From the Bookshelf

A Reporter’s Life
by Walter Cronkite
384 pages. $26.95 hardcover.

Walter Cronkite’s best-selling autobiography, A Reporter’s Life, is being well received by readers and reviewers for a variety of reasons. Cronkite was an eyewitness to the historic events that shaped our lives. His life’s account is a well-written, easy read that often seems like a fireside chat with the trusted Uncle Walter of our youth—and a poignant reminder of the days when CBS News ruled. He caps the chronology and anecdotes of his career with a blunt indictment of the present-day media in general and television news in particular.

Amid the reminiscences of national and international significance, however, Oklahomans will find an unexpected bonus. Tucked away in the third chapter are three-and-a-half pages on a little-known episode in Cronkite’s life that for one brief, shining moment made him one of us. This icon of broadcast journalism, this commentator on history’s most momentous happenings, this Depression-era drop-out from UT-Austin spent the 1937 season as the play-by-play announcer for Sooners football games on WKY Radio.

Cronkite broke into sportscasting with a Kansas City station, simulating play-by-play game accounts from abbreviated Western Union wire bulletins. His imaginative reconstructions earned him kudos. He soon returned to Texas print journalism with United Press, but apparently his broadcasting reputation reached Oklahoma City’s WKY, which had just signed the first exclusive contract to broadcast all OU games, home and away.

Before the season started, Cronkite lived in Norman to familiarize himself with the University and the team. The station went all out to promote their new star, but the opening game with the University of Tulsa found him ill-prepared for his first “live” broadcast. The Tulsa “disaster” taught Cronkite a lesson he never forgot.

“Never again would I be caught without having done whatever research was possible for whatever it was I was going to cover,” he writes. “For the football games . . . I learned the name and number and position and hometown, height and weight and record of every member of each squad of every game we broadcast. . . . We had a wonderfully successful season.”

Not that the season lacked its challenges. Cronkite recalls the Nebraska game in Lincoln, broadcasting from a radio booth three decks away from the action. When a driving snowstorm completely blanked out the field below, Cronkite was tempted to fall back on his imagination but eventually was able to tap into the coaches’ sideline telephone for an account not unlike the Western Union bulletins.

Relegated to the news department after the season—which in those early days meant rewriting stories from The Daily Oklahoman—Cronkite moved on—and the rest, as they say, is broadcast history. He still takes pride, however, that the station already was promoting the 1938 season and was disappointed at his departure.

—CAROL J. BURR