A fellow once asked Red Smith, the last poet laureate of sports columnists, why had he never written a book. Smith studied his scotch and soda, which is what you do in bars when you think someone has asked you a dumb question. He looked at the fellow, looked away, swirled the ice in his glass. Then he shrugged. "I guess," he said, gently, "after I have written 900 words, I am done."

A man of few letters, all of them wonderfully placed, Smith limited his incursions into the book-publishing world to a handful of bundled recycled columns, none of which added much growth to the Smith family treasury. He once told a fellow journalist who had just revealed concerns that a recently published collection of his own sports columns might not sell: "Guys like us don't make money writing books." Smith was just happy to collect a modest advance against royalties for what he considered a reprint of yesterday's news.

"At least you can wrap fish in an old newspaper," said Smith. "What can you wrap in a book?"

The *New York Times* essayist, you might recall, is the fellow who midwifed on the night of February 15, 1978 these words from his Olivetti:

"One thing needs to be said about Muhammad Ali's *pas de deux* with Leon Spinks before it is labeled 'historic upset' and tucked away in lavender like some treasured keepsake. If this were, say, 1958 and the match had been the main event in Ridgeway Grove or St. Nick's or the Eastern Parkway, a referee like Ruby Goldstein would have thrown Ali out of the ring inside the first four rounds. Through the early rounds of the quadrille, the heavyweight champion of the world did not pretend to punch, he who is excelled at punching. There is a certain Victorian charm about a pretty man in his drawers leaning on the ropes and burying his face in his hand like a maiden covering her blushes, but by the Marquis of Queensberry's standards the spectacle leaves something to be desired. The transfer of the title was memorable as a happening because it was the last hurrah for an actor who has commanded the stage for almost 18 years. As an example of the Sweet Science it was a stinker, an embarrassing encounter between a fearless novice who has yet to learn how to fight and a relic who has forgotten how. It was in no sense an upset."

Or, as Bill Lyons, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* columnist, phrased it, quite laconically:

"Ali is like an opera singer past his prime. He is faking the high notes."

Ali did that to even the most jaded of writers, causing them to fire poetical hooks to the notional cup whenever he turned a promised fist fight into a dog and pony show. For the last half of his career, most of Ali's fights were one part epic to three parts street corner con, and the writers, especially the seasoned veterans, were not happy when the peanut shell they selected was revealed empty.

"M. Ali, the ancient hustler, is making a mockery of the heavyweight championship. This may strike some as an impossible task, but he has accomplished it. He says he wants to make a comeback, now that he is 38 and on the verge of obesity, and nobody should be surprised. When he proclaimed his retirement, after he retrieved his championship from Leon Spinks 17 months ago, this corner noted that he would be back. Old fighters never know when enough is enough. Joe Louis can tell Ali a thing or two about comebacks. The wonderful old fighter was going on 38 when he encountered Rocky Marciano in Madison Square Garden in 1951. In training at Pompton Lake, N.J., Louis seemed to have retained his old skills. His body looked good and in training bouts he was methodical. On the last day of sparring, he hit a sparring partner with a smashing right hand and a jury of journalists in attendance thought he might somehow beat Marciano. In the Garden, in the very first round, Marciano hit Louis over a left hand and the old former champion was abruptly older. When he was knocked out in the eighth round, he fell out of the ropes and the great throng in the Garden was sad. Mr. Ali, nee Cassius Marcellus Clay, was 9 years old."

Barney Nagler, a wee man who went through life with a fistful of very sharp sticks, wrote that 1980, the day that Ali announced he was coming back to fight Larry Holmes. That fight, if you can call it that, would be the 41st of Ali's fights that Nagler covered. The 35th for the then *Daily Racing Form*
columnist was The Thrilla in Manila. One night, during dinner at the Sala with his friend Milt Richman of
United Press International
, Richmand, a baseball writer of note, asked Nagler who he considered the hardest puncher ever.

"Oh, I don't know," said Nagler, shaking his head. "I guess it would be Joe Louis. Why, who do you think?

"Carmine Vingo," Richman said, naming a heavyweight club fighter from the Bronx who scored seven knockouts in 18 fights in the 1940s.

"CARMINE VINGO!" Nagler shouted, causing considerable concern for a baker's dozen or so neighboring diners.

"Well, I have a right to my opinion," said Richman, defensively.

"Not when you are wrong, you don't," snapped Nagler.

Nagler was in Philadelphia writing a column for the ill-fated *New York Morning Telegraph* for the first Rocky Marciano-Jersey Joe Walcott heavyweight championship in 1952, the one where Walcott had Marciano down for the first time in his career, for a four count in the first round, and was leading on all three cards after twelve rounds.

"Rocky Marchegiano is completely without guile as a fist fighter. He fights at a pace and with a fury harnessed by few other heavyweights in history. He'll take a punch to throw

one. He is deadly on attack once his opponent is hurt, supremely confident in his punching power. Picture his manner the moment he smashed Walcott's jaw with that telltale right in the 13th round at Philadelphia. Quickly, he followed up with another punch, a left hook that caught Walcott just as the fallen old man was grabbing the rope before crumbling in an awkward, curious, broken heap. Marciano didn't even look to see Walcott go down, his face ashen, his body twisted to its left side with his head buried in the canvas. He just walked back to his corner, knowing full well he had achieved his purpose. This fighting arrogance is not the product of conceit. It is merely a part of Marciano's ring armament. It is as much with him as his two fists. He is aware that the purpose of a fight, apart from the basic money considerations, is victory. Marciano wants the kill."

Or, as Red Smith saw it, and as only he could write it:

"It was a grand fight, possibly the best for the heavyweight championship since Jack Dempsey's famous "long count" match with Gene Tunney, a quarter century ago. It was a wonderful fight in its own right, close and bruising and bloody and exciting, especially good because Walcott's performance was so unexpected. It is wearing a threadbare line to tatters to say that night in Walcott's reign became him so well as his leave-taking. It is also true. Here was a pacific old gentleman who was just recognized as a prince of prudence, an antique tiger who had lost to assorted mediocrities, who had never beaten any fighter of distinction, who has shown himself of many small skills and a great contempt for the calendar's spite, but had never exhibited a consuming urge for combat. Yet he stood his ground against a young, rough, resolute bruiser and fought such a battle as nobody believed he could make, and he was winning when the sands of time ran out. He came suddenly to the end of the string, got nailed, and went out as a champion should, on his shield."