



# *The Good Professor*

boxing  
by don cogswell

Abbot Joseph Liebling, forever A.J., has had his New Yorker pieces collected for years under the various interests and appetites peculiar to this legendary scribbler. A sampler from these collections is now available in *Just Enough Liebling*, published by North Point Press.

Most of us are aware of Liebling's two seminal boxing collections, *The Sweet Science* and *A Neutral Corner*. These are smartly represented, if lightly (like everything else), by four entries, including *Ahab and Nemesis* (Marciano and Moore) and the paean to Whitey Bimstein, *The University of Eighth Avenue*.

In the introduction to *Just Enough Liebling*, Dave Remnick lists the Herr Professor's other areas of literary endeavor:

“His love of New York became *Back Where I Came From*; an attention to battle and a passion for France led to *The Road to Paris*, *Mollie and Other War Pieces*, and *Normandy Revisited*; a romance with newspapers led to a critique in *The Press* and *The Wayward Pressman*; his taste for rogues of all varieties became *The Telephone Booth Indians*, *The Honest Rainmaker*, and *The Earl of Louisiana*.” (xii) (While in Reno I read straight through Liebling's account of his divorce residency at a Nevada ranch, with a “mystery” at Pyramid Lake thrown in. Who else could have pulled me into some cockamamie deal like that?)

Liebling's interests, which enrich all his work, are of a piece, threading their way throughout his writings, regardless of their primary intent. In one of the opening stories in *The Wayward Pressman*, one not included in *Just Enough*, Liebling describes his early on-faith acceptance of news stories as gospel, and how that long ago cherry was broken.

*The first thing I remember reading was a newspaper story about a fighter called Carl Morris, the Sapulpa (Okla.) Giant. I have calculated... that this must have been in September, 1911. I had read before, of course, but I cannot remember what. [Liebling was in the second grade]*

*The Morris story was illustrated with a picture of the biggest man I had ever seen, and it long seemed to me in retrospect the whitest, but when I attempted to analyze this recollection I do not see how he could have been any whiter than any other patch of paper. The memory of whiteness must relate to the term White Hope, which was used in the story. Carl Morris, it said, was the White Hope who could surely make trouble for Jack Johnson, the heavyweight champion of the world. He was the largest, strongest man in pugilistic history, standing six feet six inches and weighing 250 pounds, and the paralyzing power of the fists propelled by his mighty arms would pulverize anybody foolhardy enough to climb into the ring with him.*

*The newspaper must have been the Evening Mail, which my father brought home on his return from business every night, for no reason I can recall except that it contained Rube Goldberg's cartoons. Frank Munsey bought and killed it in the early twenties. I read the story about Morris by electric light and in bed, which would indicate that I sneaked a read while my parents thought I was asleep. I can date it so precisely now because an old copy of Tom Andrews' record book I forgot to return to Philadelphia Jack O'Brien shows that on September 15, 1911, Morris fought Jim Flynn, the Pueblo (Col.) Fireman, at the old Madison Square Garden, and that up to that time he had knocked out all opponents in places like Sapulpa and Bartlesville, Okla. This story must have been part of advance publicity, because after September 15 nobody would have written of Morris in such terms.*

*The sequel of it was that Flynn, a fighter of ordinary dimensions and accomplishments, gave Morris a beating.*

*“There is no pugilistic ‘white hope,’ the World said on the day after the fight (my researching alto ego has not been able to find the files of the Mail). “Morris's chief asset was his courage. He proved game to the core. But as a fighter he was a joke.”*

*And so, while I was a newspaper reader from the beginning of my reading career, I learned ab initio not to believe everything I read in the papers.*

(from *The Sapulpa Giant*)

Caveat Emptor: in this, his centennial year, many of Liebling's collections are being re-issued. Budget accordingly.