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The Boy of Summer: The Art and Anger of Roger Kahn

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THE BOY OF SUMMER

The Art and Anger of Roger Kahn

By

Mitchell Nathanson[♠]

In the summer of 1970 the future came to America's pastime. It arrived in the form of, of all things, a book. This one was titled *Ball Four* and its renegade author, Jim Bouton, used it as the medium by which he intended to shake a game that had grown stale out of its seemingly perpetual doldrums. Reaction to it was swift and extreme, with much of it coming weeks before the book even hit the shelves. This was largely the result of the work of his editor, former newspaperman Leonard Shecter, who placed an advance, titillating, excerpt of it in *Look* magazine, making sure to include as many spicy scenes as he could shoehorn into it so as to juice sales of the forthcoming book through conversation, debate, outrage and praise.¹ He was successful on all counts.

Before *Look* readers could turn the page even twice they read about a hungover Mickey Mantle hitting a pinch-hit homerun and pushing little children away as they begged him for his autograph, about players faking injuries and milking their contrived lameness for applause. Quickly on the heels of those stories came accounts of players cheating on their wives and "beaver shooting" on the roof of the Shoreham Hotel. Tales of "greenies" and make-out sessions with airline stewardesses followed those, and then, when it seemed as if there were no revelations left to expose in the few paragraphs remaining in the piece, boom! the game's ultimate taboo was broached through a story of

drunk players kissing each other on the team busses and planes.² And this was just the first excerpt. Even more was promised in the follow-up, promised two weeks hence.³

The excerpt, along with the book that arrived in bookstores just in time for Fathers' Day, succeeded spectacularly. While it ruffled the feathers of the players who were exposed and the old guard baseball men who protected them and their now-tarnished images, it was hailed by most others, including a large swath of the literati, as a generation-defining success.⁴ This was not baseball writing per se, rather it was a piece of writing that just happened to use baseball as its canvas. In this it was hailed as revolutionary. And given the revolutionary nature of the times, it was, at last, a baseball work that felt like it was pushing forward rather than reaching back. The future had come to sportswriting, and for the legion of *Ball Four* fans, not a moment too soon.

One writer, who was unquestionably not of the old guard nor the protector of the clay-footed heroes now exposed, and who himself was considered not merely a baseball writer but a writer who painted in baseball, was most definitely not amused by what he had read, however. His pique took a half year to make its way into print but when it did, it landed with not only a bang but a veiled proclamation that a counterpunch was coming. Writing in the December 1970 edition of *Esquire*, Roger Kahn, late of the itself late *New York Herald Tribune* and frequent commentator on not merely baseball but the world it inhabited, announced that he, like Bouton, found traditional baseball writing stodgy, boring, and worst of all, fake. The ghostwritten jock pseudo-diary format, which *Ball Four* had blown to bits, was a piece of trite fiction passing as vanilla fact that needed to go, Kahn wrote. These works "promised to the public inside tips from the secret life of Babe Ruth, Dizzy Dean and Warren Spahn. This was (and is) questionable business.

Ballplayers are unlikely to tell on themselves, even for cash advances.”⁵ Recalling one such piece that ran under Casey Stengel’s byline (but which was actually written by someone else), Kahn wrote that the resulting read was “pale as beer foam and just about as substantial. The old man appreciated the money but was damned if he was going to tell about drink, cash and other hard elements in his epochal life. He settled for tedium...which I keep close to the bed in book form because it is safer than Seconal and just as effective.”⁶ To write effectively and honestly about baseball, Kahn understood, one had to be willing to expose its underbelly. “[S]portswriting badly needs skeptics,” he wrote.⁷ But to him *Ball Four* was a bridge too far.

