Classic Book Notes

September 2024

Originally October 2020

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Women, Baseball & Poetry

Editor's note: Now that football season is in full swing and Major League Baseball teams are scrambling to make the playoffs, here is a Book Note Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth. It also celebrates several women poets. The Jefferson first published it as Book Notes #31 in 2020 and the reader may notice that the Cleveland Indians noted in the text are now the Cleveland Guardians.

Thank you! A number of readers said they enjoyed the previous two baseball ***Book Notes***. Last week, we celebrated the Cleveland Indians' victory over the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1920 World Series. I was hoping for a 100th anniversary rematch of that 1920 duel. The Dodgers held up their end, but the Tribe, in true Tribe fashion, teased then folded in the playoffs' first round.

So, as the 2020 pandemic-themed World Series, complete with piped in crowd noise and cardboard cut-out fans unfolds, here are a few more baseball poems.

Several of them are by women establishing that “fandom” is gender neutral. In one of the earlier baseball ***Book Notes,*** I recounted a Cleveland Indians’ executive telling me that women, having played softball, were now among baseball’s most ardent fans. Their attendance having sustained the game, it is not too big a stretch to say it might be women who save baseball from itself.

In this ***Book Notes,*** we’ll also share some thoughts about the question, “What is the best baseball book ever written?” and take a look into two of my favorite contenders for that honor.

First, some baseball poetry beginning with one for my baseball second cousins – Pittsburgh Pirates’ fans.

Growing up in Canton, Ohio, I was by birth a Cleveland Indians fan. However, long before I lived in Erie, Pennsylvania, the Pirates became my National League team. Two uncles and other relatives lived in New Castle, Pennsylvania. I have vivid memories of watching on my uncle’s black-and-white, mid-1950s TV the Pirates losing to Jackie Robinson’s Brooklyn Dodgers.

More importantly, Canton, Ohio is just within reach of Pittsburgh-based KDKA’s 50,000 watt AM radio signal. It was 1958. After 30 or more years of consistent losing, the Pirates of Danny Murtaugh, Roberto Clemente, Vern Law, Bob Friend, Dick Groat, and Bill Mazeroski suddenly began to win. On the yellow-back (cheap plastic) radio on my homework desk, I listened to Bob Prince and Jim Woods chronicle their resurgence. Among those they chronicled was a career minor league slugger who frequently led the International League in home runs, batting average, and slugging.

He never quite managed in his nine up-and-down seasons between the minors and majors to match those numbers or even to stay a full season. But in 1959 and 1960, backing up Pirate first baseman Dick Stuart, who was such an atrocious fielder he was called “Stony” and “Dr. Strange Glove” for all the balls his hard-handed playing dropped, our minor league slugger finally, hmmm, not blossomed but managed to hang on in the major leagues.

His name was Rocky Nelson.

The Ballad of Rocky Nelson
by Raymond Souster

When old Rocky Nelson shuffles up to the plate
The outfield shifts 'round and the fans all wait.

He takes up his stance which ignores every law,
Has a last slow suck of the quid of his jaw,

And waits while the pitcher makes up his mind
What new deception his arm can unwind.

Then the ball comes in and the sound of wood
That's heard by the ear does the loyal heart good,

And the ball rises up like a hunted thing
Pursued by an angry bumble-bee's sting,

And the outfielders run but it's no use at all-
Another one over the right field wall.
And as Rocky trots slowly around the bases
Happiness lights up twelve thousand faces. [1]

The most knowledgeable baseball fan I ever met was a colleague of mine at Notre Dame College. Deb Sheren knows more about baseball than any five guys you can muster. Having mastered "the geometry & hieroglyphs of scorecards," Joyce Kessel notes below, both in intricacy and accuracy Deb's scorecards are works of art. Like Deb bringing new energy to the game, many of baseball's most intense fans are women.

Some are poets writing some very fine baseball poetry, as in these two by Marna Owen and Joyce Kessel. Kessel, a professor at Buffalo's Villa Maria College, describes a joy familiar to Erie Seawolves' fans in *Bleacher Rat*.

