

Leonard Koppett, *Sports Illusion, Sports Reality: A Reporter's View of Sports, Journalism, and Society*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1994. pp. 296.

An investigation of the journalist's function within the sports media process is a worthwhile and enticing enterprise. However, Koppett's republished volume—originally released in 1981—on the American sports media disappoints due to its culturally and socially atavistic standpoint. No effort has been made to update either analysis, anecdotal or empirical evidence. This debility is compounded by the author's erroneous supposition that sport is separate from the wider social milieu and is not fully integrated with the 'real' world (p.195). This results in a problematic work that is guilty of generalisation on issues which the author has an outmoded viewpoint, and thus the text has wildly varying relevance to events within the contemporary American and global sport media systems.

The high point of this book is the author's explanation of the basic tenets of story and article production, which is to be expected from a reporter of more than thirty years' experience (p. 6). Koppett also demonstrates the entertainment value of a snappy quote, and actuality within an anecdote. It is disappointing, however, that there is no discussion of the stylistic approach that has been alternatively described as the 'new', 'gonzo' and 'para-' journalism, which arose in America in the mid-1960s through magazine journalism.¹ This radical reporting style paid homage to the literary novel by mixing fact and fiction and had significant stylistic and popularising effects upon the feature article. (A prime example of this style is self-described 'gonzo' journalist Hunter S Thompson's *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*).² Negligently, Koppett also ignores the intrinsic bias, and power, of language as shown through the ill-defined use of terms such as 'natural', 'reality', 'accurate', 'objective' and 'businessman'—terms that require explanation due to their cultural ambiguity, and in the latter case, gender bias. Due to these deficiencies, in terms of instructional utility, this book may be useful only as a starting point for the sports journalism novice or first year media student.

The treatment of American socio-political issues varies from simplistic to satisfactory. Koppett's adherence to the mirror view of sport and society's relationship is reductionist and largely uncritical. He

claims little has changed in sport and journalism since 1981 (p. ix), when it is arguable that diversification and fragmentation are central features of the 1990s sporting system. The treatment of women's issues is substandard with a superficial chapter which contains no genuine attempt at analysis of feminist issues or gender, either within the media or in sport. Reprehensibly, only two women were detected in the entire book (Barbara Tuchman, p. 127, and Billie Jean-King, p. 212), compared with an innumerable amount of men. In addressing racial issues, only black athletes are identified as a group and they are treated as an amorphous, unified grouping. On the positive side of the ledger, constructive attention is given to the status of children as a sports audience. The treatment of the economic rationalising base of the American sporting and media system is competent, while the arguments accompanying the discussion of amateurism as 'poison', 'evil' (p. 179) and 'sick' (p. 186) are at least entertaining. Despite these meagre successes, Koppett largely fails to contextualise relevant sports journalism issues into the wider socio-political spectrum of American society.

In conclusion, the reader is left with little grasp of Koppett's journalistic ideological and philosophical standpoint. The role of the sports journalist is left as a nebulous concept, while the social, political and media structures that support and create news agendas and stories remain largely unearthed. The many weaknesses of *Sports Illusion*, *Sports Reality* leave a bitter after-taste. The analyses of many media and socio-political issues are outdated and irrelevant. While much of this review condemns this book, I merely seek—to borrow Koppett's all-encompassing journalistic qualifier—to 'tell it like it seems from here' (p. xiv).

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Notes:

- 1 See Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, Picador, London, for a detailed account of the development of this journalistic style, and events surrounding its rise.
- 2 A reprinted version of this appears in Tom Wolfe's, *The New Journalism*.