill Nack, and Richard Hoffer, to name just

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

a few. This surge in artistry was helped along by the stunning parade of fighters they could write about, from Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, and Archie Moore to Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns and Roberto Duran. And Joe Frazier. And George Foreman. And Larry Holmes. And Mike Tyson. And . . . you get the picture. For a fifty-year stretch, a wonderful and amazing thing happened: there was fight writing every bit as great as the fighting itself.

The appeal of writing about boxing clearly extends far beyond sportswriters. At the Fights includes pieces by H. L. Mencken, Sherwood Anderson, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Budd Schulberg, Norman Mailer, Gay Talese, Pete Hamill, Joyce Carol Oates, David Remnick—it's as if there's an unofficial competition among writers for the title of greatest heavyweight boxing writer—or at least the sense that to be a great writer you have to tackle boxing. Who gets to be in the title matchup?

Kimball: That's not a question to which I'd have given much thought, but since you've asked it, my visceral reaction is that the title would go to Liebling, with everybody else left scrambling for second place. If you'd asked *them*, Mailer and Hemingway would probably each have claimed *he* belonged in the finals. (Hemingway did write some fine boxing *fiction*. He also wrote some decent boxing articles and columns for the *Toronto Star* from Paris in the early 20s, but in the end we felt none of them measured up to the high standard we'd set for *At the Fights*.) We excerpted Mailer's *The Fight*, but the truth of the matter is that Budd Schulberg knew and truly understood more about boxing than either one of them, and moreover, he was 2–0 in fistfights with Mailer and Hemingway.

I don't think any of the others you mention would have considered themselves contenders for your title, simply because writing about boxing was neither their primary focus or aspiration. In fact, some of the pieces by those writers worked as well as they did precisely *because* of the presumption of the author's naiveté: After laying bare their lack of sophistication on the subject, they allow the reader to share in their process of illumination. This is certainly true for Sherwood Anderson ("Brown Bomber") as he tries to figure out what all the fuss is about with this guy Joe Louis, and as Harold Conrad observed of the James Baldwin who came to Chicago to cover the Liston–Patterson fight, "he doesn't know a left hook from a kick in the ass." As much as she's written about the sport, I doubt that Joyce Carol Oates has ever for a moment considered herself a boxing pundit, but she's smart enough to ask the right questions.

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

Schulian: There's no question that Mailer is the biggest name in the book. And there's no denying that he could write up a storm. His prose is incandescent. But that doesn't make Mailer the champ. If you polled the other contenders for the title, you'd soon discover who stands atop the mountain: A. J. Liebling. He brought wisdom, laughter, a keen eye, and a thoroughly charming prose style to his boxing writing, and he left behind an unequaled body of work. True, he filed the bulk of his dispatches for a weekly, *The New Yorker*, but if the legend that he was a fast and effortless writer is true, he would have been just as readable working against an AM newspaper deadline. Just thinking about Liebling makes me smile, because my head fills with the music of his prose and the magic he found in the sport he called the Sweet Science.

In January 2003 Sports Illustrated ranked A. J. Liebling's The Sweet Science #1 of the 100 best sports books of all time, calling Liebling "pound for pound the top boxing writer of all time." You include two Liebling pieces in the book. What made Liebling so great—and do we see his influence in any of the other writers in the book?

Kimball: The wonder shouldn't be that there are two Liebling pieces, but that there are *only* two. (He and Schulberg have the only double-barreled entries in the anthology.) If I'd been compiling that list, *The Sweet Science* would be No.1, and *A Neutral Corner*, Liebling's other collection of (mostly) *New Yorker* pieces No. 2.

