



The Boys of Summer

Ron Kaplan

BASEBALL: A LITERARY ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Nicholas Dawidoff

Library of America
http://www.loa.org
732 pages; cloth, \$35.00

THE HEAVENLY WORLD SERIES: TIMELESS BASEBALL FICTION

Frank O'Rourke

Edited by Edith Carlson
Introduction by Darryl Brock

Carroll & Graf
http://www.carrollandgraf.com
distributed by SPD: http://www.spdbooks.org
352 pages; cloth, \$25.00; paper, \$14.00

"What is this fascination about making a hickory stick connect with a thrown ball and sending the ball as a high fly or a hot grounder for a safe hit? ... about picking up a hot grounder and throwing it to first for a putout...? These questions have gone round and round in the heads of millions of American boys for generations."

—Carl Sandburg, 1953

And so it begins anew.
Opening Day.

The teams take to unblemished green fields in dazzlingly clean uniforms amid much pomp and ceremony. Fans on the East Coast shake off the early spring chill, even some leftover snow, warmed by the thrills they've been awaiting since November.

Hundreds of articles are written about this special time of year, and not just by the sports media. Editorials joyously welcome the new season and with it the carefree times spring and summer portend. Sports pundits invoke memories of past favorite players and deeds, and feature writers seek out the human interest stories, such as the ex-Oriole Johnny Oates, suffering from brain cancer, throwing out the first pitch as his old team took on the Yankees.

All this serves to remind us that baseball, more than any other sport, is a game of words. Some writing is transitory, like the daily game recaps, but others are timeless, linking generations of fans.

Two new books reaffirm this tradition.

Baseball: A Literary Anthology is a major collection of some of the best work about the game from a variety of disciplines from a veritable "who's who" of American writers, whether known for baseball or not. With contributions from the likes of Damon Runyon, James Thurber, Roger Kahn, George Plimpton, Robert Creamer, and Stephen Jay Gould, this volume has the pro-

verbial something for everybody: spot reporting, player profiles, juvenile and adult fiction, strategic analyses, poetry, and even song (Dave Frishberg's "Van Lingle Mungo" and an excerpt from *Damn Yankees*).

Certain pieces always seem to pop up in such oeuvres, and deservedly so. Who could deny the long-standing impact of Ernest L. Thayer's "Casey at the Bat" and Jack Norworth's "Take Me out to the Ballgame," the unofficial anthem of baseball? John Updike's paean to Ted Williams, "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu" (1965), a staple of anthologies, also makes an appearance here, as does Gay Talese's darker piece about Williams's archrival, Joe DiMaggio. Some might wish that Jacques Barzun's ubiquitous saw, "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball," would disappear from the phrase book, but the entire essay from which that one line was taken is reprinted in the *Anthology*; it is much more enjoyable in context.

Baseball is akin to an ancient civilization in that it bases much of its tradition around oral history. One of the best at this craft is Lawrence Ritter who, in the 1960s, with bulky tape recorder on hand, sought out some of the old stars of the early-twentieth century. These interviews became the basis for the critically acclaimed *The Glory of Their Times* (1966). His sit-down with "Wahoo" Sam Crawford, a standout for the Detroit Tigers and a contemporary of Ty Cobb, disproves the theory that athletes of that age were uneducated and backward rubes. Donald Honig used the same methods for *Baseball When the Grass Was Real* (1975); his profile of "Cool Papa" Bell is highlighted in the *Anthology*.

**All this serves to remind us
that baseball, more than any
other sport, is a game of words.**

Snippets from Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* (1952) and Mark Harris's *It Looked Like for Ever* (1979) make it to this literary all-star team, though W.P. Kinsella, whose work, such as *Shoeless Joe* (1982), would seem like a natural fit, doesn't make the cut. Novelists not especially recognized for their sporting works are represented by Philip Roth, Thomas Wolfe, Willie Morris, and, most recently, Don DeLillo. Conspicuously absent, though, is Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), in which the fisherman Santiago spends a good deal of time waxing about "the great DiMaggio."

