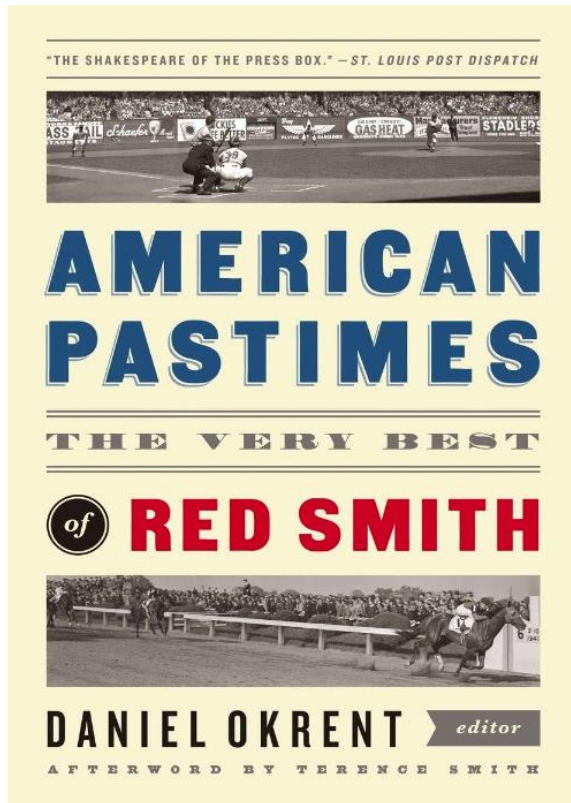


THE BEST OF RED SMITH

A review/appreciation by Roger Zotti of *American Pastimes*



A Pulitzer Prize winning columnist, Red Smith has been called “The Shakespeare of the press box,” while author Jim Jennings described his sentences as “crystalline” and “still a delight today. . . . Whatever the subject, the authority of his prose never flags.” Those two quotes about Smith’s writing aren’t exaggerations: His writing is, indeed, incomparable.

American Pastimes: The Very Best of Red Smith, edited by Daniel Okrent, contains 163 columns Smith wrote from the 1940s to the early 1980s for *The Herald Tribune* and *The New York Times*. Many of them are devoted to what A.J. Liebling termed the sweet science.

Consider these three gems in a book of gems. Published in 1949, “Videots”—which is “a generic term for television viewers”—is aptly subtitled “Fusari, Castellani, Dewar’s, & Philco. The column is about what Smith observed and heard in a packed New York bar as its clientele

watched the 1949 Rocky Castellani – Charley Fusari fight.

Nationally televised from Madison Square Garden, the bout was one of those popular Gillette Friday Night Fights boxing fans treasured . . . And who can forget the Gillette jingle—“How are you fixed for blades?”—sung by the guitar toting, dancing parrot!

In the first round Castellani, weighing 151, knocked down Fusari, who scaled 147. “The videots only grunted at that,” Smith writes, “except for one of the whiskey men (Dewar’s Label), who was rooting softly for Fusari.” Though Fusari sprang to his feet at the count of three, the Dewar’s imbiber was vocal about wanting him “to take a full nine count.”

Yes, it was a big opening round for Castellani, but from then on the slick boxing Fusari took control of the fight.

Turning to the sixth round: Seated at the bar Smith heard a patron saying that ‘I make it only the first for Castellani.’ The man on the left agreed.” And when the fight was over and the decision announced, it was in favor of Fusari. “Should of been more for Fusari,” said another customer seated at the bar “without heat.”

Before the decision was rendered, Smith tells us about a woman he heard who “kept lifting a voice that was shrill with drink. ‘Mary, oh Mary,’ she called to someone in her party. And to someone else, ‘Kiss me, honey.’” (Stay tuned: I promise she’ll be back.)

After the fight Smith heard a customer ask George the bartender if “These fights bring in the crowds in” and “Don’t a lot of ‘em come in for one beer and watch the fight?”

George replied, “Yeah, and shrugged.”

