Plimpton Wins Boxing Writers' Liebling Award

JANUARY 3, 2012 -- George Plimpton, the elegant literary adventurer who graced boxing with witty, insightful prose and once had his nose broken in the line of duty, will receive this year's A.J. Liebling Award. The Boxing Writers Association of America presents the award in memory of Liebling, the legendary New Yorker wordsmith who called his favorite sport "The Sweet Science."

Plimpton, who died in 2003, at age 76, was the author of one book about boxing, "Shadow Box," and wrote about fights and fighters for Sports Illustrated, Harper's, and Esquire, most memorably during the heyday of Muhammad Ali. It wasn't Ali who broke his nose, however. Archie Moore delivered that blow during a sparring session that Plimpton had arranged. What Ali, who was never good at remembering names, did was give the tall, patrician Plimpton a nickname he couldn't forget: "Kennedy."

Plimpton came to prominence in the world of literature as the editor and one of the founders of the Paris Review. He was also a prominent figure in New York's social scene, with his lockjaw accent, unfailing good humor, and boundless enthusiasm for new experiences. It was his enthusiasm that led him to become America's leading participatory journalist.

Following a trail blazed by Paul Gallico in the 1920s, he became the amateur who forever took his place among professionals and wrote memorably - and hilariously - and about his inevitable failure. Among other things, he played quarterback for the Detroit Lions, goalie for the Boston Bruins, and tympani for the New York Philharmonic. At the behest of his editors at Sports Illustrated, he wound up in the ring at Stillman's Gym with Moore, who was then the light-heavyweight champ and a bit of an intellectual himself.

There is no available evidence that Liebling ever sparred with a world champion, as Plimpton did when he went three rounds with Moore in 1959, but little doubt exists that the two writers were kindred spirits. Plimpton himself acknowledged the connection when he was reunited with Moore while working on a story for Esquire more than 30 years later. One minute they were talking about Moore's loss to Rocky Marciano; the next Plimpton was thinking about Liebling: "(He) had once written that if you got hit on the nose by a professional prizefighter, you were linked to a kind of genealogical tree of people who had bopped each other on the nose. It stretched back to Victorian times. It also meant, because Archie had bopped me on the nose in our 'fight,' that I was connected not only to Marciano but to Joe Louis, back through Jack Dempsey and John L. Sullivan to Jem Mace and also to Piano-Mover Jones!"

In winning the Liebling award, Plimpton, who wrote or edited 26 books, including the classic "Paper Lion," joins such previous honorees as Pete Hamill, John Lardner, Larry Merchant, and F.X. Toole. He will be honored at the BWAA's annual awards banquet in the spring. John Schulian was chairman of the committee that selected Plimpton. The committee's members were Dave Anderson, Bernard Fernandez, Richard Hoffer, and Ed Schuyler. All are past winners of the BWAA's Nat Fleischer Award for Excellence in Boxing Journalism.

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Plimpton was the prototype,.. nobody did it better.