

## THE LITERATURE OF BASEBALL

The winds of change blew powerfully across the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, transforming virtually every aspect of life. As the country moved from the Gay Nineties through the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression, from the united patriotism of World War II through national divisions created by the Vietnam War, American values and customs changed. Individuals and institutions were forced to modify practices of long standing. Those that did not found themselves swept away and replaced by those more in synch with the times. Everything seemed to be changing. But not the game of baseball.

Baseball was an exception to this modern dynamic. Baseball, which provides recreation and entertainment for millions of Americans and which has come to be called the National Pastime, remains just about the same game that Abner Doubleday invented in 1839, the same game that Swedish immigrants in Minnesota and Massachusetts factory hands were playing at the turn of the century in wheat fields or cow pastures.

In welcome contrast with football and basketball, where rule change is the norm, there are still 90 feet between the bases, exactly 60 feet, 6 inches from home plate to the pitcher's mound today as in the game's boring days. Almost a century gone by, yet four balls mean a walk, three strikes are out, and umpires are still as blind as bats.

Were he alive today, Honus Wagner, the ham-fisted shortstop for the 1903 World Champion Pittsburgh Pirates would have little difficulty recognizing the game of his St. Louis Cardinal counterpart, Ozzie (the wizard of aaahs) Smith dazzled at in the 1982 World Series. While baseball has gone through some explosive off-the-field changes, the game itself has moved along serenely from the first inning of its existence.

The baseball record book has contributed to its continuity. Dead they may be, but Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Dizzy Dean and Jackie Robinson are probably better known to most Americans today than many of the country's former Presidents. A man may not remember (or perhaps would rather forget) the exact year in which his marriage took place, but very likely he can tell you that the year in which Joe Dimaggio hit safely in 56 consecutive games was 1941.

As might be expected, reams upon reams have been written about baseball – team histories, guides, biographies of star players, sociological studies, how-to books, jock memoirs, and learned theoretical texts which prove by the laws of physics that there is no such thing as a curve ball. (Tell that to the Yankees who came up against Sandy Koufax in the 1963 World Series.)

These fact-filled tomes have their function, but the essence of baseball is more clearly expressed by its fiction, by imaginative writing that, paradoxically, proves to be truer than cold facts. While three hits in 10 at bats is considered superior performance in baseball, the ratio of its fiction to nonfiction writing is surely less than 1 in 10, a bush league average. And finding these books today with any consistency is about as easy as belting a homer with eyes shut.

Baseball literature goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and documents the American fascination with this stately and exacting game. Most of the early fiction is simple and formulaic, extolling the virtues of teamwork, fair play and clean living. Generations of youths were influenced by such literary role models as Frank Merriwell, Baseball Joe and the Kid From Tompkinsville. Baseball was a moral force in teaching youngsters how to conduct themselves off as well as on the field.

By World War 1, probably in reaction to this one-dimensional view, Ring Lardner and others began to satirize the game and its players. In pointing out the mental and social deficiencies of someone like Alibi Ike, Lardner and his contemporaries were themselves one-sided, but they proved a refreshing contrast to the reverent way in which the game had previously been portrayed.

Beginning in the '40s, such writers as Bernard Malamud, Mark Harris and Robert Coover wrote about baseball in a more rounded way, integrating the game with nothing less than life itself. They created recognizable characters who shared their triumphs and failures with Everyman. In short, baseball was now enough of a universal in American life to be a fit subject from which art could be created. Roy Hobbs in "The Natural" "sees" and tries to catch in his hands the bullet fired at his body – as wonderful a metaphor for the athletic impulse as ever was imagined.

Today, baseball fiction suffers the same natural attrition book flesh in all fields is heir to. Future lovers of the game will

find far fewer examples of the genre within whose covers they can indulge their fantasies of perfect pitches and prodigious swings. The stories of Joe Hardy selling his soul to beat the Damn Yankees, Mighty Casey fanning the breeze in Mudville, and hundreds of lesser known fictional ballplayers are worthy of preservation. Losing them means a lot more than losing a ball game.

**Ralph Sipper, Joseph The Provider / Books, 1983  
(co-written with Larry Moskowitz)**