Putting *At the Fights* together was a painstaking, year-long process that was often like a jigsaw puzzle, because sometimes the decision to include a particular piece would, due to subject matter or tone or approach, displace others. John and I made a conscious decision early on to hold Liebling in reserve. We knew whichever of his pieces we wound up using, they were going to work. Our initial inclination, for instance, had been to include Liebling's terrific account of his visit to Sonny Liston's training camp, but if we'd used that we probably wouldn't have been able to include Joe Flaherty's wonderful "Amen to Sonny," and if we hadn't used Liebling's "Kearns by a Knockout" we'd probably have had to find two more pieces to adequately address Doc Kearns and Sugar Ray Robinson. It was sometimes like playing Whack-A-Mole, because every time you'd hammer one down, three more would pop up somewhere else. But in that respect Liebling was a constant security blanket, our wild-card, because of our unshaken confidence that whatever we wound up using was going to be great.

Anyone who has written about boxing for the last fifty years owes a great

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

debt of gratitude to Joe Liebling, so yes, his influence has been both pervasive and profound, but woe be unto the conscious imitator. Any writer who sets out trying to write his own “Liebling piece”—and there have been a few—is inexorably doomed to fall flat on his face.

Schulian: Why was Liebling so great? Because he could make you laugh by writing about a fighter who was “so hairy that when knocked down he looks like a rug.” Because he could find the nobility in Archie Moore’s fruitless quest to knock out Rocky Marciano: “Would Ahab have been content merely to go the distance with the White Whale?” Because I could read him and think there was no higher calling than to write about boxing. And I know there were, and are, others like me. Five decades’ worth, if my math is right. I hear echoes of Liebling when I read Mark Kram and Bill Nack and Richard Hoffer, each very much a stylist in the great man’s tradition, each capable of reaching heights of brilliance. But the echoes are ultimately still that and nothing more, for there could be only one Liebling. He was the truth and the light.

Over the past hundred years boxing has gone through several “ages” — and perhaps more than one “golden age.” For those unfamiliar with the history of boxing would you be willing to briefly characterize the different ages—and how the pieces in the book map to those times?

Schulian: Since Liebling seems to be the connective tissue here, I’m tempted to quote him as I try to make sense of boxing’s various ages. The paragraph I have in mind begins with Liebling saying, “It is through Jack O’Brien, the Arbiter Elegantiarum Philadelphiae, that I trace my rapport with the historic past through the laying on of hands. He hit me, for pedagogical example, and he had been hit by the great Bob Fitzsimmons, from whom he won the light-heavyweight title in 1906.” Liebling goes on to list fighters who have crossed each other’s paths and walloped each other’s jaws all the way back to the early Victorians. “The Sweet Science,” he writes, “is joined onto the past like a man’s arm to his shoulder.”

So that takes us up to Jack Johnson, the great scorned heavyweight who ushered us into the early twentieth century. Not to diminish the fighters who came before Joe Louis, but they couldn’t match him in either ring talent or celebrity candlepower. And I’m talking about great, great fighters, guys whose campaigns for championships couldn’t be contained by one weight class, guys

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

who were embraced by entire religions and ethnic groups. But the greatest fighter in the first half of the twentieth century was Joe Louis. He emerged in the 1930s to become an era unto himself, defeating both heavyweight legends and bums of the month and being, as Jimmy Cannon said famously, “a credit to his race, the human race.” Four writers tackle Louis in the book: Sherwood Anderson, Red Smith, Bob Considine, and Richard Wright.

Louis’s time passed after World War II and Rocky Marciano’s time began. Who better to capture Marciano than Liebling and Red Smith, alongside Frank Graham’s on-deadline account of the Marciano–Ezzard Charles brawl? And if the Rock didn’t define an era, then TV’s fights of the week did, binding an entire nation through tiny black-and-white screens. Whole families watched, mesmerized by a parade of warriors led by Sugar Ray Robinson and Kid Gavilan. Even today, people who cared nothing for boxing after the lights went out on those fights, can remember Gavilan’s bolo punch (see Barry Nagler’s “James Norris and the Decline of Boxing” for the sad ending of Gavilan’s career).