Bleacher Rat

I grew up a National League fan

of the Pirates, Cards, Reds & Giants,
not even knowing many decades before
my Buffalo Bisons played in the Senior League
well before becoming a minor league stalwart.
So, I'd pray for sunny skies over Forbes Field
rather than Cleveland's "Mistake by the Lake."
My rare defection to the American League
came when the Orioles gained Frank Robinson
in that lopsided trade and after,
who couldn't have appreciated Cal Ripken?

My dad & I would troll the minor leagues
where for some reason affiliations
didn't seem to matter as much,
at least not to me,
who took in the green expanses
beyond dirt as the glowing diamonds
they were meant to be,
even in parks that were bare shadows
to Little League fields today.

In bandbox fields
and open air bleachers
we'd watch players with numbers,
but no names on their uniforms,
trading cards in their future or past
or not at all, their talents raw and wild.

I learned a geography of Rust Belt cities:
Toledo Mudhens, Columbus Clippers,
Rochester Redwings, Syracuse Chiefs,
Geneva Cubs, Oneonta Yankees,
Niagara Falls Rainbows,
a day’s ride away,
hoping they’d play two,
and mastering the geometry
& hieroglyphs of scorecards. [2]

If Rocky Nelson's checkered baseball career testifies to the truth of many a commencement speaker's celebration of *persistence* as the key to life's success, then in *To Believe* ,Marna Owen voices the truth that nothing lasts forever.

To Believe

It's all I can do
To pay attention and drive
While the last half of the 9th is played out
The last battle of the regular season
It's now or never
A baseball cliche, but who cares?
It is now or never

I listen to games from spring to autumn
Grab the morning paper
Read, critique, coach aloud to no one and anyone
I count the games, study the box scores
When the magic number is 1
I believe in magic

Until the third out.
It happens in the parking lot.

Bludgeoned
I leave my car and wander down the street
Buy some bread I do not want
Stare mindlessly at a purse in a shop window.

Then I see the clerk in the wine store, his head in his hands,
Eyes covered, and I know, I know despair.
I back up, go inside.
He has the game on,
The final season wrap-up among all the bottles of wine.

He lifts his head, looks at me
"Let me know if I can help you," he says dejectedly.

"Thanks," I say, and pretend to shop. Just to keep company.

We both know there is nothing to be done. [3]

The premier, in both senses of the word, best and first, woman poet exploring baseball's soul was Marianne Moore. Her *Baseball & Writing* is a classic not only of baseball poetry, but also of the modernist tradition itself. (**Nb.** The players named were members of the great Yankee teams of the late-1940s to the mid-1960s that won 15 pennants in 18 years, although they did lose the 1960 series to the Pirates).

from Baseball & Writing

Fanaticism? No. Writing is exciting
and baseball is like writing.
You can never tell with either
how it will go
or what you will do;
generating excitement –
a fever in the victim –
pitcher, catcher, fielder, batter.
Victim in what category?
Owlman watching from the press box?
To whom does it apply?
Who is excited? Might it be I?

. . .Assign Yogi Berra to Cape Canaveral;
he could handle any missile.
He is no feather. "Strike! . . . Strike Two!"
Fouled back. A blur.
It's gone. You would infer
that the bat had eyes.
He put the wood to that one.
Praised, Showron says, "Thanks, Mel.
I think I helped a little bit."
All business, each, and modesty.
Blanchard, Richardson, Kubek, Boyer.

In that galaxy of nine, say which
won the pennant? Each. It was he. [4]

Although it has nothing to do with sabermetrics or analytics draining the romance from the game, May Swenson's *Analysis of Baseball* gets to the game's heart.

Analysis of Baseball

It's about
the ball,
the bat,
and the mitt.
Ball hits
bat, or it
hits mitt.
Bat doesn't
hit ball, bat
meets it.
Ball bounces
off bat, flies
air, or thuds
ground (dud)
or it
fits mitt.

