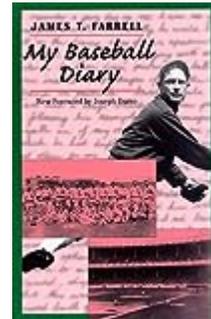


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James T. Farrell. *My Baseball Diary*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998. xx + 276 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8093-2189-6.



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Thirty-five and more years ago, in addition to Little League games, John Meister and I would play baseball in the area between our back yards. Under a misshapen tree drooping above Harold Meister's tool shed, John and I would take our turns at bat. We'd hit toward the east and north: the place in my yard where we burned trash, across the grass-grown alley, was right field; the Garber girls' flower garden, across Walnut Street, was left. It was a big enough patch that, for several years, it was safe and roomy. The tree, the shed—and later, the wormhouse (which Harold built for his nightcrawler business, making a little extra off the lazier fishermen in town)—made for effective backstops. Since John and I were both natural right-handed hitters, the garage house in right field where my grandmother and a maiden aunt lived wasn't threatened by long flies. As we grew, though, our power alley did become a danger zone. Though I know now that the Garber girls were just sweet old ladies (really, I thought Martha was, even back then), Madeline could certainly put on a scowl when we traipsed through their lush flower beds chasing a long hit. And I'm sure, looking back, that we worried more than they did about the bright blue globe that sat on a birdbath base in the middle of the garden: a liner or a hard bouncer could have easily smashed it to bits. Still, it was a "comfortable" ballpark. All summer long, we'd play games, recreating the batting orders of current big-league teams, trying to bat as

the real big-leaguers batted, trying to make sure we were realistic in the style—if not in the result—of the games.

Later, as our ability to hit for power and distance grew, we shifted to a south and west arrangement. Long hits to left now went into the Meisters' own vegetable garden, and John could retrieve those without threat; the sheds and the tree blocked long hits into center, and right was the now-filled-in hole where a basement house had been, with plenty of room to go all the way to Hancock Street and across to Wilbur Eckstein's cornfield. Those safety features, coupled with a pitch-back net behind the repositioned home plate, made it possible for us to continue playing two-man ball in our own yards for several more summers.

Still later, as we headed for high school, we abandoned the mock games, opting instead to hit long flies or hard grounders right down the alley, north to south. Batting from the Walnut Street end, we'd hit to the area between the Cottons' and the Fishers', half a town block or more. It was outfielding practice for a couple a varsity hopefuls. The games of childhood were over.

Probably nothing about this set-up was unusual. The two of us, whiling away our summers playing ball in the yard: typical American boys growing up, isolated in the small-town early sixties. As James T. Farrell tells his

story, I was surprised how similar must have been our experiences to his nineteen-tens boyhood in an Irish neighborhood of South Chicago. Geographical variations and a half a century aside, baseball and boyhood in twentieth-century America have long been inextricably entwined.

Farrell's version of boyhood baseball opens his 1957 *My Baseball Diary*. The initial narrative tells of his buying a Ty Cobb Louisville Slugger bat with his first dollar. An aunt who sees the little boy dwarfed by the bat asks, "What in the name of God possessed him?" (p. 6). The rest of the book essays to answer that seemingly simple question. Its answer? In a phrase, baseball possessed him.

There is much of 1950s mythology in these Farrell pieces. Baseball's appeal is its poetry (p. 82). "We American men are a nation of frustrated baseball players . . ." (p. 187). The poetry "becomes a part of ourselves," and it includes "[t]he spectacle, the movements, the sounds, the crack of the bat, the swift changes from routine dullness to sudden and dramatic excitement . . ." (pp. 192-93). Such litanies crowd the text; near his conclusion, he says, "we can boil all this down to a simple sentence—we like baseball. We like the atmosphere of a ball park, the practice sessions, the warming up of the pitchers, the moment when the home team runs out onto the field for the first inning, the sound of the crack of the bat, the alternative moments of rest and action, the ball arching out to a fielder, or else lifting, rising and disappearing from sight as it goes out of the park, the thrill when a catcher receives a fast ball—briefly, we like baseball" (pp. 238-39). The myth attains a universal quality. "Baseball and its memories are part of the river of our national life which flows on and on" (p. 82). In time, the "scenes, plays, names, games crowd into your memory" (p. 157). Baseball evolves into an innate part of the American psyche, or at least of the American male psyche.

But Farrell isn't entirely taken in by the myth. Even as a youth, he sensed—if he didn't see—a reality behind it. Not all big-leaguers were heroes: to this staunch White Sox fan, even great players deserved the razzing of opposition fans. This young Irish Catholic boy had no desire to commit a sin (and unsportsmanlike conduct was certainly sinful, in his mind), but his intense dislike of the Red Sox and of their star pitcher, Smoky Joe Wood, caused him to challenge the deity by heckling the pitcher. "I didn't at all want to be unsportsmanlike, but somebody had to do something about Smoky Joe Wood. To keep seeing the White Sox lose was not at all as bad as going to Hell when you would die; but it was Hell enough. So

I cast sportsmanship to Hell-and-gone" (p. 35). Farrell's own tendency toward hero-worship took a big turn in 1920, with the accusations of scandal that eventually sent out of baseball eight Sox players for throwing the 1919 world series. He was actually present as other kids told a silent Shoeless Joe Jackson that "It ain't so, Joe," pleading for confirmation from the man himself (pp. 107-108). The subsequent Black Sox scandal matured the teen-aged Farrell's view. The adult Farrell was more realistic (or naturalistic) yet, seeing the game as a way for fans to let off steam . . . though described with an odd hitch: "It is undoubtedly true that more than one little missus escaped from having her teeth knocked out or her eyes punched black and blue because her loving husband could go to a ball park to insult Ty Cobb, or to describe the antecedents of some other star . . ." (pp. 230-31). The "river of our national life" ran a little rough in places, it seems.

My Baseball Diary has notable flaws. Despite Farrell's knowledge of the game, his view of the future is more romantic than far-sighted. After writing of Ty Cobb's records, he insists that "Many of them [career numbers like 4191 hits, .367 average, 892 steals], unlike Ruth's sixty home runs in one season, can never be bettered Modern baseball conditions [larger gloves, night games] exclude such records. This is practically an absolute certainty" (p. 220). Written in 1957, he foresaw the shattering of Ruth's single-season home run record, but he doubted the mere possibility of bettering some others. More significant, perhaps, than Farrell's own lack of insight is a failure of the editors of this new edition. While asking for an index might indeed be too much, it wouldn't be extravagant to expect a simple bibliography including original publication dates and places for the individual pieces in this work. Certainly all were written by 1957, but some seem to date much earlier; without details, however, a reader can't place the perspective historically, and that's a key drawback.

Still, though, *My Baseball Diary* is a good choice for the first volume of the Writing Baseball series. It's a significant work by a major author, and we've needed this valuable historical reference back in print. The reporting shows the hand of a novelist. The snippets of fiction show the research, knowledge, and insights of an investigative reporter. This is a first-class work, episodically documenting baseball's role in America from the early 1900s through the mid-fifties. Ultimately, a self-referential comment, late in the book, best explains the significance of the book to Farrell and his devoted readers. Telling of Fred Lindstrom's rise from the same playground Farrell himself played on to the big leagues, the

respected novelist says, "A Chicago boy from the South Side, he could easily have served as the model for a character in a story I might have written" (pp. 263-64). These essays and stories are both myth and reality. History, memoir, journalistic reporting, fiction: My Baseball Diary rises above mere genre to be entertainment. It reaches directly into the personal lives of many who grew up in twentieth-century America and who lived by Farrell's coda, "We like baseball."

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