And then came Cassius Clay, soon to be Muhammad Ali, who defined boxing for the nation the way nobody ever had before or likely will again. You’d think he would have been enough to last us the rest of the century, but no, the world of boxing was so rich in talent that it gave us what should be known as the Four Kings Era, in honor of George’s brilliant book *Four Kings*. Suddenly, the U.S., a nation fixated on heavyweights, found itself under the spell of Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns, Roberto Duran, and Marvelous Marvin Hagler (George’s piece on the controversial 1987 Leonard–Hagler fight is a must-read). Small men, but giants just the same. They gave us great fights, fascinating and diverse personalities, and moments of both triumph and disgrace. They gave us everything writers could hope for, which was more than Mike Tyson ever did—Remnick’s profile of Tyson gives you the flavor of what I’m talking about. Today, a fighter like Manny Pacquiao recaptures some of the magic of another era. To watch Pacquiao is to think that, no matter how dreary boxing has looked in the last decade, he’s a dandy emissary to the new century.

You include pieces by great sportswriters not known for writing about boxing—Red Smith, Dick Schaap, Mike Lupica—and others best known for their boxing writing—W. C. Heinz, Larry Merchant, Richard Hoffer. Is there a difference in how a writer who covers boxing day-in, day-out approaches the sport?

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

Kimball: You've mentioned six names there and I think there are six individual cases, and they're not as easily categorized as you make it seem.

Red actually wrote a lot about boxing, most of it before he got to the *Times*. He covered Louis and Marciano and Robinson in their primes, and as "Night for Joe Louis," the column we used in *At the Fights*, shows, he was awfully good at it. I think Red went off the rails a bit by the time Ali came along. He never did warm to Ali, and that early animus colored much of what he wrote later, much of which was so wrong-headed that it seems almost as uninformed as, say, Dick Young. But, hell, Red was the second guy ever to win the Boxing Writers' Association of America Nat Fleischer Award—which made him the first of three men to win the Fleischer *and* the Pulitzer Prize. But he was a boxing guy and he knew his way around ringside.

Dick Schaap was never a boxing guy, but he was certainly an original *Ali* guy. Dick had a facility for forming fast friendships with many of his sporting subjects, friendships that were both genuine and enduring, and his relationship with Ali was one of those—and this started way back when Ali was Cassius Clay and nobody would have bet a nickel he'd one day be the heavyweight champion of the world, much less an iconic public figure. That's what made Dick the best choice to trace the arc in "Muhammad Ali Then and Now" from Clay to Ali on the eve of the fight with Joe Frazier.

Mike Lupica I've known since I hired him to be what he calls "the junior half of the greatest two-man sports department in history," at the Boston *Phoenix* back in the early 1970s. Mike might not actively *dislike* boxing, but I think it's safe to say that he has far less empathy for the sport than any other writer included in *At the Fights*—and that in turn made him the absolutely perfect guy to write about Don King ("Donfire of the Vanities") at a time mainstream America hadn't quite figured out who Don King even *was*.

Schulian: It's true that Bill Heinz, Larry Merchant, and Rick Hoffer wrote so masterfully about boxing that the natural impulse is to think of them as boxing writers. But all were generalists who could write about any sport, and in Heinz's case, he was also a splendid World War II correspondent, the author of a book about a surgeon, and the co-author of *M*A*S*H*. What made them so memorable when they focused on boxing—and I think this is borne out by their pieces in the book—is that they found the humanity in this bloody sport. Heinz and Hoffer strip away artifice and zero in on the souls of their subjects while Merchant finds a faithful observer of the Sweet Science, composer David Amram, to provide a

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

stirring observation about a wild Philadelphia middleweight named Gypsy Joe Harris: “You can see him as a little kid on the street who had to improvise to survive.” In one moment, Amram sees the essence of a jazz musician; in another, Beethoven. Merchant’s column stuns you with its charm.

