The Book

Karl Lindholm

He begun thinking about baseball a lot, which he never done before, always treating it before like it was football or golf, not a thing to think about but only play. He said to me, "Arthur, tell me, if you was on one club and me on another what kind of book would you keep on me?"

"If I was to keep a book on you," said I, "I would say to myself, 'No need to keep a book on Pearson, for Pearson keeps no book on me." ...You must remember. Or if you can't remember you must write it down. The man you are facing is not a golf ball sitting there waiting for you to bash him. He is a human being , and he is thinking, trying to see through your system and trying to hide his own.... "

"I will keep a book," he said.

—from *Bang the Drum Slowly*, by Mark Harris

I never play by the book because I never met the guy that wrote it.

—Dick Williams. Oakland A's Manager, 1980

Baseball is the most literary of sports in America. Books are important to the game. Every year sees a battery of new books about the diamond game and America's past, often written in the first person by some graybeard wordsmith recalling his youth and the game's timeless heroes. Colleges and universities, even prestigious places like Middlebury College in Vermont, get away with offering courses with grandiose titles such as "A Gentle Trinitarian Mysticism: Baseball, Literature, and American Culture." The phrase is philosopher Michael Novak's. In *The Joy of Sports*, he asserts that baseball "is suffused with a Gentle Trinitarian mysticism," because of the game's emphasis on the number three and its multiples in its organizational essence.)

The "Book" is a powerful symbol which resides at the center of the game. The immediate suggestion of the Bible and other sacred texts is unavoidable. After all, the Old Testament starts with "in the big inning."

Baseball finds its way into the books of some of our greatest writers. In the 1870s, America's bard, Walt Whitman, observed,"I see great things in baseball. It is our game—the American game"; Mark Twain used the game as a pastime for Arthur's (or was it Eddie Feigner's?) knights in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889). Stephen Crane wore the tools of ignorance for Lafayette College and Syracuse University in 1890 and 1891. Thomas Wolfe was a big fan, and, from high school English, we all know that Hemingway's Santiago, the Cuban fisherman and baseball fan in *The Old Man and the Sea*, was inspired by Joe DiMaggio's bone spurs. Robert Frost was an avid ballplayer in pickup games at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Vermont and even covered the 1956 World Series for the fledgling *Sports Illustrated*. It goes on, even to the present: Bernard Malamud, John Updike, Philip Roth, Marianne Moore, Jack Kerouac, Donald Hall, Robert Coover, Nancy Willard, Garrison Keillor, all players on the varsity, have incorporated their love of baseball into their work.

Karl Lindholm *is a dean and teacher of courses with grandiose titles at Middlebury College.*

Playing by the Book—Not all books having to do with baseball encompass the history of the game or explore its imaginative possibilities and cultural relevance. In fact, perhaps the most important book in baseball isn't even written down: It moves through time on the force of its own historical authority.

When was the last time you heard a baseball reference to "the Book"? Maybe it was today...when the Voice of the Red Sox intoned that the skipper was "going by the Book" in bringing in the lefty to throw to a like-sided slugger in the late innings of a close game. The Book has a thousand Commandments. It dictates that you take on 3-0, hit behind the runner, don't throw an 0-2 strike, bunt with runners on first and second with no outs in the late innings of a close game, don't try to stretch a single or steal a base when you're behind. The Book is a guide to life between the lines, a guide to the strategy of baseball, the most complex game among our sporting passions. It is the collected wisdom of the game's practitioners.

Who wrote this Book—and where can I get a copy? Like the Bible, it has many authors. Certainly, John McGraw (hardly a saint), the progenitor of the Baltimore game, was an early and crucial contributor. McGraw's legatee, feisty Earl Weaver, the Earl of Baltimore, wrote new and important chapters in his game strategy. Weaver's approach, based on the big inning, contrasted with McGraw's station-to-station, one run-at-a-time impulse. "Pitching, defense, and three-run homers" was his credo and formula. "Innovations" such as artificial turf and the designated hitter have occasioned a selective rewriting of aspects of the Book.