Bat waits
for ball
to mate.
Ball hates
to take bat's
bait. Ball
flirts, bat's
late, don't
keep the date.
Ball goes in
(thwack) to mitt,

and goes out
(thwack) back
to mitt.

Ball fits
mitt, but
not all
the time.
Sometimes
ball gets hit
(pow) when bat
meets it,
and sails
to a place
where mitt
has to quit
in disgrace.
That's about
the bases
loaded,
about 40,000
fans exploded.

It's about
the ball,
the bat,
the mitt,
the bases
and the fans.
It's done
on a diamond,
and for fun.
It's about
home, and it's
about run. [5]

No poet but a fine writer, frequent Global Summit speaker Doris Kearns Goodwin evoked the Brooklyn Dodgers of her childhood recounting her and her father's bonding over baseball in *Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir*. It would be churlish of me to critique the book as another baby boomer New Yorker (Kearns Goodwin was born in 1943 so she is sort of a boomer prequel) taking yet another emotional bath lamenting the Brooklyn Dodgers fleeing to Los Angeles. It is, however, much more than that. For Kearns Goodwin, baseball is the balm helping her family cope with her mother's debilitating illness and her own dawning awareness of childhood's end. It is also a beautiful testimony to baseball's bonding power, not only for fathers and sons, but fathers and daughters, too. [6]

Although neither a New Yorker nor a Brooklynite, I confess to a soft spot for the Brooklyn Dodgers. I have an "authentic replica" (I won't repeat that linguistic analysis from last week's ***Book Notes***) Brooklyn Dodgers cap. I wistfully recall watching on our small black and white TV the 1955 and 1956 World Series between the Dodgers and the Yankees. This was at the birth of my baseball fandom. I thought the Dodgers and the Yankees played in the World Series every year.

In those days, elementary school children went home for lunch. The series began at noon. I watched the first several innings before my mother shooed me back to school. I can still recall my 1955 fourth-grade teacher coming into the classroom and breathlessly telling us the Dodgers won their first World Series ending Brooklyn's seemingly eternal "wait till next year."

So, what is the best baseball book of all time? David Ulin in a 2011 article in the ***Los Angeles Times*** cites ***You Know Me Al*** by Ring Lardner (1916) first, but it's not clear that is a qualitative or merely chronological statement. He also lists Bernard Malamud's ***The Natural,*** a much more morose book than its film version with Robert Redford, Roger Angell's ***Five Seasons,*** and Robert Coover's ***The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*** Coover's book is technically fiction, but it is clearly the best baseball novel ever written. Maybe in a future ***Book Notes*** during Spring Training 2021 I'll try to defend that statement.

Ulin conspicuously omits Roger Kahn's ***The Boys of Summer*** as too sentimental, with which I agree but still consider it among the best. Published in 1972, ***The Boys of Summer*** recounts Kahn's two years covering the Brooklyn Dodgers in the

early 1950s. Kahn is clearly a “homer.” There was no journalistic pretense of objectivity. Although a journalist, Kahn was a fan and owns it at the outset. As he said in an interview, “I was neutral all right. Neutral for Brooklyn.” [6]

Kahn focuses on Jackie Robinson and the impact he had integrating baseball. He relates the difficulties Robinson encountered, the friendship, perhaps more mythical than real, with Kentuckian Pee Wee Reese, who in a famous incident responding to viciously heckling fans went and stood next to Robinson to show his solidarity.

But the Robinson story has been well documented elsewhere, most notably in Jules Tygiel’s ***Baseball’s Great Experiment***. For me, ***The Boys of Summer’s*** greater strength is in Kahn’s appreciation of just how good professional baseball players, and, by extension, all professional athletes, really are. Most fans, even serious fans who played the game themselves, frequently don’t appreciate just how good these guys are.

One anecdote and one profile demonstrate that Kahn understands perfectly the rarity of their talent and skill. Kahn had played sandlot baseball in New York City and at New York University. While not really good, he was good enough to play college ball. He thought he could play. During his first spring training season while watching Clem Labine, a not quite great relief pitcher of the era, throw what today would be called a “bullpen” session, catcher Rube Walker asked Kahn to stand in the batter’s box to make it more realistic.