“The Puritanism of sport is dangerous nonsense,” he wrote, but the blunt tales told by Bouton and Shecter “give anti-Puritanism a bad name.”⁸ The book “adopt[s] a superior and almost leering viewpoint” that Kahn found to be shallow and superficial. In the piece, Kahn found himself on an island – adrift from his older brethren who still clung to the musty tales told by a ghostwritten Casey Stengel, but separated from those a generation younger who couldn’t get enough of both Bouton and *Ball Four*: “Bouton feels free to describe and laugh at the sexual habits of others, whom he names. This has delighted many young sportswriters, to whom the standard portrait of the athlete as monk must be buried at any cost. To Dick Young, the best of newspaper baseball reporters, such tattling makes Bouton a ‘social leper.’”⁹ Kahn found himself in neither camp and his *Esquire* piece was, in large part, an expression of his feeling that there was now a tug-of-war going on for the soul of baseball and that he didn’t feel comfortable joining in on either side. Bouton had the right idea in *Ball Four*, Kahn believed. He just lacked the proper perspective to pull it off.

It was a complicated piece and couldn't possibly be fully understood in its time, being that it came out well over a year before his landmark book, *The Boys of Summer*, was released.¹⁰ But in retrospect it can be seen as the moment where Kahn firmly planted his flag in what would become his signature style. "Ballplayers, and even their wives, are people; prick them and they bleed," he wrote.¹¹ Because Bouton and Shecter ignored what was, to Kahn at least, this foundational tenet of thoughtful sportswriting, their book was, from his perspective, "unfortunate."¹² "[A]nyone presuming to write seriously about sport had better recognize the existence of *To An Athlete Dying Young*," Kahn proclaimed near the end of his piece. Or, more to the point, this: "It is something to cry about, being an athlete who does not die young, and a hero's tears are the profound unbridgeable current between the best-seller *Ball Four* and a major, or even serious, book."¹³ Nobody knew it then, but Kahn had decided that he would be the one to attempt to bridge it.

The Houseman poem would become Kahn's lodestar and, together with *Ball Four*, would represent everything Kahn believed should and should not be contained within a work of serious baseball writing. To Kahn the true tragedy was not the athlete dying young but the athlete who suffered the misfortune of outliving his glory. The lucky ones were those who died before the laurel withered. The tragic ones were those with no choice but to wear their lifeless crowns for decades thereafter, reminding everyone of what they once and no longer were. Bouton laughed at these unfortunate souls, Kahn believed. A serious work would pity them.

The Boys of Summer did just that. Told in halves – the first recounting the tale of the Dodger clubs Kahn covered at the *Herald Tribune* in the early 1950s; the second a

succession of portrayals of thirteen of Brooklyn's "Boys of Summer" two decades later – the book represented a distillation of sports storytelling style as understood and practiced by Roger Kahn. In order to understand it – and Kahn himself -- though, we must travel back farther than his *Esquire* fusillade against *Ball Four*. We need to understand just who Kahn was as a young writer at the *Herald Tribune*. We need to understand the man who collaborated with Jackie Robinson in an ill-fated and short-lived magazine catering to Black causes and social justice through sports. We need to understand the man who freelanced his way through the 1960s as a self-appointed protector of the wholesomeness and purity of baseball against the winds of change he believed were inexorably corrupting it. We need to understand the man who was so repelled by the modernism of *Ball Four* that he penned a sepia-toned love letter to lost youth as represented through a vanished team from a bygone generation as a corrective.

This article traces the storytelling roots and progression of Roger Kahn from his start at what was considered the most literary daily newspaper in America, to his transformation as something of a youthful curmudgeon, through his career-defining *The Boys of Summer*, and up to his final work where he seemingly abandoned everything he had railed against in his *Esquire* piece and put forth a book that was more *Ball Four* than *Ball Four* could ever hope to be. In the end, the Roger Kahn of 2014's *Rickey & Robinson*¹⁴ bore little resemblance to the Roger Kahn of the 1970 *Esquire* critique of *Ball Four*. Superior and preachy, dishy and dirt-dealing, brutal and cold, the book landed Kahn at the one place he claimed he'd never visit: the literary doorstep of Jim Bouton.