Kimball: Right. Rick Hoffer wrote a book about Mike Tyson and is also a former Fleischer winner, but I’d hardly categorize him as primarily a boxing writer. It’s more a case of his being the last man standing at *Sports Illustrated*. From the outset, with Budd Schulberg and Mort Sharnik through the years with Bud Shrake and Mark Kram and Pat Putnam and Bill Nack, *SI* had always represented the cutting edge in boxing writing. Hoffer’s piece on George Foreman in *At the Fights* (“Still Hungry After All These Years”) follows in that great tradition, although you’d have to say it’s about George and not really about boxing at all. Hoffer is first-rate on any subject; now he has a book out about the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, and Foreman’s gold medal there is obviously just a small part of that book.

There are more pieces from *Sports Illustrated* in *At the Fights* than from any other single source, but it’s not an accident that even the most recent of them was written almost two decades ago. It’s as if *SI* ceded the ground on boxing. If they run a decent boxing story now, you can almost bet that Hoffer wrote it, but he probably had to kick and scream to get it in the magazine. It’s as if they’ve made disliking—or ignoring—the sport an institutional policy.

In his piece on the Mike Tyson–Evander Holyfield fight, David Remnick writes “Heavyweight championship fights, from the days of John L. Sullivan onward, are stories, morality plays.” This suggests that a great boxing story is not necessarily about a great fighter. Or that a great story could inflate a fighter’s reputation. Are there instances where the story is better than the fighter?

Schulian: It’s too much to say that the best boxing stories are about losers. That argument is contradicted time and again throughout the book. But losers and eccentrics and guys who never quite made it to the mountaintop have inspired some classic writing. You want to weep for Primo Carnera after reading what Paul Gallico had to say about the way he was used as a patsy and a stooge and a pretend heavyweight champion. And then you have Stanley Ketchel and Bummy Davis, two crazy-tough fighters who would have been swal-

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

lowed by the mists of time if it weren't for the stories written about them. Was John Lardner's piece on Ketchel better than the fighter himself? Absolutely. And Bill Heinz's on Davis? Without a doubt. And the amazing thing is that Lardner and Heinz never met their subjects, both of whom were prematurely dispatched from this life by gunshot. But Lardner and Heinz were intrepid reporters as well as stunning writers, and they proved it with their renderings of the two fighters' hearts and souls.

Kimball: The story better than the fighter? That happens so often in the newspaper business that it's the rule, not the exception, at least when we're talking about a compelling storyline building up to the fight. If the subject of the storyline doesn't pass muster under fire, he suddenly becomes a lot less interesting.

Deadline, under-the-gun fight stories are a different animal altogether. Trying to do justice to a great twelve-round fight when you've got twenty-eight minutes to make an edition is the most excruciating exercise imaginable. You just get it done and send it and hope it comes out in English, though it's amazing how often it turns out to be not as bad as you'd feared.

And of course the real test comes when you have to write a deadline story about a stinking fight—and no matter how great the participants, that sometimes happens too. I remember the old AP fight scribe Eddie Schuyler sending his fight wrap after one of those and turning to me to sigh, "If they want me to write better, they're just going to have to fight better."

As you mention in your introduction, Muhammad Ali is a "historic figure who transcended sport" and is the subject of six essays in the book. Why these six?

Kimball: At one point we had twenty-two separate pieces on Ali alone, and every one of them a gem. Winnowing those down to six may have been the most painful part of the process, but I'd say the ones we finally did end up with not only represented the best of the best, but provided a diffuse cross-section that accurately represents and hopefully explains the almost mystical appeal of the most fascinating and captivating individual I know. So the question isn't how we chose the six great Ali pieces that are in the book, but how we eliminated the sixteen great ones that aren't.

