

Foreword *by Carlo Rotella*

You have in your hands a rare and precious thing in the twenty-first century: the work of a professional boxing writer. There are few such pros left, and none on the way, as far as I can tell. George Kimball – who was born on 20 December, 1943, and died of oesophageal cancer, still writing and planning new pieces right up to the very last deadline of all, on 6 July 2011 – was one of the very last of the breed.

Professional boxing writers, as a class of journalists, can exist when writers who care about the quality of their reporting and their prose can make a decent living writing about boxing. Something similar holds true for boxers. For both sets of practitioners, there has to be some kind of balance between doing it for love (so to speak) and doing it for money – not a lot of money, necessarily, but enough to temper enthusiasm and cynicism with the rigour that comes of delivering the goods to earn a worthwhile wage.

Once upon a time, when boxing's only peer as a popular sport in America was baseball, a lot more men could make a living at the trade, which made for more bouts, a thicker network of gyms, and more and better boxers. Similarly, newspapers were obliged to employ reporters who specialized in boxing, and boxing magazines had stables of writers who addressed large readerships. Some of these golden-age fight scribes were better than others, of course, but together they played an important collective role. Their grasp of the complicated fit between two very different kinds of sophistication – the boxer's difficult craft and the dark arts of the fight business – supplied a crucial third force to offset the often uncritical passion of fans and the promotional fairy tales peddled by the backstage powers who profited from boxing.

These days, with boxing consigned to a remote niche in newspapers and magazines, and with most writers who regularly cover fights working for websites that pay starvation rates, the “decent living” part of the professional equation is hard to come by. Too many writers filing copy from ringside have to do it as a hobby, or because it feels good to sit up close and wear press

credentials around your neck and act like an insider. The result is that too often they write like fans or volunteer publicists. That's one big reason why the body of informed, substantive, well-reported, well-crafted, timely, timeless, independent-minded, entirely professional fight pieces that make up this book are, as I said, a rare and precious thing in the world today.

That George Kimball wrote them mostly after he'd "retired" is an indicator of the current state of affairs in the fight-writing world. Print and online editors wouldn't let him retire in peace. He learned his craft as a newspaper beat reporter in Boston, for a decade at the *Phoenix* and then for twenty-five years at the *Herald*, which meant that he was far better at the job and more experienced than anybody else those editors could find. His career spanned the end of the era of the boxing beat writer at a newspaper – an era he helped prolong by exploiting the rise of the local middleweight hero Marvin Hagler to force the *Herald* to let him cover boxing regularly – and the beginning of the online era. He was one of the very few boxing writers worth reading when he went long online, and that's precisely because he internalized the virtues of the newspaper beat reporter's often highly constrained trade.

As you read these pieces, consider how much went into even their most effortless-seeming paragraphs. Kimball's long-range perspective, both his knowledge of boxing history and his extended personal familiarity with the fighters and other characters he writes about, enriches every observation. A just-right blend of connoisseur's joy and seen-it-all worldiness enables shrewd judgements of talent and also a penchant for penetrating the fight world's pandemic bluster and lies to arrive at nuggets of truth. He strikes a crucial balance between by-the-book reportorial legwork and disciplined personal judgement, and he mates the theatre critic's eye for ring drama to the investigative reporter's nose for murky dealings. Again and again, his literary sensibility and cask-aged sense of humour strike resonant notes from double-checked facts.

Kimball makes it all look easy – or, if not easy, then smooth and natural. And by the time he wrote these late-career pieces it did come to him naturally, and had been coming to him naturally for many years. But you're looking at the accrued benefits of decades of writing about boxing for a living. In other words, you're looking at the work of a professional boxing writer. Enjoy it, and treasure it. We probably won't see its like again.