The New York Herald Tribune Years

Kahn landed a job as a copy boy at *New York Herald Tribune* at the age of 21 in 1948. Within three years he was covering the Brooklyn Dodgers for the most literary minded of all the New York dailies. As soon as afforded the opportunity the young beat writer set forth for his readers his approach to sportswriting. Subbing for columnist and sports editor Bob Cooke, who was on vacation in October 1951, Kahn took advantage of the opportunity to express an opinion for once by transforming a piece ostensibly about the Princeton University football star Dick Kazmaier into a lesson on the proper subjects of quality sports reporting. "Somebody had complained that sports writing was falling apart at the seams," his piece commenced. "It is a common complaint and one that you may take lightly. You may. This department can't. 'Listen,' the protest began, 'you people are missing the boat. You're not writing the right stuff.'" The information Kahn's complainer was longing for was the sort of stuff the generation of sportswriters that would follow Kahn would dole out in spades, and then some: "What fans want to know is what he's like. Where he's from? Where's he going? What does he do with his spare time? Does he read? What does he read? Stuff like that."¹⁵

Kahn wasn't having any of it. His piece on Kazmaier focused on the man but only to the extent that it helped explain the performer or performance on the field. He would dig beneath the box score but would report on what he uncovered only to the extent that it was in service to the game itself. If it was irrelevant detritus it would remain where Kahn found it, regardless. The complainer in Kahn's piece wanted to know what brand of cereal his favorite players ate.¹⁶ The 23-year-old Kahn was determined not to give it to him. He would inhabit the real world of the athletes he covered and would report on it as well as their place within it. But within boundaries.

He would sit down with Kazmaier and report on what college life was like for a collegiate superstar. But he would not open the entirety of his life up for public view. Dick Kazmaier's preferred brand of breakfast cereal would remain a mystery, at least to Kahn's readers.

As he settled into his role as the Dodgers' beat writer, Kahn went to great lengths to convey to his readers not merely what it was like to be a big league ballplayer but what it was like to be Roger Kahn. This was a break from what came before. Kahn would not be the invisible scribe, a mere conduit of the action on the diamond to the readers of the *Herald Tribune*. He would bring his readers along with him as he engaged in what was clearly to him the greatest job in the world – watching big league baseball games and then writing about them. An early April 1952 piece on an exhibition game began with two paragraphs on the miserable train ride north from Florida as the club made its way toward Brooklyn. “For the last six nights they’ve slept in Pullman cars where the temperature has ranged from very hot to very cold, depending on (a) the particular car, and (b) the particular time of day. It’s no surprise, then, that running noses abound and germs are having a field day with the Brooks.”¹⁷

In another piece he situated readers in the back of the team's chartered plane:

Dreamers were musing about the beauty of the thunderclouds, and realists were nervous about the turbulence of the thunderclouds. Others, between the dream and the reality, were dozing fitfully. Charlie Dressen was talking baseball. Newspaper men were talking about their stories. Radio men were talking about themselves. In one corner of the plane a man sat reading a book. He was a pitcher and the book was “The Old Man and the

Sea.” To preserve the reading professional standing, of course, his name cannot be revealed.¹⁸

He wrote about what it was like to be a beat writer during spring training and what it felt like to field a ground ball walloped by a Major Leaguer.¹⁹ He brought fans a bit closer to pitcher Carl Erskine by spending a day with him at home and interviewing not the famous Dodger but his eighteen-month-old son.²⁰ He spent an afternoon at Ebbets Field not in the press box but in the stands, taking in the game with the players’ wives.²¹ With Kahn at the typewriter a Dodger fan following the club through the *Herald Tribune* would come to learn about and love his club in a whole new way.

What was a big league ballplayer *really* like? Like a small child but with one glaring difference that crystallized everything a fan needed to know if he hoped to understand big league baseball, Kahn wrote in an August 1952 piece:

If you talk to a small boy too long, you’ll find yourself believing a lot of unusual things. It’s fun to get up early. Fifty cents is a handsome weekly allowance. Girls always spoil things. And playing baseball for money is the easiest thing in the world.

