The Abiding Influence of Baseball in American Lore and Literature

Fromm Institute          Spring, 2016          Prof. Alan Goldberg

As indicated in the Spring, 2016 Fromm Course Catalogue, this class will explore baseball’s enduring influence in American life, legend, and literature. Once dubbed “The National Pastime”, baseball seems to have waned in our national consciousness. However, for those who grew up with baseball, have cherished it, and passed it on from one generation to the next, baseball continues to delight and surprise as we mine its storied past and its eternal present. As such, if one were to trace the arc of American narratives—from literature to journalism, from poetry to song, from cinema to documentary film—from the last half of the 19th Century through the 20th Century and even to this day, baseball still resonates. The very nature of baseball’s long and storied history and leisurely pace has elevated its cast of colorful characters and iconic moments into the realm of mythology, where fiction meets reality and America’s best scribes, regardless of genre, have borne witness. Case in point: Simon and Garfunkel and Gay Talese were both mesmerized by the same elusive figure: “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio? A nation turns its lonely eyes to you,” as the refrain goes.

A disclaimer: I have been immersed in baseball—throughout my life—as an avid baseball fan, player (even to this day), coach, manager, youth league board member, umpire, father of a (female) former college outfielder, etc. Of course, I (along with many of you) can trade obscure saber-metric trivia and wax nostalgic with misty memories and anecdotes with the crustiest of old-timers. However, as we are also targeting the casual baseball fan or even the non-baseball-affiliated Fromm student, my approach to this class is that of a professor of literature with a special emphasis on mythological patterns in narrative fiction and non-fiction, as in life. To those of you who know me, this class will not deviate far from previous investigations of Jewish Literature, Dystopian Literature, Post-Modern Literature. Indeed, picking up from last spring’s course on “A Century of Bellow and Malamud”, the first of our three chosen novels will be “The Natural”, the book that brought Malamud to prominence in the early 50s, “The Era” (echoing the title of Roger Kahn’s book) where many of us truly acquired our love of the game.

I will also lean on documentary film footage (mostly clips from the definitive series on baseball by Ken Burns), but only insofar as it targets the literary and mythic dimensions of baseball and speaks to archetypal patterns in American cultural and intellectual history. Burns, as always, brings a dimension of entertainment—comedy, song, expert commentary, and anecdote—to the plate (no pun intended)
that will enhance our readings and discussions and add gravitas to other multi-
media sources. Aside from the other two core novels—“Shoeless Joe” by W. P.
Kinsella and “The Art of Fielding” by Chad Harbach---in each session we will
reference many fine selections from “Baseball, A Literary Anthology”, edited by
Nicholas Dawidoff, and featuring the likes of John Updike, Mark Harris, Phillip Roth,
Roger Angell. I will be ambitious in selecting pieces from this anthology but will
indicate which pieces are best fully digested and which pieces are optional, so as not
to over-burden you with too much reading. Three novels and a number of other
shorter pieces spread over eight sessions (nine weeks) will be more than sufficient.

One fine spring day, perhaps we can all venture outside of Fromm Hall and toss the
ball around, hit a little “fungo” and practice “the art of fielding.” Maybe a gentle
game (wiffle ball—no other equipment necessary) can break out.
Week One (April 14):


Ken Burns---“Baseball” (Multi-media baseball documentary). Burns will be utilized throughout the session along with other audio-visual sources.

Roger Angell—from “This Old Man. All in Pieces”

Song and Verse (literary anthology and other sources)

Week Two (April 21):

Read first half of The Natural (Bernard Malamud)

Baseball: A Literary Anthology (ed. Dawidoff). Selections with asterisk (*) are optional:

From “The Glory of Their Times: Sam Crawford” (Lawrence S. Ritter)

“Baseball When the Grass Was Real: James ‘Cool Papa’ Bell” (Donald Honig)

from “Of Time and the River” (Thomas Wolfe)

* from “You Know Me Al” (Ring Lardner)

* “Ruth Comes Into His Own with 2 Homers” (Heywood Broun)

Week Three (April 28):

Finish The Natural

“You Could Look It Up” (James Thurber)

from “Chicago, City on the Make” (Nelson Algren)

“My Grandmother Goes to Comiskey Park” (James T. Farrell)

*Pitchers and Catchers” (Moe Berg)
"Shine Ball" (James A. Maxwell)

* "God’s Country and Mine” (Jacques Barzun)

**Week Four (May 5):**

Read first half of Shoeless Joe (W.P. Kinsella)

“Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu” (John Updike)

“Rules for Staying Young” (Satchel Paige)

from “Damn Yankees” (Broadway Musical)

“Can’t Anybody Here Play This Game?” (Jimmy Breslin)

* "The Terrible-Tempered Mr. Grove” (Red Smith)

**Week Five (May 12):**

Finish Shoeless Joe

“The Silent Season of a Hero” (Gay Talese)

from “Portnoy’s Complaint” (Phillip Roth)

from “Ball Four” (Jim Bouton)

* "The Green Fields of the Mind”) A. Bartlett Giamatti)

* “The Great American Baseball Card Flipping, Trading and Bubble Gum Book”

**Week Six (May 26):**

Read First Half of The Art of Fielding (Chad Harbach)

from “The Boys of Summer” (Roger Kahn)

from “Late Innings” (Roger Angell)

* from “Five Seasons” (Roger Angell)

* from "Stengel: His Life and Times” (Robert Creamer)
Week Seven (June 2):

Continue *The Art of Fielding*

from “It Looked Like For Ever” (Mark Harris)

from “The Celebrant” (Eric Rolfe Greenberg)

from “The Autobiography of Leroi Jones” (Amiri Baraka)

* “An American Childhood” (Annie Dillard)

Week Eight (June 9):

Finish *The Art of Fielding*

“The September Song of Mr. October” (David Remnick)

“A Minors Affair” (Richard Ford)

* “Yankee Ends Real Corker of a Mystery” (Buster Olney)

* “The Streak of Streaks” (Stephen Jay Gould)

Longer Selections (Optional—Anytime at your leisure)

“Head Down” (Stephen King)

from “Underworld” (Don DeLillo)

Book List:

The Natural (Bernard Malamud)

Shoeless Joe (W.P. Kinsella)

The Art of Fielding (Chad Harbach)

Baseball: A Literary Anthology (ed. Nicholas Dawidoff)