Smith ends his column like this: “Somebody had a Bing Crosby record going on the jukebox. Television had been switched off. . . . The screechy woman”—I told you she’d be back!—“cried, ‘Kiss me, honey.’”

There’s Smith’s column titled “The Old Mary Ann” (1959). If you’re wondering who or what the old Mary Ann is, “[It was Max Baer] winding up his right,” Smith writes, “which no other fighter of any time could throw with quite the same gaudy and destructive and altogether unforgettable flourish.” When it landed it was usually lights out for his opponent.

In 1934 Baer won the world heavyweight title at Madison Garden Bowl by smashing Primo Carnera to the canvas twelve times in eleven rounds before referee Arthur Donovan woke up and stopped the slaughter.

A year later, Baer, in his first title defense—June 13 was the day—was outpointed by James J. Braddock.

In Smith’s piece he writes about the time Baer was called a coward—unjustly—after being stopped by a prime Joe Louis on September 24, 1935, at Yankee Stadium.

In round three he was hit by Louis’s best punches and dropped twice. Louis’s left jab was a thing of beauty to watch.) In round four he was knocked down by a thunderous right to the chin and “took the count on one knee,” which angered some people because they believed he should’ve immediately jumped to his feet and gone after Louis.

“[Baer] never denied that he could have gotten up,” Smith writes, “merely remarking that ‘if they want to see the execution of Max Baer it’ll cost them more than twenty-five dollars a seat.’”

Classic Max Baer.

Smith adds: “To the best of my knowledge he never offered further explanation . . .”

Here’s the fight’s backstory: Baer broke his right hand in training and kept it secret “. . . the hand was dosed with Novocain to protect the million dollar gate,” Smith writes. “This is neither incredible nor unprecedented; other fighters have concealed injuries for far less money.”

Before the fight began, Baer and his physician “slipped into the men’s room where the doctor inserted the needle beneath the bandages. . . . Apparently the needle went near the wrist. At any rate, instead of merely numbing the hand, it deadened the whole right forearm. Within ten minutes Max was a frantic wreck, not far short of collapse. His friend Jack Dempsey almost

literally had to drag him out for the fight.” Baer’s Mary Ann, his best weapon, was useless during the four rounds he lasted with the great Louis.

The source of the information about Baer’s right hand was Bayard Bookman, the fighter and his manager Ancil Hoffman’s accountant. Smith quotes another source as saying he knew Bookman well and there was no reason why he’d invent such a story.

Q: How would Baer have done if his right hand wasn’t broken?

A: Louis had too much fire power in his prime for any of the heavyweights of the time, and with his ability to punch with either hand, he would’ve stopped a game Baer in a later round, though he’d have to be very mindful of his foe’s old Mary Ann.

Smith’s 1971 column titled “The Constant Reader” contains interviews with Sonny Liston, who held the heavyweight championship from 1962 to 1964. In one interview “[Liston’s] boyish charm was beneath the surface,” Smith writes. “Only in a few passages later did his repartee sparkle. Once he said, ‘Uh.’ Later, expanding a trifle, he said, ‘No.’ And at last, taking off the conventional wraps, he said, ‘Uhhuhu.’”

In another interview, Smith—his fingers had to be crossed—told Liston’s trainer, a former Philadelphia heavyweight named Willie Reddish, “Yes, I did ten years hard in Philadelphia.”

Working out nearby, Liston heard what Smith said and asked him, “No good time?”

“Not a bloody hour, Sonny,” replied Smith.

In Liston’s small dressing room, after his workout, “he snatched a stack of towels off a chair to make a seat for me. With every evidence of confidence and candor, he answered all my questions. At length I rose to leave, I wished him luck, and we shook hands.”

“‘Any time. Any time,’ Liston responded. Obviously, any old con from Philadelphia was a friend of Sonny’s.”

Roger Zotti is a regular contributor to the *IBRO Journal* and the author of two boxing books, *Friday Night World* and *The Proper Pugilist*. He can be reached at rogerzotti@aol.com to say nice things about his writing.