Labine’s money pitch was a late and sharply breaking curveball. Kahn relates how he grabbed a bat and took his position in the batter’s box. Using every ounce of his courage not to bail out as “the ball exploded past the plate with sibilant whoosh, edged by a buzzing of hornets” as it broke sharply down and away, Kahn, breathing a heavy sigh of relief at not playing the fool by “bailing out” of the box, thought to himself no one in the New York sandlots threw like that. [8]

If the Labine episode speaks to the talent gulf between professional athletes and the rest of us, Kahn’s chapter, “The Bishop’s Brother,” vividly illustrates the professional’s commitment to excellence. “The Bishop’s Brother” is George “Shotgun” Shuba, the second man to hit a pinch-hit home run in the World Series. Shuba was a reserve outfielder for the Dodgers of the early ’50s, a hitter

with a swing so fluid he was nicknamed “The Natural,” which he hated. It has been suggested that Shuba, who had one great season, inspired Bernard Malamud’s novel, ***The Natural***.

Three quick Shuba anecdotes reveal both the talent level and the commitment to excellence required to make it to any sport’s, any profession’s, highest levels. Visiting Shuba in Youngstown, Ohio in the late ’60s, Kahn describes a pre-dinner game of catch they played in Shuba’s backyard. As Kahn tells it, “Shuba did not have an outstanding major league arm. Scouts described it as uncertain, or weak. Now he cocked that arm and fired easily. The ball shot at my Adam’s apple and I knew, with a clutch of anxiety, that I was overmatched.” [9]

Shuba, a nice but somewhat dour man, harbored a lingering resentment against the ruthless survival ethic of professional baseball. He said, “(t)here’s no justice in the baseball business.” When Kahn retorted, “I thought you had some fun,” Shuba countered, “It wasn’t fun. I was struggling so much I couldn’t enjoy it. Snider, Pafko, Furillo, they weren’t humpties. I was fighting to stay alive. To play with guys that good was humbling.” [10]

Kahn replied, “But you were a natural.” Shuba rejoined “You talk like a sportswriter.” When Kahn said he would have given anything to have Shuba’s “natural” swing, Shuba told him you could have had it. Shuba explained that he earned his “natural” swing in his parents’ basement. He had hung a baseball by a string from a basement ceiling joist, then every night all winter he swung at it 600 times strengthening his wrists, evening out his swing. Shuba finished with the crack, “You call that natural? I swung a 44-ounce bat 600 times a night, 4,200 times a week, 47,200 swings every winter. Wrists. The fastball’s by you. You gotta wrist it out. Forty-seven thousand two hundred times.” [11]

The price of excellence is total commitment.

Ulin, in that Los Angeles Times article mentioned earlier, and I agree, as does **The Sporting News**, that Lawrence J. Ritter’s ***The Glory of Their Times*** not only invented baseball scholarship with its oral history of the game’s early stars, but it is the best baseball book ever written. **The Sporting News’** definitive listing of the 25 best baseball books ever written can be found here.

Like Kahn, whose title comes from Dylan Thomas' "I see the boys of summer," which begins "I see the boys of summer in their ruin …" [12], Ritter reflects on athletes who, unlike A.E. Housman's runner dying young, outlived their glory. Both Kahn's and Ritter's books are really not about sport but about life's passing, transitory nature. Ritter, a professor of economics and finance at New York University, got the idea for his book in 1961 with the death of Ty Cobb. Ritter realized that the men who played baseball in the late 19th and early 20th century were dying. He wanted to get their stories before it was too late. He traveled more than 75,000 miles armed with his tape recorder. His technique was simple. After meeting each man, once the man was comfortable with him, Ritter simply turned on the recorder and listened. He continued that method in the book itself, as his only comments are a paragraph or two at the beginning of each story, after which he remains silent as the men tell their stories.

