

“Play Ball”: The American Sport Meets the American Dream

Bart Giamatti, former Commissioner of Baseball, once called America’s sense of baseball “an enduring public trust”—and the richness, breadth, and depth of literature written about the sport reflect just that. From its inception, this absolutely American sport has fueled our American dreams.

LeAnne Howe’s novel *Miko Kings* shuttles in time from the Choctaw leagues in pre-statehood Indian Territory (1906) to the late 1960s, introducing us to Hope Little Leader, whose genius as the pitcher for the Miko Kings defies the rules of physics. In W.P. Kinsella’s *Shoeless Joe*, a long-deceased Shoeless Joe Jackson appears in an Iowa cornfield to play ball with other spirit players. Magic realism is a natural pairing with baseball in these novels, a game that is “the last pure place where Americans dream” (Marcus Giamatti). In his non-fiction book *The Boys of Summer*, Roger Kahn conjures Ebbets Field and the Brooklyn Dodger world in which men like Campanella, Snider, Reese, Hodges, and Robinson were in their prime, ready to win the 1955 World Series. The Dodgers are also historian Doris Kearns Goodwin’s turf as her memoir captures post-WWII life in Brooklyn, a world of the small corner grocery and neighborhoods so close that they operated more like family institutions—except when it came to baseball rivalries. In *Bang the Drum Slowly*, Mark Harris tells the story of “Author” Wiggin, a baseball player who has it all, the whole American Dream; his friend, a scrub catcher, doesn’t have the dream at all—he has cancer.

These five books are framed by the game of baseball; through the common territory of the diamond on which these human dramas are played, they accomplish a great deal more in showing us how to live our lives authentically.

Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story

by LeAnne Howe

Howe’s novel slides into and out of two principal worlds—the Indian Territory baseball leagues of pre-statehood Ada, Oklahoma, and an Ada nursing home in the late 1960s. Part of that time travel takes place in the mind of Hope Little Leader, once the pitching sensation of the Miko Kings. For the Choctaws the timeless game of baseball is exactly that—a game without the constraints of time (not prey to the artificial imposition of innings), a game “in the blood” that connects and enables intertribal diplomacy. In 1907 the Miko Kings, Indian Territory League champs, prepare to stand off Fort Sill’s Seventh Cavalry team, winners of the Oklahoma Territory League, in a nine-game series for the Twin Territories championship.

The story is also told by Lena Coulter, a journalist who returns to Oklahoma to restore her grandmother's home. Workmen discover a leather mail pouch containing papers, drawings, a journal, and photographs, sending Lena on a search for her family history and her sense of self as a Choctaw. Some of Howe's characters are historical and many are inventions as she weaves a story that is both fictional and based on historical fact. Thus the world of the imagination, of dreams, intersects with and informs what we call history in ways that re-fertilize, reconfigure, and re-charge the past.

Shoeless Joe

by W. P. Kinsella

As is the case with *Miko Kings*, W.P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* fuses fiction with history as his novel incorporates the real story of the 1919 Black Sox Scandal. The author indulges in a "what if" moment, with the ghost of Shoeless Joe Jackson returning to an Iowa cornfield to play ball with another long-dead historical figure, Archie "Moonlight" Graham, who made it to the "big" briefly but didn't even get to bat. Along the way, the novel's protagonist, Ray Kinsella, "kidnaps" (rescues) author J.D. Salinger and builds a small ballpark on his own Iowa property in response to otherworldly messages: "If you build it, they will come," and "Ease his pain." (The screenplay for the iconic 1989 film *Field of Dreams* was adapted from this novel.) Whether the quest is to ease the pain of Shoeless Joe, or to give Moonlight Graham a chance at bat, or to jolt the villains (Ray's brother-in-law and his partner) out of their greed and irrelevance, our hero leaves us extraordinarily aware of the power of one man's passion and of the transformation possible through love for a sport perceived as noble and beautiful.

The Boys of Summer

by Roger Kahn

In Part I of *The Boys of Summer*, Kahn presents the Brooklyn Dodgers in their glory days, from 1949 to 1956, when he covered them as a young reporter for *The New York Herald Tribune*. The Dodgers were a diverse collection of great athletes, passionate players who epitomized what baseball meant. Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier as the first African American to play in the Major Leagues. Some of the players were World War II veterans whose wartime experiences had matured them—or scarred them forever. Most had grown up in blue-collar families where hard work was the key to survival. All of them were driven to succeed, some almost mystical in their exploits. In Part II, the players are graying men past their prime. Time has been good to some, cruel to others. Some raised families and had second careers; others suffered bad health or the death of children and loved ones. Kahn writes, "This is a book about time and what time does to all of us." In his mind, the Brooklyn Dodgers remain *The Boys of Summer*.

Bang the Drum Slowly

by Mark Harris

Harris's book is the ultimate baseball novel. The story develops around the friendship between Henry Wiggin, a pitcher and the narrator of the story, and Bruce Pearson, a somewhat limited catcher. At first, Henry is Bruce's only friend on the team. When Bruce is diagnosed with an incurable disease, only he and Henry know he is dying. As the season goes on, Bruce plays better than ever before and his teammates begin to accept him. The novel catches the realistic dialogue and everyday life of professional baseball players, including their roughness, tenderness, and black humor. It is a meditation on life, friendship, love, and loyalty—qualities which make any challenge in life bearable, whether one is a baseball fan or not.

Wait Till Next Year

by Doris Kearns Goodwin

Wait Till Next Year is a memoir about Goodwin's girlhood as an avid Brooklyn Dodger fan. She and her father followed the fortunes of the Dodgers at their peak, listening to games on the radio, keeping a scorebook showing a precise record of each game. For five years the Dodgers won the National League Championship, advancing each time to face the New York Yankees in the World Series. The Yankees defeated the Dodgers in the first four World Series, leaving her spirits crushed; but in the fifth year, her beloved Dodgers prevailed and became World Champions.

Tracing those years, Goodwin describes events taking place in her hometown and across the nation: the polio scare, the Army-McCarthy hearings, the quiet mood of the 1950s, and her life as a devoted Catholic. She describes her first confession in which she admits praying for serious injuries to certain players who often helped defeat the Dodgers and praying for injuries to the entire Yankee team. As an esteemed historian, Goodwin has written about U.S. leaders, from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson; still, she's more often questioned about baseball than presidents. This memoir is a great story about growing up as a Brooklyn Dodger fan during the Golden Age of Baseball.

Selected Supplementary Reading:

The Natural—Bernard Malamud

Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game—Michael Lewis

Opening Day: The Story of Jackie Robinson's First Season—Jonathon Eig

The Summer Game—Roger Angell

Summer of '49, and Teammates—David Halberstam

“Play Ball”: The American Sport Meets the American Dream was developed by Dr. Viki Craig and Dr. Jerry Nye. Dr. Craig, retired Professor of English at SWOSU, is a former OHC Board member and officer, Chautauquan, and long-time “Let’s Talk About It, Oklahoma” scholar. She was raised in a baseball-loving family and her late husband played with the Cleveland Indian and Kansas City Royal organizations. Dr. Nye was Professor Emeritus at Southwestern Oklahoma State University where he taught for 32 years (21 years as Chairman of the Language Arts Department). He served as a "Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma" scholar since the program’s inception in 1985 and presented more than 160 LTAIO programs.

