

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Classic Book Notes #29

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### Baseball & Poetry *It's October and Major League Baseball Playoff Time!*

*Editor's note: As the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy and Raimy Fellows embark on their 2023 program, we are reprising four classic Book Notes on leadership by Dr. Andrew Roth. Following is the last of four parts.*

Although this is going to be about sharing some baseball poetry, I think my nomination for that honor is a football book – Tom Callahan’s ***Johnny U: The Life and Times of Johnny Unitas***. Maybe I’ll do a **Book Notes** on it sometime around Super Bowl Sunday, America’s premier secular holiday. John Feinstein’s ***A Season On the Brink*** is probably the best basketball book I have read and ***Hoosiers*** might be my favorite sports film, but the literature involving basketball, football, hockey, and soccer all come limping sadly behind baseball writing.

Simply, some of the best writing – period – is baseball writing. From John Updike’s *Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu*, which can be found [here](#) to Roger Angell’s reporting in **The New Yorker**, from Robert Creamer’s biography of Babe Ruth (**Babe**) to – well, it’s a long list. The two best baseball books ever are Lawrence Ritter’s *The Glory of Their Times* and Roger Kahn’s *The Boys of Summer*. They transcend the nostalgia trap to be, hmm, profound is too big a word, to be probing meditations on life, fleeting fame and the inevitable pinch of the mortal coil.

They bring to mind the best sports poem ever written, A.E. Housman’s *To An Athlete Dying Young*, which although it is about a runner, I will include its key stanzas:

To An Athlete Dying Young

The time you won your town the race  
We chaired you through the market place;  
Man and boy stood cheering by,  
And home we brought you shoulder-high.  
To-day the road all runners come,  
Shoulder-high we bring you home,  
And set you at your threshold down,  
Townsmen of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away,  
From fields where glory does not stay  
And early though the laurel grows  
It withers quicker than the rose...

Now you will not swell the rout  
Of lads that wore their honours out,  
Runners whom renown out ran  
And the name died before the man. [1]

Or, as Charles Barkley often opines, “Fr. Time is undefeated!”

For Pittsburgh Pirates fans, Paul Blackburn’s *7th Game: 1960 Series* ought to conjure up pleasant memories of that lost time when the Pirates were *champions of the world*:



women. As we watched the game, he said, look around at the crowd. He asked, "What do you see?" At first, missing the forest for the trees, I was puzzled. Then he pointed out to me the large number of women in attendance who had come on their own or with groups of other women. Girls playing softball in high school and college bolstered baseball's flagging attendance in the late 20th century. They are a prime factor in its continuing popularity. Having played the game, they knew what they were seeing. They were fans.

As J. Patrick Lewis reminds us, that all began in the early 1970s with Title IX:

### First Girls in Little League Baseball

*December 26, 1974*

*Title IX of the 1972 Education Act is signed, providing for equal opportunity in athletics for girls as well as boys.*

The year was 1974

When Little Leaguers learned the score.

President Ford took out his pen,

And signed a law that said from then

On women too would have the chance

To wear the stripes and wear the pants.

Now what you hear, as flags unfurl,

Is "Atta boy!" and "Atta girl!" [3]

Lewis also has a wonderful short poem about the challenge of hitting a baseball, an art many believe the hardest thing to do in sport – squarely hit a round ball with a round bat. Talk about squaring the circle. Here is Lewis on hitting:

### A Swing and A Miss

The fastball  
that you hope to poke  
is smoke

The curveball  
that you thought was there  
is air

The knuckler  
wobbling up to you  
can dipsy-do

The screwball  
an ironic twist  
hits your fist

The sinker  
comes as a surprise:  
it dies

The let-up pitch  
you can't resist?  
you missed

The spitball  
that by law's forbidden  
(is hidden) [4]

Speaking of pitching, there is Gene Fehler's *Nolan Ryan*:

#### Nolan Ryan

He threw a white pea  
fast faster faster fastest  
of them all,  
Try hitting a pea  
with a toothpick  
and you'll see what it's like  
to bat against the  
fast faster faster fastest  
of them all.

John Updike actually wrote a basketball novel, ***Rabbit, Run*** about a high school hoops star, who, unlike the runner in Housman's poem, outlived his glory and spent a large part of his time and psychic energy, like Tom Buchanan in ***The Great Gatsby***, to mix my sports, trying to retrieve the lost thrill of some ineluctable autumn football afternoon. In addition to his classic, ***The New Yorker*** article on the retirement of Ted Williams, Updike penned several baseball poems, like:

#### Tao In the Yankee Stadium Bleachers

Distance brings proportion. From here  
the populated tiers  
as much as players seem part of the show:  
a constructed stage beast, three folds of Dante's rose,  
or a Chinese military hat  
cunningly chased with bodies.  
"Falling from his chariot, a drunk man is unhurt  
because his soul is intact. Not knowing his fall,

he is unastonished, he is invulnerable.”  
So, too, the “pure man” — “pure”  
in the sense of undisturbed water.