Schulian: If you include Bill Nack's story on Joe Frazier's undying hatred of Ali,

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

there are actually seven Ali pieces in the book. And I suppose we could have had seventeen or even seventy and they all would have been wonderful in their own way, because Ali was as open and intriguing a subject as a writer could hope for. He could be joking and doing magic tricks, throwing fake punches at sportswriters and flirting with pretty girls, and then he would have a flash of insight, something that might make him seem vulnerable and human, and he'd just blurt it out. I've never been around anybody like him. Reading these seven pieces, you can trace the arc of his career, from his boisterous days as the young Cassius Clay to that sad night in Las Vegas when Larry Holmes made the world realize that the dogs had barked and the caravan had moved on. So much joy and bravery of every kind, then so much sadness. And Ali let us see it all. He always loved a crowd.

One thing we discover is that Ali was not the only eloquent fighter. The book includes a stunning piece of writing by Gene Tunney about his fights with Jack Dempsey. And David Remnick hails Archie Moore for his monologues “worthy of Molly Bloom or the Duke of Gloucester.” How important is a fighter’s personality—or articulateness—to his career? Do fighters still have personalities?

Kimball: I never met Gene Tunney. One’s inclination is always to be skeptical about boxer-authored pieces, but I think in this case it’s safe to say that Gene wrote every word of his account of the Dempsey fights—and that if anybody did touch up his prose it was probably somebody like George Bernard Shaw or Thornton Wilder, which is OK by me. Tunney’s son Jay recently published an entire book on Gene’s friendship with Bernard Shaw, which included the startling (to me, anyway) revelation that when Tunney got married, Thornton Wilder accompanied the couple on their European honeymoon. He and Gene went mountain climbing together in the Alps.

I *did* know Archie Moore, who was every bit as articulate and intellectual and absolutely spellbinding as Remnick says he was. If anything, I think that in comparing him to Molly Bloom and Gloucester, David might be selling Arch a bit short.

But no, a fighter needn’t necessarily be articulate, at least in the conventional sense, to be a great fighter, or for that matter even a great interview. Sonny Liston communicated mainly in grunts, but he had an enormously complicated personality. I mentioned the time Liebling, who had never met him

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

before, visited Sonny's training camp before the first Patterson fight and wrote a wonderful account of it. It ended up with Joe as the butt of a Liston practical joke—Sonny pretended to explode in a temper tantrum, hit one of his handlers so hard that he dislodged teeth before shooting another, and then pointed the pistol at a terrified Liebling. What Liebling probably never knew about that visit was that after Liston's workout and before the fun and games began, Sonny called his press agent Harold Conrad over to his side of the rec room and said "Ask your fat friend there if he'd like a cup of tea."

You're going to tell me a guy like that was *inarticulate*?

Or take Roberto Duran. Because he didn't speak English, or at least pretended he didn't, the complexity of the man largely eluded even most of the people who wrote about him, but when you listen to somebody like Ruben Blades, who knew him better than any boxing writer, deconstruct Duran, you recognize how much of Duran's public image is really just a caricature. I think Leonard Gardner's account of the first Leonard fight and Vic Ziegel's portrait of Duran in New York, which are both in *At the Fights*, are important in that respect—they humanize a man who was mostly described in flat-out stereotypical fashion, even by people who covered his whole career.

The stories continue after the bell and not all the pieces in At the Fights are heroic. "Nowhere to Run," the piece you wrote, John, profiles the sad later years of Johnny Bratton. And the book ends with Carlo Rotella's elegiac account of fifty-two-year-old Larry Holmes going ten rounds with 310-pound Butterbean Esch. Why do boxing's life lessons always seem so much sadder than any others? Does watching the lives of ex-boxers affect writers who cover boxing?

Kimball: You ought to be either his PR man or Butterbean's dietitian. Esch weighed 334 when he fought Holmes—and that was really svelte, for him. (The Bean weighed more than 400 pounds for the last two fights before he hung up his gloves.)