Red Smith, Wendell Smith, Jimmy Cannon, and Paul Gallico represent the sports columnists, chronicling the big names and low-lives of their day. But general journalists such as Murray Kempton and Jimmy Breslin also weigh in with their pithy observations.

Former athletes have their say, too. The writings of Satchel Paige and Moe Berg, two of the most interesting characters to play the game, are both a part of the *Anthology*. Jim Bouton, an out-

standing pitcher for a couple of years with the New York Yankees, forever changed the nature of sports biographies with his watershed *Ball Four* (1970), which exposed ballplayers for the arrested juveniles they were (and not just in the figurative sense). But before Bouton picked up the pen, Pat Jordan wrote of the travails of a struggling player in *A False Spring* (1975), albeit with a less iconoclastic attitude.

There have been dozens of anthologies over the years, usually concentrating on one aspect of



Detail from cover of
Baseball: A Literary Anthology

the game, such as women writers (1994's *Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend*) or baseball in fiction and fantasy. What sets Dawidoff's collection apart is the inclusion of those not normally associated with baseball. Poets William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and Carl Sandburg grace the pages. Radio personality Jonathan Schwartz and actress and avid fan Tallulah Bankhead discuss their avocations as well. Even frightmeister Stephen King weighs in with a nonfiction piece about his son's little league team.

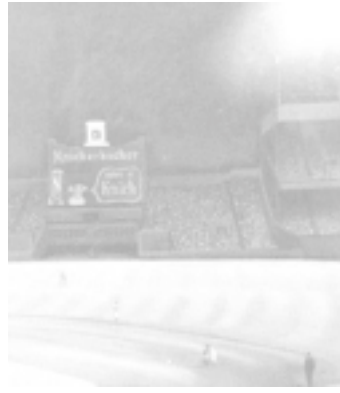
Dawidoff could have added a few hundred pages to make room for missing writers like Kinsella, Eliot Asinof, and even Zane Grey. Like a well-played game that goes into extra innings, fans wouldn't mind a bit. As it stands, though, this *Anthology* is a hall of fame collection.

Frank O'Rourke never developed the reputation or following of a W.P. Kinsella or Harris, but he produced some of the most poignant short stories about the sport ever written. Editor Edith Carlson has more than ably collected some of these lost treasures. The result is *The Heavenly World Series: Timeless Baseball Fiction*, and for that baseball fans should be grateful.

The author of more than 50 novels, O'Rourke was a frequent contributor to magazines such as *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, and *Esquire* during the 1940s and 1950s. As befits that era, his baseball stories deal with a lost time, a

slower-paced game, when there were only sixteen major league teams, no mega-million free agents or cookie-cutter ballparks, and little TV coverage.

O'Rourke, who died in 1989, speaks with such subdued yet stirring passion that the reader might forgive that many of the stories are essentially the same. His principals are proud men hanging on to the game they love by the skin of their teeth. Like most athletes of a certain age, they have difficulty coming to terms with their waning skills and will do just about anything not to give up the life of a ballplayer, with all its elations and disappointments. They know the ride can't go on forever, but still they seek one more game, or to make, as O'Rourke writes, "The Last Pitch" or "One More Inning," whether at the major league level or for some two-bit sandlot team in a one-horse town. And when the realization sets



Detail from cover of
The Heavenly World Series:
Timeless Baseball Fiction

in that it *is* truly over, he wants to see the sanctity of the game passed down to a worthy heir apparent.

Sharp fans (especially of the Philadelphia Phillies, the author's favorite team) will recognize actual players fictionalized in many of the story lines. Dane Bjorland, the shortstop in "Flashing Spikes," for example, is based on Swede Risberg, the ringleader of the Black Sox scandal of 1919, in which eight players conspired to throw that year's World Series. But in this story, he is seeking redemption in the face of unrelenting disdain. The author similarly builds a story around the debut season of Jackie Robinson and the difficulties he found finding acceptance.

Ron Kaplan is a freelance writer from Montclair, New Jersey. His articles and reviews have appeared in such publications as Baseball America, The Cleveland Plain Dealer, and Mental Floss.