And wonderful stories they are. From Jimmy Austin, who played in the American League for 14 years, beginning in 1909 with the New York Highlanders. They weren't called the "Yankees" then, for as Austin tells it, "… we played in a little park – it only seated about 15,000 – located at 168th Street and Broadway, which was on pretty high ground. … Sometimes we were called the Hilltoppers." [13] To Paul Waner, who with his brother Lloyd played for 14 years side-by-side in the Pittsburgh outfield. Although both were short, Paul was taller than Lloyd, so Paul was called "Big Poison" and Lloyd "Little Poison" because they were such great hitters they were death to pitchers. [14] Between them they collected 5,611 hits – the most by any brother combination in baseball history. [15]

As a Cleveland fan, I am biased towards Cleveland stories. Ritter has several, beginning with Rube Marquard. Marquard never played for the Cleveland Indians, or Blues or Naps as they were known before 1915, but he was born and raised in Cleveland. Further cementing him as a personal favorite, he won 23 games in 1907 for Canton's team in the Central League. Marquard set and still owns the record for the most consecutive victories to begin a season – 19 in 1912 which made him the first pitcher to win 20 in a row with his final victory of the 1911 season.

More poignantly, Marquard relates his estrangement from his father, the chief engineer for the city of Cleveland, who never played the game and thought professional baseball an undignified career. Father and son argued bitterly about

whether Rube should play ball. When he did, they did not talk for over 10 years, until one day his father appeared in Brooklyn, where Rube was pitching for the Dodgers. They reconciled. Later, New York reporters went to Cleveland to interview the father for a father-son profile. When they asked the father if he played baseball himself, he replied "Oh, of course I did, when I was younger." Asked if he was proud of his son, he replied, "I certainly am … why shouldn't I be? He's a great baseball player, isn't he?" [16]

As recounted last week, Stan Coveleskie escaped the coal mines of Shamokin, Pennsylvania to become a Hall of Fame pitcher for the 1920 World Series champion Cleveland Indians. Like George "Shotgun" Shuba, Coveleskie loved his baseball days, but found them a constant challenge. He speaks of the anxiety of competing against the very best of the very best for a very limited number of jobs. As Coveleskie says, "I enjoyed playing ball. But it's a tough racket. There's always someone sitting on the bench just itching to get in there in your place. Thinks he can do better. Wants your job in the worst way: back to the coal mines for you, pal! The pressure never lets up. Doesn't matter what you did yesterday. That's history. It's tomorrow that counts. So, you worry all the time. It never ends. Lord, baseball is a worrying thing." [17]

We'll conclude this ***Book Notes*** with Ritter's interview of Bill Wambsganss, who was born in Cleveland and also played for the Cleveland Indians. Regarding fame, he says, "Funny thing, I played in the Big Leagues for thirteen years – 1914 through 1926 – and the only thing anybody seems to remember is that once I made an unassisted triple play in a World Series. Many don't even remember the team I was on or the position I played, or anything. Just Wambganss – unassisted triple play." [18]

Wamby, as he was known because it fit easier in a box score, appreciated poetry. He offered Ritter two, one a bit of doggerel from Ring Lardner and another from an unknown poet on fame's fickleness. Wamby recalled Lardner's description when Wamby came to the Cleveland Naps, as the Indians were then known, in 1914 to replace Ray Chapman, which didn't happen. Lardner on Wamby:

The Naps bought a shortstop named Wambganss,
Who is slated to fill Ray Chapman's pants.
But when he saw Ray,

And the way he could play,
He muttered, “I haven’t a clam’s chance!”

Ritter took his title, “The glory of their times,” from Ecclesiasticus 44:17 – “All these were honored in their generation/And were the glory of their times,” a sentiment Wamby seconded. He tells of reading a newspaper on the elevated train going up to the Polo Grounds to play the Yankees and finding this poem. He cut it out and carried it in his wallet until it disintegrated, offering literal proof to time’s passing it described:

from Anonymous Poem Quoted by Bill Wambganss

Now summer goes
And tomorrow’s snows
Will soon be so deep,
And the sky of blue
Which summer knew
Sees shadows creep. . .