I've heard Pete Hamill say more than once—I'm sure he's quoting someone, though I'm not sure who—"There are really only two boxing stories—the one about the fighter on the way up, and the one about the fighter on the way down." In the case of Holmes and Butterbean, both guys sort of fell into the latter category, and Carlo was able to mine that encounter for the pathos it represented. You can count on the fingers of one hand the boxers who are able to

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

retire at the top of their game, on their own terms. Gene Tunney was one, Rocky Marciano another, and if he can keep resisting his impulses, Joe Calzaghe may turn out to be in that company. If there's one thing you learn if you hang around boxing long enough, it's that they're all going to lose, sooner or later, and when they retire it's almost a corollary that they're going to come back. The subtitle of Bill Barich's story in *At the Fights*, "Never Say Never," was "Ray Mancini's last fight," but of course it *wasn't* his last fight. Four years later, Boom Boom tried to come back—twice—and he lost both times.

Bob Arum once told me "Never fall in love with a fighter; he'll eventually break your heart." Writers who haven't been inured by boxing sometimes need to learn that lesson the hard way, but when you've been around the block a few times, as John and I and most of the writers represented in this book have, you learn to maintain a certain emotional detachment, simply because you know there's only one way this story is going to come out in the end.

I think Rotella subtly gets to the heart of this, or at least to the heart of Holmes, in "Champion at Twilight," by playing Larry off Butterbean. Without belaboring the obvious, you've got this guy who is strong as an ox but can't fight a lick, and for ten years he's been packaged as a self-parody and trotted around the country like the bearded lady in a circus, making other people rich because people will pay money, basically, to gawk at him. In the other corner you've got a guy who held the heavyweight championship for seven unbroken years, beat Muhammad Ali, and was about as financially secure as they ever are when they get out of this game, but as Carlo shows in this piece, Larry Holmes feels even more ill-used by boxing than Butterbean does.

Schulian: The way I see it, melancholy is as much a part of boxing as hands raised in victory. It's there in the scar tissue over fighters' eyes and the mumbled words of guys who stayed in the ring too long and the endless stories of thieving promoters and managers. A lot of the writers who were my heroes—Bill Heinz, Jimmy Cannon, and Mark Kram in particular—drew prose portraits of these lost souls that had the same effect on me as blues in the night. They taught me to remember the people that boxing too often forgets or never thinks of in the first place.

For my story about Johnny Bratton, an old welterweight champion, I had no idea what I'd find when I went looking for him, but it wasn't anywhere near as heartbreaking as what I found. He was as far gone as any ex-fighter I've met. And yet the street was the best society could do for him. Worse, the hotel where

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

he slept in the lobby was going to be gentrified, so one more door was going to be slammed shut. My story was a distress signal. I wrote it and never saw the footloose Bratton again. But I know that he lived another fourteen years, and that he was said to have spent the last of them in a retirement home. I like to think he died in a bed with clean sheets.

What are your favorite pieces in the book?

Kimball: My favorite pieces in the book? Come on, man. Which of your children is *your* favorite?

Schulian: I'll give you three favorites: Mark Kram's piece on the Thrilla in Manila is, to my thinking, perfect. I've long considered Kram one of the great stylists in *Sports Illustrated's* history, and this is his masterpiece. His language and imagery are rich and vibrant, and there's a full-blooded quality to the emotion he obviously felt as he watched Ali and Frazier wreak havoc on each other. They had all come of age together, and now the writer was watching the fighters turn each other into old men who never should have fought again after this. There's never been a story about a fight that was as powerful or moved me as profoundly.

My other favorites are character studies of the kind of rogues who could find only one sport that would have anything to do with them—boxing. John Lardner's "Down Great Purple Valleys" begins with the single greatest lede in journalism history: "Stanley Ketchel was twenty-four years old when he was fatally shot in the back by the common-law husband of the lady who was cooking his breakfast." Red Smith called it "the single greatest novel ever written in one sentence." And the amazing thing is, the story just keeps getting better and better as Lardner unspools the short, crazy life of this go-to-hell middleweight. Fueled by booze and opium, wild about the ladies, and armed with a punch that once flattened Jack Johnson, Ketchel dwelled on the outer edge of boxing's margins, and he paid for it. But, oh, what an unforgettable character.