If you talk to some ball players too long, you start believing a lot of unusual things, too. Movies are better than ever. The only pitches that get hit are curves that don’t break. All umpires suffer from galloping myopia.

And playing baseball for money is the hardest thing in the world.²²

Yes, Kahn informed his readers, baseball was a kids’ game played by adults, but adults who aged rapidly and for whom the kids’ game got just a little more difficult with each passing year. Pee Wee Reese was 33, Kahn wrote, and dreaded the game every now and

then. He was old and he was tired. And day games after night games just made everything hurt even more. This was realism come to the sports section, through the telling of one player's daily struggle simply to put himself out there at shortstop every day and not collapse. "Sometimes he gets tired and sometimes he feels a little dread because at thirty-three the grind wears hard. But if Pee Wee was a small boy again he knows he'd still dream the same dream and work just as hard to make it come true. Only this time he'd know that he wasn't dreaming about the easiest thing in the world."²³

Like his sportswriting predecessors Kahn was engaging in the art of building the game up for his readers. But his approach was to do so through cold injections of reality. And whenever he saw wisps of the old-time mythmaking in the ether, he called it out.

The emergence of Willie Mays had the old-timers, and the younger writers who emulated them, tripping over their tongues in search of superlatives to describe what they were seeing. Kahn instead chose to make the mythmakers his subject rather than the focus of their adulation. "Willie makes plays that can back up any rave," Kahn wrote in March 1954. But "the young man has only played parts of two Major League seasons and more returns are in order before a 'best-ever' tag is attached to his well-muscled back."²⁴ Yet his fellow scribes were already sold and Kahn mocked them relentlessly. "Willie is 10 feet 9 inches tall," he wrote a month earlier, jabbing at the literary air-kisses blown in the direction of the Giants wunderkind. "He can jump fifteen feet straight up. Nobody can hit a ball over his head, of course. Willie's arms extend roughly from 157th St. to 159th St. This gives him more than ample reach to cover right and left as well as centerfield."²⁵ You'll know him when you see him in the flesh, he wrote, because "a sound of golden horn from beyond the mountains will herald Willie's approach. When

he alights from his plane eyes will be dazzled. There's an excellent chance that grown men will weep."²⁶ Naturally, it would make sense to change the format of the '54 All-Star Game from American League vs. National to both against Wille Mays, he wrote.

As a bulwark against fantasy he stood up for the modern game – his game – against the old-timers who complained that baseball just wasn't what it used to be back in the day. In a piece entitled "Remembrance of Teams Past" he took on Ty Cobb, who had just (ghost)written a piece in *Life* magazine complaining about all of the college boys that now peppered club rosters and who, he believed, succeeded in making the game too soft. The nuances of the game were gone, Cobb complained, to which Kahn retorted: "There isn't a man worthy of the name who'd rather see a nuance than a home run."²⁷ Kahn loved the game he was covering and loved his Dodgers even more, a fact he was not shy about admitting. He let his love seep through his writing and saturate his coverage of the club and the frustration and disappointment he felt annually -- as Brooklyn reached the precipice but was then inevitably turned back -- bled through the page, staining the fingertips of his readers. "Every year is next year for the Yankees," was the lede of his 1952 World Series post-mortem, a sentiment that reached into the hearts of the crestfallen fans who read the piece the morning after Brooklyn's Game 7 defeat at Ebbets Field. "When the Yankees had finished winning the last big game, they mobbed [pitcher Bob] Kuzava and Gladys Gooding, the Ebbets Field organist, struck up a few tunes. 'Blue in the Night,'" she played, and then 'This nearly was mine.' 'This' belongs to the Yankees, last year, this year and, barring a miracle, next year. Because for the Yankees, every year is next year."²⁸

Although technically a reporter, Kahn was more comfortable as a storyteller. Objectivity wasn't the goal as much as drama, tension, and emotion. While rainouts could be the bane of the beat writer, there being no game to report on, they served as the canvas for some of Kahn's best writing. The inconvenience of the game itself out of the way, Kahn was then free to roam. He'd create running dramas, such as the one that pitted the Dodgers against the umpires who wouldn't give them a break.²⁹ He'd return to this pitched battle over the course of his tenure at the *Herald Tribune*, helping to create an "us versus them" narrative that brought his readers in; clearly they were in league with their Dodgers.