So the laurel fades. . .

Through the cheering mass
Let the victors pass
To find fate’s thrust,
As tomorrow’s fame
Writes another name
On drifting dust. [19]

A great collection of photos from ***The Glory of Their Times*** can be found **here.**

A marvelous video based on Ritter’s book ***The Glory of Their Times – Special Edition*** can be found **here.**

A video with audio from the Rube Marquard interview can be found **here.**

-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

Photo Credits

Ritter, Lawrence S. ***The Glory of Their Times: The Story of the Early Days of Baseball Told by the Men Who Played It.*** (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1966).
Kahn, Roger. **The Boys of Summer**. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972).

End Notes

1. Souster, Raymond. *"The Ballad of Rocky Nelson,"* at **Baseball-Almanac.com** available at https://www.baseball-almanac.com/poetry/po_rcky.shtml accessed October 18, 2020.
2. Kessel, Joyce. *"Bleacher Rat,"* at **Spitballmag.com** available at http://www.spitballmag.com/Baseball-Poetry#Baseball-Poem-March2011 accessed October 18, 2020.
3. Owen, Marna. *"To Believe,"* at **Spitballmag.com** available at a http://www.spitballmag.com/Baseball-Poetry#Baseball-Poem-October2010 accessed October 18, 2020.
4. Moore, Marianne. *"Baseball & Writing,"* at **Baseball-Almanac.com** available at https://www.baseball-almanac.com/poetry/po_baw.shtml accessed October 18, 2020.
5. Swenson, May. *"Analysis of Baseball,"* at **Poemhunter.com** available at https://www.poemhunter.com/poems/baseball/page-1/22150313/ accessed October 18, 2020.
6. Cf. Goodwin, Doris Kearns. ***Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir***. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).
7. Womack, Graham. *"Classic Book Review: The Boys of Summer,"* in **Baseball: Past and Present** available at https://baseballpastandpresent.com/mlb/classic-book-review-the-boys-of-summer/ accessed October 18, 2020.
8. Kahn, Roger. ***The Boys of Summer***. (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 55.
9. Ibid., p. 229.
10. Ibid., p 235.
11. Ibid., p. 241.
12. Thomas, Dylan, *"I see the boys of summer,"* at **poets.org** available at https://poets.org/poem/i-see-boys-summer accessed October 19, 2020.
13. Ritter, Lawrence. ***The Glory of Their Times: The Story of Early Baseball by the Men Who Played It.*** (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 74.
14. Ibid., p. 278.
15. *"Baseball Brothers," in* ***SABR Research Journals Archive*** *available at* http://research.sabr.org/journals/baseball-brothers *accessed October 19, 2020.*
16. Ritter, p. 19.

17. Ibid., p. 115.
18. Ibid., p. 215
19. Ibid., p. 224.

Subscribe to JES Publications Mailing List!

Support JES | Donate

JES Mission: The Jefferson was founded to stimulate community progress through education, research, and publications. Its mission also includes a commitment to operate in a nonpartisan, nondenominational manner without a political or philosophical bias. As such, the Jefferson intends to follow the examined truth wherever it leads and is neither liberal nor conservative, Democratic nor Republican in philosophy or action. Our writers' work reflects their own views.

In Case You Missed It

Too Many Erie Infants, Toddlers Lack Child Care: Profound Opportunity Awaits in Solving Enduring Problem written by **Michelle Harkins**

The Wider World | Fragile States and Global Resilience written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

Truth in Love | Life Without Voice: Constitution and Amendments Did Not Change White Minds or Hearts written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

Be Well | Magnesium Matters written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

Classic Book Notes #111 | 1968/2022: The Seeds of Our Discontents (Last of 9 Parts): The Fusion Thread written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

On the Waterfront | What Were They Thinking? St. Lawrence Seaway Was Big News in 1950s written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**