You can't buy this Book; it doesn't exist in earthly form. It is thus mystical and mythological, though it has daily practical application in the game itself. Christy Matthewson wrote *Pitching in a Pinch* in 1912; some seventy years later, Tom Seaver wrote *The Art of Pitching*. Cerebral George Will dissected game strategy in *Men at Work* with the baseball's current genius, the (micro-)manager Tony LaRussa. Former player Keith Hernandez provides another gem of analysis in *Pure Baseball:The Game for the Advanced Fan*. There are many books, wonderful books, that reflect and contribute to the one essential Book. You can find the Book at any ballpark, any day there's a game, at any level, but you can't find it at B. Dalton.

The Book can be learned, but it can't be read. It must be learned if the game is to be played *right*. Harry Rose taught the Book to Pete; Mutt Mantle taught it to his son, Mickey. High-school coaches teach from the Book all the time. It is only when the Book is substantially understood that one can deviate from it and "go against the Book," opening up whole new realms of possibility and appreciation. Knowing the Book of Baseball, understanding the game's chessboard strategy, makes the the interstices of the game meaningful and a time for relevant talk: "Think they'll pitch out? I guarantee he's running on this pitch."

Of course, players and managers keep a Book on one another as well, observing and analyzing other players and managers, their skills, weaknesses, and tendencies. We often hear comments like, "the Book on Moose is that he can't lay off the high heater;" or "the Book on Lefty is that he gets rattled with men on base." Tony Gwynn, and many other expert players, keep an extensive book on opposing pitchers, now often assisted by computers and video and other high-tech aids. Managers (supported by advance scouts) keep track of what opponents like to do in certain situations. The Book on Billy Martin was that he practiced the inside game of John McGraw: Roger Angell once said of him: "He loves the suicide squeeze the way a wino loves muscatel." (It turned out, unfortunately, that he also loved muscatel the way a wino loves muscatel.)

No one has ever been more thoughtful and analytical about the game than Ted Williams: his devotion to his craft is legend. He is famous for having said: "All I want out of life is that when I walk down the street folks will say 'there goes the greatest hitter who ever lived.'" He got his wish through the application of great skill, discipline, and knowledge. Nothing infuriated Williams more than being called a "natural hitter." "What about all the practice?" he would demand. He even applied the lessons about aerodynamics from Marine flight school during his war service. Did Williams keep a Book on opposing pitchers and umpires and ballpark idiosyncracies? Absolutely. In his rookie season, he took the advice of Joe Cronin and wrote down all that he learned in a little black book.

Was there a Book on Williams? According to Detroit Manager Del Baker, "the book on Ted when he first came up was that he would chase high balls." This would not be a problem for long. "Boy," Williams said, lamenting the shrinking strike zone to biographer Ed Linn in *Hitter: The Life and Turmoils of Ted Williams* (1993), "a ball above the waist is a helluva ball to hit. The guys who had the best luck with me never gave me anything but quick breaking stuff, down in the dirt." In 1970, he wrote the Book on hitting, *The Science of Hitting*.

Keeping the Book—There is another Book, this one a real, concrete thing, that the game also depends upon utterly—and that's the scorebook. This is a very different Book from the historical, unwritten Book of fundamental strategy. This Book doesn't just keep score. It is the origin of the miasma of numbers and statistics that envelops the game and absorbs its fans and players. It is the essential starting point, the source, of our evaluation of players' performance: "He's a .300 hitter," we say, or "he's got an ERA under 3.00." These standards of excellence evolve from the

daily assembly of scorebook stats.

Go to any game and look on the bench and you will find some solemn individual, a parent, assistant coach, sister, or substitute player, bent over the task of "keeping the book." There is no coach who hasn't asked plaintively before a game, "Who'll keep the Book today?"

