

The Library of America Interviews

Pete Hamill about A. J. Liebling

In connection with the publication in March 2008 of *[Liebling: World War II Writings](#)*, edited by Pete Hamill, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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Quite a few journalists became well known for their coverage of World War II: Martha Gellhorn, John Hersey, Bill Mauldin, Edward R. Murrow, Ernie Pyle, William L. Shirer, Margaret Bourke-White, among many others. The Library of America celebrated many of them with its two-volume collection Reporting World War II. What was it that so distinguishes the work of A. J. Liebling that he is the first to have a single volume devoted to his World War II reportage?

In all of his work, from short pieces to books, Joe Liebling made literature. He was certainly not the first American journalist to do so, nor the last, nor the only one among those who reported World War II. But his work perfectly fits Ezra Pound's line, in *ABC of Reading*, that "literature is news that stays news."

Do you think he has influenced how journalists have covered wars since?

I hope so. I know he influenced me, and some reporters my age, when we went to the wars as young reporters. In certain bars, we often discussed him (and others), when trying to make sense of wars. I remember talking about him with Ward Just of *The Washington Post* in the Hotel Caravelle in Saigon in early 1966. Ward was a superb reporter (who went on to be a superb writer of fiction) and he had no desire to write in the Liebling manner (nor did I). But we both respected Liebling's war reporting, his eye for revealing detail, his refusal to fall into a mush of sobbing rhetoric, or to don the tough-guy mask of the Hemingway imitator.

Liebling: World War II Writings includes the full text of three books: The Road Back to Paris, which was published during the war and includes his

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reporting on the North African campaign and his firsthand account of the fall of Paris; Mollie and Other War Pieces, which was published after the war and includes his eyewitness account of the Normandy landing on D-Day and the liberation of Paris, and Normandy Revisited, which was published in 1958 and recounts his experiences as he revisited places in 1955 that he reported on during the war. Do you see a change in his style and approach to his subject over these three books?

Yes. *The Road Back to Paris*, published in 1944, covers the war from 1939 to 1943, and is based on rewritten dispatches to *The New Yorker*, some trimmed, others expanded. As the war goes on, Liebling's vision gets more precise and more personal. Near the end of the book (on p. 306 of the Library of America edition), Liebling writes:

Matthews looked through his binoculars and saw a couple of small dots creeping hesitantly toward us like lice across a panhandler's shirt front. He said they were tanks....

Those sentences, and the paragraph that contains them, are written by a Liebling who did not see the world in the same way before 1939. He has absorbed the unspoken lessons of the war, its many mutilations, its stupidities and horrors, while making it concrete and visible. The sentences are, of course, written by a New Yorker, one who has seen too many Depression-era panhandlers. But by this time in his evolution, Liebling often puts on a tight-lipped New York irony as if it were armor. After all, he knows by now that the lice he sees can kill him.

We expect drama from wartime correspondents. Seymour Toll, in his wonderful article "Liebling Covers Paris, Hemingway Liberates It," contrasts how Hemingway and Liebling covered D-Day and the liberation of Paris and favors Liebling's reports: "gripping in their understated, unheroic buildup of suspense and climactic action." Does Liebling deliver the drama we expect?

Drama, yes; melodrama, never. Among his strengths, for example, is an ability to portray the inevitable boredom of war. The waiting. The endless card games and stale jokes and talk of home. And yet, Liebling recognizes that the banal part of war always has a buried tension to it, because in the morning, they all might die. Liebling handles much of this with a casual, ironical touch. He clearly enjoys the company of soldiers. He sees them as men, often very young, not as bronze statues in the park. And he never self-dramatizes his own role.

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Do you have any favorite pieces in the book?

“Letter from Paris, Sept 1” (p. 522). Every time I read that first sentence, I burst into tears.

“Despite chronic gout, a degree of plumpness, and extreme near-sightedness, he regularly accompanied combat patrols” is how The New York Times described Liebling in its obituary. Liebling seems a rather atypical war correspondent. He was a Jew, raised on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, a lifelong Francophile, and a somewhat overweight gourmand. How did this background shape his experiences and writing during the war?