A few years later, after he was off the Dodgers' beat, Kahn deepened the tone of the battle by revealing what he was not permitted to reveal earlier – that the source of the friction between the club and the umpires was the belief by more than a few Dodgers that the umps were refusing to police and punish those opposing pitchers who were throwing at Jackie Robinson. In an August 1954 piece titled "An Angry Man," Kahn exposed the bare numbers that lay behind it all: "[I]n less than eight major league seasons [Robinson] has been hit by a pitched ball sixty-five times. There is a lot of talk about pitchers throwing at Carl Furillo, who, like Robinson, stands close to the plate. In almost nine seasons Furillo, less agile than Robinson, has been hit thirty-one times. By normal baseball standards Furillo has been hit often. Here again normal baseball standards don't apply to Robinson."³⁰

Years later Kahn revealed that he was restrained from writing about race at the *Herald Tribune* by the paper's sports editor, Bob Cooke, whom Kahn considered a racist.³¹ Kahn believed he was given an impossible task at the paper: "Write about the

first integrated major league baseball team, but be careful. Never, ever mention integration.”³² When he tried to write about it he’d receive a terse note back from his editors: “Write baseball – not race relations.” It wouldn’t be easy. He did manage to sneak in a few stories here and there and of course there was the unwritten subtext to his long-running drama regarding the Dodgers and the men in blue. But all but the most socially aware readers were likely to miss the subtleties. Despite the pushback he was nevertheless able to shepherd a column on the odyssey of pitcher Joe Black to the Dodgers into print in June of 1952 but painted his journey as one that was exceedingly pleasant despite one racially-tinged incident in Buffalo where an opposing player threatened him hit him with a bat. But by the end of the piece Black and the player had resolved their differences: “I was waiting for him the next time we were in Buffalo,” Kahn quoted Black as saying, “and sure enough he came around. He wasn’t looking to fight, though. He said he was sorry and stuck his chin out and told me to belt hit it because he had it coming.”³³

Two years later, however, in his “Angry Man” piece, Kahn let it all out. Robinson was an angry man, Kahn wrote, and there was a societal need for angry men like Jackie Robinson “to fight stupidity and bigotry and conformity. There is a need for Jackie Robinson. That’s why it is so troubling to hear so often the man dismissed with a shrug.” After making his case for Robinson and the rage within him that so many players, umpires, and writers bemoaned while marginalizing him, Kahn’s piece wrapped up with this: “Some men could take things...in stride and not say, as Robinson has in moments of rage, that all reporters are bigoted, incompetent, near-sighted and dishonest. Some men aren’t angry. But it was this fury of Robinson’s that enabled him to do the

great and tremendously difficult thing he did only nine years ago. Without the anger he wouldn't be Jackie Robinson. Without Jackie Robinson the world of baseball would be an infinitely poorer place.”³⁴ As for how this piece – race relations rather than baseball – made it into print, it most likely had something to do with the disclaimer that ran under it, informing readers that Cooke was on vacation. The piece might very well be the single best piece of writing of Roger Kahn's life.

The piece was an extension of the sort of writing Kahn did while working with Robinson on Robinson's short-lived magazine venture entitled *Our Sports*. In 1953 Robinson approached Kahn, asking if he might be interested in contributing to a magazine that would, in Robinson's words, “corral all the activities of Negroes in sports into one interpretative medium for the vast Negro audience.”³⁵ Robinson, with Kahn's help, would write a column each month, as would Kahn under his own byline. Together they recruited other writers to write the sort of provocative stories that would never have been published within the white press. “Will There Ever Be a Negro Manager?” was one.³⁶ Were the New York Yankees bigoted? was another.³⁷ It was hot stuff. Too hot for most advertisers, who stayed away. Before the year was out *Our Sports* had folded.

