



Beyond the Book®



Book Expo America 2007 – New York A Winning Season – Its Time to Take Sports Writing Seriously

KENNEALLY: I want to turn now to Star Lawrence. Starling Lawrence is Editor-in-Chief and Vice Chairman at W.W. Norton and Company, where he has worked since 1969. He's here with us today because among the authors he's published at Norton are Michael Lewis, Sebastian Junger, Patrick O'Brian, Vincent Bugliosi. He is an author himself, and has published a volume of short stories, *Legacies*, and two novels, *Montenegro*, and most recently, *The Lightning Keeper*. He was born in New York and received degrees from Princeton and Cambridge before he joined the Peace Corps, serving in Cameroon. And welcome, Star.

LAWRENCE: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: With sports figures, it's common, as we've heard, to use the vocabulary of mythology, and teams are cursed, athletes are heroes, rivals lock in fierce battle. Do you think of sportswriting and the writers that you've worked with as at all engaged in myth making? It's a leading question, I suppose. But if it's not, is it a way to upend the myths?

LAWRENCE: I think people have always used myth to organize their understanding of the world. I mean, the Greeks did it, we do it. I certainly think that sports figures make excellent mythic subjects. And whether they conform absolutely to the convenient or the simplified version of the myth is another question. Of course, they don't. But I think that sportswriting – good and bad sportswriting – does – certainly depends on elements of myth. It's interesting to people. It's the way we think about our own lives. So I think it's necessarily part of sportswriting.

KENNEALLY: And it's the way the games are organized. There's a certain mythic proportion already there. You're definition of non-fiction was a satisfying collection of facts. And I guess what I wanted to ask you, as someone who's worked with variety of men and women who collect facts for a living, is the way that Michael Lewis approaches his subject different, and how, from the way that Sebastian Junger might?

LAWRENCE: I don't know that I can answer that. I think both authors, and maybe anybody who writes an interesting book, is willing to take a detour from what might be said to be strictly the subject of the book, and find the interesting path that takes you away from the subject. And if you're really good, it's going to lead you back again. Digressions, interesting digressions. *The Perfect Storm*, you learn about wave physics and meteorology, and I don't think he would have written the book in the first place had he not had a near, very close call with drowning in the ocean. And he writes about what it's like to drown. Which of course, is a useful – useful. And interesting to the reader, given the subject of the book.

Michael Lewis just does not write about one thing. In fact, I think everything he writes, or everything he's ever going to write that is truly interesting is about market mechanisms. That's what *The Blindside* was, that's what *Moneyball* was. And it's certainly what his first book, *Liar's Poker* was. And his mind just works in interesting ways. He sees things that other people can – perhaps have looked at the same information, and he will just take it in a different direction. And I find it absolutely fascinating – in the work of those authors, or in the work of any author – when I am taken someplace I didn't know I was going to go. And that's true.

John Kenneth Galbraith wrote an admiring review of his fellow Canadian, Robertson Davies. And he said the secret of the fascination of Davies' fiction is that he gets you interested – in the course of a novel – he gets you interested in information that you didn't know, and you would have sworn you had no interest in when you started the book. And it is Davies' genius to make you interested in stuff you would have dismissed as a subject of inquiry.

KENNEALLY: When it comes to sportswriting though, does it help that Michael played ball himself, do you think? And in what ways?

LAWRENCE: I certainly do think it helped. He wrote a slender little book called *Coach*, which is about him as a high school – sort an accidental high school baseball hero, very accidental. Fat, white kid is what he referred to himself as his qualification for pitching. But yes, I think he's – Michael gets a look in his eye when he does this. He's remembering what that moment felt like when the pitcher who had been pitching was taken out for a non-sporting reason, and he was given the ball. And he has his line in this little book – he said there I am, blah blah blah, and he sets the scene for you. And he said I am about to show the world, and myself, what I can do. And it's his relationship with a coach that has brought him to this point. So that was clearly a really important moment in his life. And he has spent the rest of his life showing himself, and the world, what he can do.

KENNEALLY: As an editor, though, do you think that someone could write a book about baseball who's never thrown a baseball?

LAWRENCE: I guess my question would be why would they do that? Why would they want to do that? It's possible. But I –

GOLENBOCK: Do you know somebody who's never thrown a baseball?

KENNEALLY: No, I actually – that's a good point, Peter. It's hard to imagine. But I'm sure, if we think about other sports that are just less commonly played – and it's a question I might ask the other panelists in a moment – but to have had the experience of being an athlete. I guess I'll put it that way – not necessarily playing a particular game, but to have had the experience of being an athlete – is that a prerequisite for writing an engaging book about sports?

LAWRENCE: I don't think I can answer the question. I don't honestly know. I think that you do learn things in playing sports, you learn things about yourself.

KENNEALLY: There's an appreciation –

LAWRENCE: And you –

KENNEALLY: – for the game.

LAWRENCE: – learn – and you don't have to be a world-beater athlete to learn something. In fact, you learn some things about yourself that you tuck away that are useful and not very – perhaps not very positive information. You learn something about your limitations, and what you do with those givens.