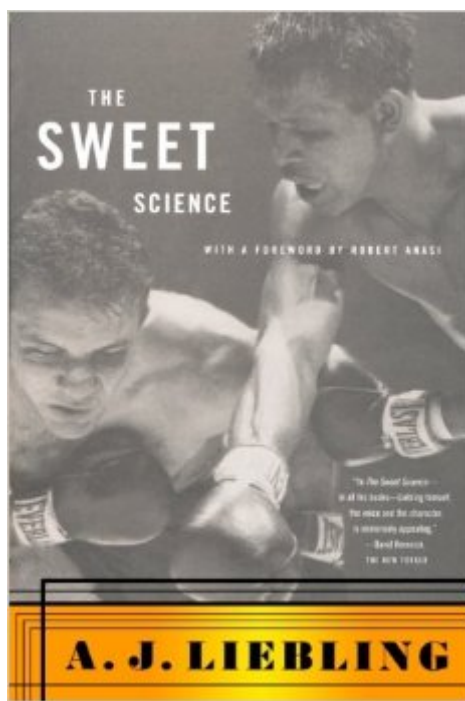


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The Sweet Science



Synopsis

A.J. Liebling's classic New Yorker pieces on the "sweet science of bruising" bring vividly to life the boxing world as it once was. It depicts the great events of boxing's American heyday: Sugar Ray Robinson's dramatic comeback, Rocky Marciano's rise to prominence, Joe Louis's unfortunate decline. Liebling never fails to find the human story behind the fight, and he evokes the atmosphere in the arena as distinctly as he does the goings-on in the ring--a combination that prompted Sports Illustrated to name *The Sweet Science* the best American sports book of all time.

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Customer Reviews

Sportswriting is generally shlock. But A.J. Liebling was no sportswriter. Perhaps the finest reporter ever, certainly one of *The New Yorker's* shining lights, Liebling wrote with equal grace on the swaggering cons of Broadway, his misspent youth in pre-war Paris, blood pooled in a landing craft off Omaha Beach, just about anything that caught his sharp eye and florid pen. And because Liebling wrote what he loved, he also wrote boxing. Whether he was at an obscure club fight or a marquee bout, Liebling never saw his subjects as muscled automata. His boxers were people, every fight a story, and the stories collected in the *Sweet Science* form a classic work of sport that no cigar-chewing sports hack ever tossed on a wire.

When I first read this collection of essays about boxing, I thought I noticed a certain sameness about them. Most of the essays follow a pattern - Liebling visits the boxers while they're training, he goes to the bout and describes the fight in some detail, then leaves for home, or often for a bar and

reflects on the fight. But the book is so good that immediately after finishing, I felt compelled to read it for a second time, and I noticed that each essay has its own theme, a slightly different and interesting take on the sport. Liebling was an expert on boxing history, and when he wrote these essays had been attending bouts for over thirty years. Often the essays feature names still familiar today - Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Rocky Marciano. Liebling is erudite and opinionated. He sympathises with the older boxers, and prefers guile to raw punching power. He also dislikes television and cultivates a humourous disdain for fans who go to boxing matches only to be seen. He's the sort of fellow you would like to drink with in a bar because he's utterly fascinating. The whimsical quality of some of his writing is apparent in the following excerpt, when he's describing how putting sparring partners on the preliminary card makes for bad fights: "Sparring partners are endowed with habitual consideration and forbearance, and they find it hard to change character. A kind of guild fellowship holds them together, and they pepper each other's elbows with merry abandon, grunting with pleasure like hippopotamuses in a beer vat." That's great writing. A final note; this book is a window into an different world, the age just before television took hold, when many people still took their amusement outside their homes. Unfortunately, that world is gone, but you can explore it in this wonderful book.

When asked which is the best book on boxing ever written, anyone with any inclination towards the literary side of *The Manly Art* will instinctively site Liebling's classic collection of essays written in the early '50s collected in this volume. On the evidence here, I cannot dispute the consensus. Liebling gives you not a history or a list of profiles of boxers but an entire world and a culture. He captures the feel of going to a boxing match in the early '50s, the crowds, the managers, the trainers and assorted characters. The best thing you can say about a piece of literature is that it places you in the action, you can physically feel that you are there and present. I have read no other book on Boxing that accurately captures this the way Liebling does in *The Sweet Science*. He's also an accomplished and erudite writer, a highly cultured man who brings that cultural sensitivity to something often considered, by those ignorant of these things, to be base and low-brow. The fighters themselves - Marciano, Moore, Sadler, Robinson, Patterson, Farr - come across less as legends and more as contemporary sportsmen. It seems incredible to me that once upon a time you could just buy a ticket and stroll into the Marciano-Moore fight! For me, that fight and many others was the stuff of mythology and yet Liebling succeeds in making it real and tangible. Final note: anyone who after reading this feels an uncontrollable lust to acquire Pierce Egan's *Boxiana* volumes will be enthralled to know that there is a company in Canada, Nicol Island Publishing, who have published

at least three of the total of five volumes. Unfortunately, does not seem to sell any of them.

The late, great Floyd Patterson, who became the first heavyweight to regain the title after losing it, is as good a reason as any to name a book about boxing, 'The Sweet Science'. In this particular case, A.J. Liebling's masterpiece about boxing (mostly in the fifties) was voted the best sports book ever, by Sports Illustrated. The incredibly colorful characters Liebling focuses on would be hard to beat by any writer in any field, even if he may not have gotten all of it right. For example, he seems to actually get along with Rocky Marciano's manager, Al Weill, even though evidence elsewhere suggests that Rocky may have retired to get away from him. And I think he resorted to cliché in describing Irish Billy Graham as "good as a fighter can be without being a hell of a fighter" (p.250); Graham is a Hall of Famer who was robbed in a welterweight title fight against Kid Gavilan—and my (Jewish) uncle idolized him. But Liebling, who wrote on "serious subjects" for 'The New Yorker' and was an award-winning war reporter, attended the first fight ever held in Yankee Stadium in 1923—and remained optimistic about the future through the lens of boxing, concludes, "I reflected with satisfaction that old Ahab (Archie) Moore could have whipped all four principals on that card within 15 rounds, and that while (Jack) Dempsey may have been a great champion, he had less to beat than Marciano. I felt the satisfaction because it proved that the world isn't going backward, if you can just stay young enough to remember what it was really like when you were really young."

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