Railing Against Modernism

Almost from the instant he departed from the *Herald Tribune*, Kahn was nostalgic for a romanticized lost age that in many ways he helped to shape. When he left the paper he was not yet 30 but he was decades older in perspective than he was in years. Within a few years he had become the embodiment of what he railed against just a few years earlier – an old-timer complaining about how the game wasn't what it was back in the good old days. Soon he'd become a peddler of nostalgia and would ride the national

wave of nostalgia that gripped the country by the end of the 1960s to not merely a best-seller but immortality in his sepia-toned *Boys of Summer*.

In 1959 – when he was not yet 32 – he penned a piece for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* lamenting the loss of baseball’s magic. Kahn had left his newspaper home, his Dodgers had decamped for Los Angeles, the world he had known since he was a child was rapidly disappearing. And he desperately missed all of it. “It doesn’t make a man think to the point of pain,” he wrote, clearly pained, “but the fact is that baseball is losing some of its magic. The old gods are disappearing, or, perhaps worse, they are simply proving to be mortal. The game is not in danger of extinction, but neither is it likely ever again to dominate a great portion of our national scene.”³⁸

As for the root cause of baseball’s demise, Kahn returned to his preferred villain: television: “Baseball men have not yet been able to come to grips with the electronic root of their evil times. The game that gave us Ruth and Rogers Hornsby required some effort by spectators. They had to get out and travel to the ball park. The game that has been juggling franchises to balance books requires no effort at all. It comes into living rooms free.”³⁹ Television was making everything too accessible, Kahn believed. And even worse, it was shrinking the oversized heroes of our youth to miniature figures that fit into the boxes in our living rooms. There could be no modern-day Babe Ruth, he argued, because everyone on television was pint-sized and wedged between deodorant commercials. In just a few years he had gone from defending the modern game against old-timers like Ty Cobb and mocking his fellow sportswriters for puffing up a young Willie Mays, to pining for the days of sentimentalized, even fabricated, journalism.

As for his opinion of Willie Mays circa 1959 Kahn found him wanting as compared to the heroes of an era he saw receding quickly through his rear-view mirror. Mays, however, was at least more interesting than Mickey Mantle, who Kahn found “colorless.”⁴⁰ Mays, he wrote, was livelier but too erratic to ever be considered a player and personality on a par with the likes of Ruth. As for everybody else in baseball, they were interchangeable and bland as the oatmeal that was advertised between half-innings. Worse, the games were getting longer and bogged down with too much strategizing; statistics were coming to dictate the flow of the game, which was an arrow to the heart of a romantic such as Kahn. “One game of baseball lasted roughly two hours twenty years ago and frequently took even less. The average now has moved up to two hours and forty-five minutes. The added time is occupied by such managerial strategy as pinch-hitting for the pinch-hitter because the other team has suddenly changed pitchers. The extra forty-five minutes are dramatically useless. Is it fun to watch a manager think? Not nearly as much fun as it is to watch his ball players hit.”⁴¹

In 1974 he filed a column for *Esquire* wherein he lamented the loss of baseball heroes for children. When he was a kid, he wrote, a kid’s heroes were all ballplayers. But television had vaporized the concept of the athlete as hero. His son’s friends all “describe[d] television with contempt. No one will use an underarm deodorant because of an athlete’s endorsement. They laugh at commercials, they insist. ‘I like some of the sports movies,’” one of Kahn’s son’s friends tells him. “‘It’s good to see things where they treat athletes as people.’”⁴² When Kahn responds by saying that when he was a kid sports movies treated athletes as *heroic* people, the teenagers all respond that those movies were corny. Television, and the New Journalism represented by works such as

Bouton's *Ball Four*, brought not only a new intimacy to the relationship between the athlete and the fan, but a level of reality that Kahn – the onetime young realist – couldn't stomach: "Newspaper and magazine sports journalism have come about since 1940. Some old idolatry persists, but it is modified by a new muckraking. Editors want athletes quoted almost as they speak, portrayed almost as they are. Reading sports pages and articles, one has little sense of strolling through a pantheon. Like the newly hirsute women of the girly journals, athletes are becoming practically real."⁴³