“It is not necessary to seek out  
a wasteland, swamp, or thicket.”  
The opposing pitcher’s pertinent hesitations,  
the sky, this meadow, Mantle’s thick baked neck,  
the old men who in the changing rosters see  
a personal mutability,  
green slats, wet stone are all to me  
as when an emperor commands  
a performance with a gesture of his eyes.

“No king on his throne has the joy of the dead,”  
the skull told Chuang-tzu.  
The thought of death is peppermint to you  
when games begin with patriotic song  
and a democratic sun beats broadly down.  
The Inner Journey seems unjudgeably long  
when small boys purchase cups of ice  
and, distant as a paradise,  
experts, passionate and deft,  
hold motionless while Berra flies to left. [5]

Jacque Barzun said in order to understand America one must understand baseball. That, unfortunately, is no longer true, but intellectuals love baseball – George Will wrote an almost unreadable book about it – ***Men At Work*** – and Leonard Koppett wrote an excellent primer for the advanced fan – ***The Thinking Fan’s Guide to Baseball***. This was all before the sabermetric and analytics revolution ushered in by Bill James and embedded in the larger culture by Michael Lewis in ***Moneyball***. Tom Clark’s *Baseball and Classicism* speaks to this phenomena:

#### Baseball and Classicism

Every day I peruse the box scores for hours  
Sometimes I wonder why I do it  
Since I am not going to take a test on it  
And no one is going to give me money

The pleasure’s something like that of codes  
Of deciphering an ancient alphabet say  
So as brightly to picturize Eurydice

In the Elysian Fields on her perfect day

The day she went 5 for 5 against Vic Raschi [6]

It has been startling the speed with which the weather has changed these past several weeks hinting at winter's inevitable arrival. The Hot Stove league was the old phrase for talking baseball during winter's baseball-less months. The phrase describes a now gone reality, talking baseball around the warmth of the hot stove – a wood burning pot-bellied stove – in an old time general store, now, too, a gone vestige of another America. Marjorie Maddox's *Grand Slam* evokes that warmth:

### Grand Slam

Dreams brimming over,  
childhood stretched out in legs,  
this is the moment replayed on winter days  
when frost covers the field,  
when age steals away wishes.  
Glorious sleep that seeps back there  
to the glory of our baseball days. [7]

Well, there are literally hundreds – no, thousands of baseball poems, but two or three have become part of the language of America. Ironically, in a culture that exalts winners, one describes the fate of America's most famous loser. Ahh, that is probably harsh, but Ole Casey of *Casey at the Bat* did strike out. He knew what Lewis meant in *A Swing and A Miss*. A wonderful reading of it can be heard [here](#).

Lawrence Thayer's classic *Casey at the Bat*:

### Casey at the Bat

*A Ballad of the Republic, Sung in the Year 1888*

The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville nine that day;  
The score stood four to two with but one inning more to play.  
And then when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same,  
A sickly silence fell upon the patrons of the game.

A straggling few got up to go in deep despair. The rest  
Clung to that hope which springs eternal in the human breast;  
They thought if only Casey could but get a whack at that—  
We'd put up even money now with Casey at the bat.

But Flynn preceded Casey, as did also Jimmy Blake,

And the former was a lulu and the latter was a cake;  
So upon that stricken multitude grim melancholy sat,  
For there seemed but little chance of Casey's getting to the bat.

But Flynn let drive a single, to the wonderment of all,  
And Blake, the much despised, tore the cover off the ball;  
And when the dust had lifted, and men saw what had occurred,  
There was Jimmy safe at second and Flynn a-hugging third.

Then from 5,000 throats and more there rose a lusty yell;  
It rumbled through the valley, it rattled in the dell;  
It knocked upon the mountain and recoiled upon the flat,  
For Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat.

There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his place;  
There was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile on Casey's face.  
And when, responding to the cheers, he lightly doffed his hat,  
No stranger in the crowd could doubt 'twas Casey at the bat.

Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands with dirt;  
Five thousand tongues applauded when he wiped them on his shirt.  
Then while the writhing pitcher ground the ball into his hip,  
Defiance gleamed in Casey's eye, a sneer curled Casey's lip.

And now the leather-covered sphere came hurtling through the air,  
And Casey stood a-watching it in haughty grandeur there.  
Close by the sturdy batsman the ball unheeded sped—  
"That ain't my style," said Casey. "Strike one," the umpire said.