Bummy Davis, the "Brownsville Bum" immortalized by W. C. Heinz, was a different breed of cat, but just as wild and fearless and self-destructive and utterly mesmerizing. What separates the two of them is the circumstances of Davis's death. Where the womanizing Ketchel gets played for a sap, Davis, who was a thumb-in-the-eye fighter, stands tall when armed robbers stick up the joint where he's tending bar. One of the robbers calls Davis a "punch-drunk bum" and Davis starts swinging and the robbers start shooting. They're still

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

shooting when he chases them out the door with a bullet in him, and he stays after them until he falls on the sidewalk and dies in the rain. When Heinz paints the picture for us, it's not mere sportswriting. It's writing.

While most of the pieces in the book focus on fights or fighters, some of the most colorful characters are those behind the fighters, as in Pete Hamill's poignant profile of Cus D'Amato. Does everyone involved in boxing have a story? Who do you find are the most memorable non-fighter characters in the book?

Schulian: You better believe they all have stories. Take Wilson Mizner, whom John Lardner described as “a wit and literary con man.” Mizner managed Stanley Ketchel for a spell, sprinkling bon mots along the way. He found Ketchel in bed with a blonde, a brunette, and a handsome quantity of opium. Asked what he did, Mizner said, “What did I do? What could I do? I told them to move over.” Not exactly a milk-and-cookies anecdote, but boxing isn't a milk-and-cookies sport.

Don King was probably smart and guileful enough to succeed at anything he tried, but boxing was the perfect place for his—how to put this?—ethically-challenged ways. King wasn't the least bit shy about how he shortchanged fighters and screwed over business partners, but he had that finger-in-a-wall-socket hairdo and that Daddy Warbucks cackle and that way of speechifying like a cross between Shakespeare and Redd Foxx. Big rings and a big cigar, too. A big man physically, or was it just the hair that made him seem towering? It doesn't matter. You couldn't take your eyes off the son of a bitch. He always sent writers away with great material, grand pronouncements and bastardized words—afoxanado, trickeration, Caucasianism—that still crack me up. Mike Lupica captured King perfectly, not just who he was, but who he might have been.

My other favorite character in the book is the antithesis of King, a gentleman trainer named Ray Arcel. He was courtly, dignified, soft-spoken, honest. And loyal. He trained Roberto Duran for free and Duran repaid him by quitting against Sugar Ray Leonard. Broke Arcel's heart. But Arcel didn't quit on Duran. He stayed with the guy after that disgrace in New Orleans. Fighters get tossed on the discard pile all the time, but Ray Arcel was too good a man to do that. Once you read Jerry Izenberg's piece about him, you'll understand just how profoundly he could affect your life.

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

George, I know that you continue to cover today's boxing scene for thesweetscience.com. Boxing does not seem to be as much a part of mainstream American culture as it once was. Fighters are no longer household names the way Joe Louis or Muhammad Ali once were. What happened?

Kimball: Hamill says “When I grew up in Brooklyn, there were only two sports—baseball and boxing.” Pete’s only eight years older than I am, but that was certainly no longer the case when I was growing up. The popularity of football and basketball has undercut boxing, not just in the public consciousness but because those sports tended to siphon away young athletes who in an earlier era might have become boxers. For most of my life the heavyweight champion of the world could legitimately be considered the single most important athlete on earth, and that was true at least as long as Ali held the title. Ali may still be the most recognizable figure on the planet, but you’d be hard-pressed to find a man on the street who could even name the heavyweight champion today—in part because there are actually three of them, none of them Americans.

Does boxing still inspire great writing? Who are the writers covering boxing now that we should be reading?

Kimball: If you really want to read boxing coverage in a newspaper nowadays, you’d probably have to move to London. The short answer is that most of the best boxing *American* writing nowadays can be found on the Internet, which has turned out to be the last refuge for many of the boxing writers of my generation.