The Boys of Summer sprung from this older, more wistful, Roger Kahn. It was a book the younger Kahn would have scoffed at – lamenting the perceived halcyon days and mourning fallen heroes. But once he left the *Herald Tribune* Kahn was no longer that young man. As Gay Talese would describe it, *The Boys of Summer* "is a work about youthful dreams in American towns and big cities decades ago, and how some of these dreams were fulfilled, and about what happened to those dreamers after reality and old age arrived."⁴⁴ In a very real way it was Kahn's stinging rebuke of the modernistic hyper-realism of *Ball Four*. Bouton's book achieved very much the same thing that television did, at least from Kahn's perspective – it made the players look human and small. Kahn's *Boys of Summer* would reinflate them and render them larger than life and as Kahn preferred them to be, his stint at the *Herald Tribune* notwithstanding.

And it was an enormous success. Unlike *Ball Four*'s reviews, which were overwhelmingly laudatory, reviews of *The Boys of Summer* were mixed. However, even the most tepid review recognized that the book struck a resonant chord and nobody was surprised when it became a breakaway hit. Heywood Hale Broun enthusiastically reviewed it in the *Washington Post* and immediately recognized it for what it was – a

journey into a romanticized past: “The world of which Roger Kahn writes in *The Boys of Summer* ended less than a quarter-century ago, and its continuity, statistically and intellectually apparent, is an illusion of symbolic logic in which baseball seems to be the same old game because the measurements of the diamond have not changed. In truth, the Brooklyn Dodger team which was Kahn’s to cover for the *Herald Tribune* was the last leap of the flame of romance in baseball.”⁴⁵ While conceding that “some may find all this unrealistic and sentimental,” he found it a vivid document of a lost age, romance and all.

Other reviewers were more damning but, still, found themselves taken in by the world Kahn had created within the book’s pages. In the daily *New York Times*, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt began his review by noting that his every intellectual impulse told him to hate the book but he enjoyed it nonetheless.⁴⁶ “Mr. Kahn’s unrelenting tone of veneration, as if all his memories had been removed from the altars of the world’s great cathedrals,” was grating, he wrote. Worse, “the Dodgers, Ebbets Field and The *New York Herald Tribune* are not yet so distant in the past that they can be treated as relics of some Golden Age. Besides, too much emotion expended on too little amounts to sentimentality, and artistry lavished on trivia adds up to kitsch.” And yet it somehow worked. Despite the fact that outside of the profiles of Robinson and Roy Campanella the “where are they now” sketches that made up the second half of the book seemed banal, Lehmann-Haupt was taken in by Kahn’s ability to bring the old Dodgers back to life, at least on the page. By the end of his review, Lehmann-Haupt essentially threw up his hands, mystified as to how and why he found the book so appealing: “It’s entirely possible that its worst excesses work in its favor -- that Mr. Kahn makes us pay

attention to what we ordinarily might ignore precisely because of the enormousness of his obsession and the consequent pretentiousness of his approach to it.” But without realizing it, he hit on the precise reason why the book clicked. Despite everything it did so wrong, it succeeded in hitting the target Kahn the romantic had been aiming at for years: the heart. Lehmann-Haupt kept reading in spite of himself because *The Boys of Summer* ignited within him “the warming glow of a simpler, better, by-gone way of life.”

The appraisal in the *Times*’s Sunday Book Review was similar. Here, too, the reviewer found the book “pretentious.”⁴⁷ But here, the reviewer, Grace Lichtenstein, understood what Lehmann-Haupt did not: that *The Boys of Summer* succeeded because the era it was describing “was hermetically sealed in 1957 when the Dodgers were traded to Los Angeles (for cash, and a team later named the Mets). The borough never regained the special sense of community the frenzied rooting for the Dodgers had created. What is surprising is not that Kahn has written a flowery, flawed yet moving elegy to the Brooklyn of his youth, but that no one did it sooner.” It was “a very stylish piece of fifties nostalgia that puts us back in touch with our heroes without either cosmetizing or demeaning them. Those were simpler times.”