In many ways. Liebling grew up in a New York filled with very tough Jews. There were many Jewish prizefighters, including some world champions. Liebling himself (before the gourmand overwhelmed the athlete) took boxing lessons, which later helped make him a splendid writer about “the sweet science.” There were tough Jewish gangsters too, from the Lower East Side to Brownsville, in distant Brooklyn. As a young newspaperman, Liebling got to know Jewish conmen, Jewish gamblers, Jewish hustlers. Along with the tough guys, they helped form a kind of myth, based on a tough tenement reality, and Liebling must have been absolutely aware of it. And was proud of it. Or delighted by it. And carried it with him to war. Up over that ridge were the Nazis, a bunch of bullying bums. And here we come ...

He never stopped loving France and the French, but he was clearly heartbroken when the French chose to quit on their stools in 1940, instead of fighting to the last man. He knew that the French lost 1.3 million dead in World War I. As a student in France, he had lived among the survivors. But still, the collapse wounded him too. At the same time, he knew that defeat was not the end of the story. He was delighted with the emergence of the Resistance, and was there for the liberation of Paris in 1944. His North African work is wonderful to read, as he gains knowledge of the Muslim world that goes beyond the cartoon version (he would use this knowledge throughout his post-war career). His ability to speak French was also invaluable, in North Africa and after D-Day. He always avoided the abstract and did not wave flags. But in all of his deceptively complex war correspondence, the reader is in no doubt about which side Liebling is on. As Ed Murrow once said, there are some stories to which there are not two sides.

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You've covered wars in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Lebanon, and Northern Ireland. Did Liebling influence how you wrote about those conflicts?

Not in a direct way. He was such a powerful stylist that I'd have been a masochistic fool to try to imitate him. I was also writing for daily newspapers, without the comparative luxury of working on a weekly deadline. But he certainly helped me to see and hear and smell the terrain of war, the way Stendhal did, and Hemingway, Crane, Mailer, Jones, and Shaw. It was that quality that I tried to emulate.

Has how reporters write about war changed since Liebling covered World War II? Do you think this book has anything to say to today's war correspondents?

All of journalism was changed by the triumph of television, including the reporting of war. The image too often overwhelms the word. But Liebling can still teach all young journalists something about reporting the world and its follies. To see, smell, listen, and write.

When and how did you first come across Liebling's work? Compiling this volume and annotating the pieces in it must have required total immersion in Liebling's world and mind. Did it lead you to discover things about him or his work that you hadn't known before?

I started reading *The New Yorker* in 1950 when I was 15. I was already a newspaper freak, and a boxing fan. I don't remember which Liebling piece was my first, but I remember, a few years later, when I was young member of the U.S. Navy stationed in Pensacola, waiting anxiously for the magazine that carried this man Liebling. Even then, before ever thinking about becoming a writer, I knew that he was very special. In 1962, in the press headquarters at the first Patterson-Liston fight, I met Liebling himself. His hands were swollen with gout, his voice low, but he was kind to me about some writing I'd done for *The New York Post*. A year later, he was dead.

In this volume, I learned many things from Derick Schilling's superb chronology and notes. I learned about Joe Liebling. I learned about his time among us and the places that he went. Journalism is inevitably jammed with the common and proper nouns of a given era. Equally inevitable: many fade into a kind of oblivion. Derick has gone through every line in this collection and brought many words back to life. His diligent work enriches our experience of Liebling's prose.

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Liebling wrote for The New Yorker from 1935 until his death in 1963 and is known for much more than his war correspondence. In 2002 Sports Illustrated named his collection of essays on boxing, The Sweet Science, “the best sports book of all time,” and the collection of his columns on the press, The Press, is still considered one of the touchstone works on the media. Will there be another volume of Liebling’s writing from the Library of America?

Yes. There will certainly be another volume of Liebling. You need another if only to appreciate the wide range of his writing. The current plan is for the next volume to include *The Sweet Science*, *The Earl of Louisiana*, *The Press*, *The Jollity Building*, and *Between Meals*, and it should be published some time in 2009.