

## **Baseball's Abiding Imprint in American Lore and Literature: Season II**

**Fromm Institute**

**Spring, 2017**

**Prof. Alan Goldberg**

This season's offering is a reprise of last spring's "Baseball" course. As indicated in last spring's syllabus, "this class will explore baseball's enduring influence in American life, legend, and literature. 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." The influential French American public intellectual Jacques Barzun, still an active observer of popular culture as he approached his 105<sup>th</sup> birthday, is famously quoted, "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball."

Alas, last spring we barely made it into the early 1950s in the documentary video segments of the class. For those of you who enjoyed the course last spring, we spent a good deal of time lingering on and reminiscing about the body of work and images that make baseball lore and literature such a delight for those of a certain age, whether an avid or casual fan. We did not have the opportunity to fully explore some of the more subtle motifs embedded in the chronicles of America's pastime, particularly the recurring archetypal patterns and literary/narrative themes that mirror the sweep of both American history and what mythologist Joseph Campbell referred to as "The Hero's Journey." As such, we will continue where we left off, relax the pace, and enlarge the scope. We will expand upon such topics as baseball at the movies, in song, in verse, in the visual arts, as a vehicle that elevates the finest sports journalism into an art form, and most saliently, as a rich resource mined by some of America's most honored literary writers.

By no means does this class intend to provide a comprehensive history of baseball to the present moment. Indeed, we will concentrate on a select few decades—from the 1950s through the 1970s--of documentary footage, largely (but not exclusively) provided by Ken Burns' definitive series first aired on PBS in the mid-Nineties and later updated in 2010 in his sequel entitled "Extra Innings." We will employ this footage only insofar as it targets the artistic and mythic dimensions of baseball and mirrors larger societal conflicts in contemporary (post WW II) American history. Many of our readings chronicle this pivotal era and blend well with the select documentary images, voices, and soundtracks. It should become abundantly clear that baseball is a perfect conduit to uncover universal patterns embedded beneath the tangible drama and history of the game and its colorful cast of characters.

Last year, we read three core baseball themed novels—"The Natural" (Bernard Malamud), "Shoeless Joe" (W.P. Kinsella), and "The Art of Fielding" (Chad Harbach) as well as many fine selections assembled by Nicholas Dawidoff in "Baseball, A Literary Anthology." This semester, I have chosen one novel, "Bang the Drum Slowly" (Mark

Harris), one drama, “Fences” (August Wilson, faithfully rendered in a recent movie starring Denzel Washington and Viola Davis), and the likely final collection of pieces written by the venerable New Yorker literary editor and treasured baseball journalist, Roger Angell—“This Old Man.” For San Francisco Giants fans, Angell’s piece on Madison Bumgarner’s historic performance in the 2014 World Series is timeless as is his title piece from the perspective of a 93 year old who has seen it all. Once again, we will use Dawidoff as a primary source throughout this session and read selections that were not assigned or not required last year, including classic Roger Angell and a lengthy excerpt from the acclaimed contemporary American novel “Underworld” (Don DeLillo). Additionally, I will provide copies of excerpts from “The Great American Novel” (Phillip Roth) and a few other select literary pieces.

**Reading Resources:**

Bang the Drum Slowly (Mark Harris) novel

Fences (August Wilson) play. See the 2016 movie with Denzel Washington and Viola Davis (a faithful representation of the play)

This Old Man: All in Pieces (Roger Angell)

Baseball: A Literary Anthology (ed. Nicholas Dawidoff)

**Week One (April 13):**

Introduction: Review Syllabus and Reading Requirements. Retrospective on reading and other material covered last spring (2016). Continue where we left off (in the early 1950s)—but with a subtle shift in tone and range of material: a more leisurely pace and targeted time frame (mostly 1950-1980)—more depth on literary and archetypal mythic elements, synergy between documentary footage (Ken Burns et al) and cast of characters/authors.

Roger Angell (“This Old Man: All in Pieces” and other works) woven throughout the session—within and beyond the realm of baseball.

Baseball in Literature (“The Best and the Brightest”)

Baseball in Song, Verse, Cinema, Art, Media:

“Take Me Out to the Ballgame” (Jack Norworth, “Van Lingle Mungo” (Dave Frishberg)

Baseball, Homer’s Odyssey, Oedipus, and Joseph Campbell’s “Monomyth”

**Week Two (April 20):**

From “God’s Country and Mine” (Jacques Barzun)

from “Late Innings” (Roger Angell)

from “This Old Man” (Roger Angell)

from “Stengel: His Life and Times” (Robert Creamer)

“Perfect Day—A Day of Prowess” (Robert Frost)

Baseball at the Movies (“The Natural”, “Field of Dreams”, “Major League” et al)

**Week Three (April 27):**

from “This Old Man” (Roger Angell)

from “Underworld” (Don DeLillo)

“Polo Grounds” (Rolfe Humphries) poem

“Back at the Polo Grounds” (Murray Kempton)

Bang the Drum Slowly (Mark Harris): read first part

**Week Four (May 4):**

Bang the Drum Slowly (Mark Harris) finish novel--discussion

“North Toward Home” (Willie Morris)

Jews in Baseball—Eric Solomon (handout), video clips (Greenberg, Koufax)

**Week Five (May 11):**

From “This Old Man” (Roger Angell)

from “The Long Season” (Jim Brosnan)

“A False Spring” (Pat Jordan)

**NO CLASS MAY 18**

**Week Six (May 25):**

“Fences” (August Wilson): See the 2016 movie (Denzel Washington/ Viola Davis) and/or read the play.

“A Minors Affair” (Richard Ford)

**Week Seven (June 1):**

“Final Twist of the Drama” (George Plimpton)

“A Day of Light and Shadows” (Jonathan Schwartz)

“The Streak of Streaks” (Stephen Jay Gould)

**Week Eight (June 8):**

“Rain Delay: Toledo Mud Hens, July 8, 1994” (Martin Espada)

Baseball’s Enduring Legacy: excerpts from Phillip Roth, Robert Coover et al

“This Old Man” (concluding words from Roger Angell on Madison Bumgarner, the 2014 World Series, and the timelessness of baseball)