From the benches, black with people, there went up a muffled roar,  
Like the beating of the storm-waves on a stern and distant shore.  
"Kill him! Kill the umpire!" shouted some one on the stand;  
And it's likely they'd have killed him had not Casey raised his hand.

With a smile of Christian charity great Casey's visage shone;  
He stilled the rising tumult; he bade the game go on;  
He signaled to the pitcher, and once more the spheroid flew;  
But Casey still ignored it, and the umpire said, "Strike two."

"Fraud!" cried the maddened thousands, and echo answered fraud;  
But one scornful look from Casey and the audience was awed.  
They saw his face grow stern and cold, they saw his muscles strain,  
And they knew that Casey wouldn't let that ball go by again.



The sneer is gone from Casey's lip, his teeth are clinched in hate;  
He pounds with cruel violence his bat upon the plate.  
And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,  
And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow.

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;  
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,  
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;  
But there is no joy in Mudville — mighty Casey has struck out. [9]

Although it has been debated who "Casey" was, it has been suggested that he was Boston Brave Mike "King" Kelley. Regardless, he would have felt marginally better if he had at least made contact smacking a grounder to third baseman Joe Tinker, but then he'd have suffered *Baseball's Sad Lexicon* as recounted by Franklin Pierce Adams:

#### Baseball's Sad Lexicon

These are the saddest of possible words:  
"Tinker to Evers to Chance."  
Trio of bear cubs, and fleeter than birds,  
Tinker and Evers and Chance.  
Ruthlessly pricking our gonfalon bubble,  
Making a Giant hit into a double —  
Words that are heavy with nothing but trouble:  
Tinker to Evers to Chance. [10]

A fine reading of Baseball's Sad Lexicon can be found [here](#).

We'll close these **Book Notes** — there's a ballgame on television I want to catch — with a brief snippet from Rolfe Humphries' *Polo Grounds*. For years, I have misquoted it, saying "the crowd never ages" when Humphries actually wrote, "The crowd and players/Are the same age always, but the man in the crowd/Is older every season." Forget baseball for a moment, but any teacher — anyone who works with young people, actually — will understand the sentiment. Having taught in college for all of 50 years, each year one senses the students receding, or is it the teacher who recedes, for the students are always 20 or 19 or 18. Humphries' *Polo Grounds* is a wonderful meditation on the time's passing.

#### Polo Grounds

Time is of the essence. This is a highly skilled  
And beautiful mystery. Three or four seconds only  
From the time that Riggs connects till he reaches first,  
And in those seconds Jorges goes to his right,

Comes up with the ball, tosses to Witek at second,  
For the force on Reese, Witek to Mize at first,  
*In* time for the out — a double play ...  
Time is of the essence. The rhythms break,  
More varied and subtle than any kind of dance;  
Movement speeds up or lags. The ball goes out  
In sharp and angular drives, or long slow arcs,  
Comes in again controlled and under aim;  
The players wheel or spurt, race, stoop, slide, halt,  
Shift imperceptibly to new positions,  
Watching the signs according to the batter,  
The score, the inning. Time is of the essence.  
Time is of the essence. Remember Terry? ...  
Remember Stonewall Jackson, Lindstrom, Frisch,  
When they were good? Remember Long George Kelly? ...  
... Time is of the essence. The shadow moves  
From the plate to the box, from the box to second base,  
From second to the outfield, to the bleachers.  
Time is of the essence. The crowd and players  
Are the same age always, but the man in the crowd  
Is older every season. Come on, play ball! [10]



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### End Notes

1. Housman, A.E. "To An Athlete Dying Young," in C.F. Main and Peter J. Seng **Poems** (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1973), p. 370.
2. Paul Blackburn "7th Game: 1960 Series," in **Baseball Poems, The Poetry Foundation** available [here](#) accessed October 5, 2020.
3. Lewis, J. Patrick. "First Girls in Little League Baseball," in **Baseball Poems, The Poetry Foundation** available at [here](#) accessed October 5, 2020.
4. Lewis, J. Patrick, "A Swing and A Miss", in [baseballalmanac.com](http://baseballalmanac.com) available [here](#) accessed October 5, 2020.
5. Updike, John. "Tao in the Yankee Stadium Bleachers," in **Baseball Poems, The Poetry Foundation** available at [here](#) accessed October 5, 2020.

6. Clark, Tom. "Baseball and Classicism," in **Baseball Poems, The Poetry Foundation** available [here](#) accessed October 5, 2020.
7. Maddox, Marjorie. "Grand Slam," in **Baseball Poems, The Poetry Foundation** available [here](#) accessed October 5, 2020.
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