In the professional game, writers, sportswriters, fittingly keep the Book. At other levels, it's whoever you can get to do it. The reason it's hard to find keepers of the Book is because it's hard to keep. It is a hieroglyph of black splotches (runs), numbers, letters, combinations of numbers and letters. It is easy to screw up the Book, especially when the ball is winging around the field seemingly unwilled. I love it when the radio announcer says something like, "For those of you keeping score at home, that rundown went 3-6-3-4-2-6." It's damn hard to fit all those numbers in that little box (and, while we're at it, who are these people keeping score at home?).

Keeping the Book (it sounds like a job for an medieval monk—"The Keeper of the Book") is quite a responsibility and a challenge. A mistake affects lives. In a famous scene in the movie *Bull Durham*, Crash Davis talks about how tough it is to hit for a decent average:

> Do you know what the difference between hitting .250 and .300 is? It's twenty-five hits. Twenty-five hits in 500 at bats is fifty points, okay? There's six months in a season; that's about twenty-five weeks. That means if you get just one extra flare a week, just one, a gork, you get a ground ball, you get a grounder with eyes, you get a dying quail...just one more dying quail a week, and you're in Yankee Stadium.

That one hit a week could also be a scorer's decision on a booted ball (or maybe that's what a "gork" is). When I was coaching high school I once read in the morning paper that my team had been no-hit the day before. That was news to me: I could have sworn we got some hits, so I went to the Book, our scorebook, and sure enough, we had three hits. Clearly, their Book-keeping authority (probably the coach) had a different view of some hard ground balls off gloves.

Real Books About Baseball—There are, of course, regular books about baseball, written-down books, published like other books, some of which are quite remarkable in exploring both the hidden and overt dimensions of the game. Among these, is there one that qualifies as the Book, the quintessential baseball story? What is "the Book" about baseball?

Recently, our small, but literate SABR chapter here in Vermont was mailed a membership survey, one of the questions on which asked us to identify our "favorite baseball book?" Lawrence Ritter's *The Glory of Their Times* appeared on the most responses. We could do worse than declare that seminal text of first person narratives the Book on baseball. Another top vote getter was *The Boys of Summer*, by Roger Kahn, though my choice in the nonfiction category is *Baseball's Great Experiment, Jackie Robinson and his Legacy*, by Jules Tygiel, the best combination of scholarship and narrative appeal in the baseball canon, a great book, a model.

On the fiction side, most readers, I suspect, would anoint Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* as the Book, with W.P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* and Mark Harris's *The Southpaw* running close behind. However, my choices are otherwise. I love Jerome Charyn's *The Seventh Babe* and Nancy Willard's *Things Invisible to See.*

The Seventh Babe tells the tale of Babe Ragland, the seventh "Babe" to play Major League Baseball, a lefty shortstop for the Red Sox who plays with a fierce love of the game which ultimately overwhelms the mon-eyed snakes who try to bring him down. In developing this marvelous character, Charyn imaginatively reworks some of baseball's most dominant myths and clichés, as well as some of its most bizarre footnotes. Full of twists and turns, *The Seventh Babe* explores the imaginative intersection between white baseball and black baseball in the segregated first half of this century.

Nancy Willard's novel is about death and love and war—and baseball. Set in Ann Arbor about the time of WWII, *Things Invisible to See* brings together the young ballplayer, Ben Harkissian, to whom was given "the sinister mysteries of the left hand and the dark meadows of the right hemisphere" (he's also a lefty), and the reticent Clare Bishop, who has the gift of "spirit travel." Ben, along with all of his high-school teammates, is shipped off to war where he encounters Death, and makes a deal with him. The deal involves a ballgame between Death, and his all-star minions, and Ben and his mates, the South Avenue Rovers. Like Charyn in *The Seventh Babe*, Willard makes beautiful use of magical and supernatural devices in this delightful book.

Books and baseball: for those of us who love books, baseball remains the national pastime. So... *keep the book, read* the book, *learn* the book, *follow* the book—but not slavishly. Sometimes we all need to *defy* the book just to make life interesting.