I assume you’re talking about younger writers. Carlo Rotella, obviously, is one guy who everyone should be reading, but Carlo is a highly respected professor (at Boston College) and a *writer*, not a boxing writer. He doesn’t “cover” boxing regularly, nor does he aspire to. One really bright young writer who seems to have a genuine passion for the game is Peter Owen Nelson. He’s currently writing a book with Freddie Roach, and has developed a very solid relationship with guys like Manny Pacquiao and Devon Alexander—not just with the fighters, but with the trainers, handlers, and even the hangers-on. In the past year Nelson has managed to cover some fights as a stringer for the *Times*, which is a very hopeful sign. He really knows his stuff, and if he’d written some of those stories a year or two earlier I daresay he’d probably have been included in *At the Fights*. Being that close to a fighter’s camp is a great way to build a foundation, of course, but it makes me worry a bit for him too. Peter has

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

yet to have his heart broken by a fighter, so it'll be interesting to see how he handles it when that happens—and it will.

Schulian: It's harder to find great boxing writing these days simply because it's harder to find great fighters and great fights. And when you can't find great fighters and great fights, the public's interest wanes and newspaper and magazine sports editors devote less and less space to the Sweet Science. It's too bad because there are some wonderful young sportswriters who I think would have a field day if they covered the kind of fighters and fight people I did. I'm thinking about Joe Posnanski and Lee Jenkins at *Sports Illustrated* and some of the hard chargers at *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post*. In newspapers, Ron Borges still does quality work for the *Boston Herald*. In magazines, it's catch as catch can. It's been a while since Gary Smith did a boxing story at *SI*. Wright Thompson at ESPN's magazine visits the sport occasionally, but it always seems to be for a story about the past, not the here and now. Mark Kram Jr. keeps a fire in his belly for those rare times when the Philadelphia *Daily News* turns him loose on boxing.

But the writer who reminds me most of the guys from my era is Mark Kriegel, who did great boxing stuff when he was in New York at the *Post* and *Daily News*. He's in our book, of course, with a clear-eyed, BS-free profile of Oscar De La Hoya, and he's at work on a book of his own about Boom Boom Mancini. I've read Kriegel's other books, on Joe Namath and Pistol Pete Maravich, and I know what an intrepid reporter and soulful writer he is. If anybody is going to remind people how great boxing writing can be, it's him.

Do you remember when you first discovered you had a passion for writing about boxing?

Kimball: No.

Schulian: So it's 1973 and I'm working on the city desk at the *Baltimore Evening Sun*. I do re-write in the mornings, feature stories and a rock-and-roll column in the afternoons. It's a great gig, but I want more. Specifically, I want to get my foot in the door at *Sports Illustrated*. I get to know a couple of the magazine's writers when they come through town, I make friends with *SI*'s Baltimore stringer, and pretty soon here comes a letter from Pat Ryan, the editor who handles freelancers. She wants four story ideas. I can only remember a couple from the

Kimball and Schulian on *At the Fights*

batch. One was about coon-dog swimming races on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The other was about a fight promoter in Baltimore who had a gym over a strip joint on a three-block stretch of sin known as The Block. Pat zeroes in on the fight promoter. Great. I liked him best, too. His name was Eli Hanover. A non-stop talker with a stable of fighters who were always candidates to get the clap from the dancers downstairs. Eli put on his fight shows at Steelworkers Hall, where there was a picture of I. W. Abel, the union boss, on the wall, and a crowd that offered fighters advice like "Hit him with a coconut, dummy." John Gregory Dunne borrowed that line for his novel *True Confessions*, by the way. And Pat Ryan loved the story. It ran word for word the way I wrote it. Unbeknownst to me, my career was about to take a wonderful turn as a result. There would be more work at *Sports Illustrated*, a sportswriting job at *The Washington Post*, sports columns in Chicago and Philadelphia. But when the story ran, in March 1974, all I could think of was that *SI* had paid me \$1,000 and how much fun writing about the fight game had been. I knew I had to do it again.