In fact, they weren’t. However, the burgeoning sentimentalized nostalgia craze was just starting to take off smack-dab in the midst of the publication of *The Boys of Summer*; just as Bouton’s *Ball Four* was perfectly timed to capitalize on the modernist New Journalism craze that was then cresting so was Kahn’s work the ideal tome representing the reactionary response to it. For many, postwar modernism was growing weary by the late 1960s, by which point it had become dominant. The economic boom of the 1950s gave birth to a consumer culture where everything was not only new, newer,

and newest, but bigger and in living color.⁴⁸ The counterculture movement was peaking and everybody seemingly was questioning everything. In such an environment, books such as Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, and Bouton's *Ball Four* fit the times like a glove. But with that came a backlash from those who had grown tired of the seemingly never-ending change. Modernism didn't seem so great when it gave America a war it couldn't extricate itself from, a social fabric being torn apart in the streets, and lives that seemed more complicated than ever. For many people, "new and improved" was only half-right. Everything was indeed being remade, over and over. But none of this seemed to be making things better. If anything, to these people at least, their lives were getting worse.⁴⁹

The cultural pushback started quietly but quickly gained steam. At first it seemed odd that the fifties throwback band Sha-Na-Na would take the stage at the counterculture's signature event: 1969's Woodstock. But they were warmly received despite their schmaltz and matching gold lamé suits as they danced synchronistically to "At the Hop," released by Danny and the Juniors the year the Dodgers left Brooklyn. By 1972 the fifties musical *Grease* was on Broadway and *Life* magazine's June 16th cover featured a modern-day bobbysoxer hula-hooping in retro glee. Inside were stories chronicling the "Wacky Revival of hula hoops, ducktails, sock hops, Marilyn Monroe look, Rock 'n Roll, Elvis himself – plus a '50s quiz."⁵⁰ 1973 would see the release of the nostalgia-driven *American Graffiti* in theaters and then, in '74, *Happy Days* on television. For the first time in American history nostalgia was in.⁵¹ And *The Boys of Summer* fit perfectly.

For those who had had enough of the complexities of modern life, who had become convinced that new wasn't automatically better, Kahn's book presented a sentimentalized past to baseball fans just as *Sha Na Na* did to music fans and *American Graffiti* and *Happy Days* did to movie and television viewers. If *Ball Four* was the literary equivalent of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, offering up the present and near future in all of their ominous tones, then *The Boys of Summer* served up a recent past that was pure *Happy Days*: "Sunday, Monday, happy days; Tuesday, Wednesday, happy days..."

The Storyteller's End

The Good Old Days couldn't last forever. As Kahn aged sentimentality turned to a sort of bitterness that could frequently be found in his writing. He was not one to let things slide and the stature he had achieved after the publication of *The Boys of Summer* offered him a public platform to even a score should he feel comeuppance was due. In 1982 Daniel Okrent found Kahn's novel, *The Seventh Game*, wanting, writing in the *New York Times Book Review* that "Kahn commits enough writerly sins to send himself back to the minors."⁵² He wrote that beyond borrowing from his earlier work, Kahn committed the more grievous sin of including "cliches so firmly grounded in bad baseball literature that they are beyond tracing. He gives us predictably venal owners, dishonest agents, subliterate players..." Kahn displayed, Okrent wrote, a "tin ear" which doomed the entire project. In sum, Okrent found the book "flat, sloppy and pointless." In attempting fiction, Kahn was out of his league, Okrent wrote, and his mess of a novel provided, if nothing else, a cautionary lesson: "There are intelligent, observant, acute nonfiction writers who simply should confront fiction as a smart hitter confronts a low slider on the outside corner: They should let it go and wait for the pitch they can hit."

Three years later Kahn got his revenge, savaging Okrent's *Nine Innings* in the same publication:

Baseball writing often suffers from what Stanley Woodward, that grandmaster of sports editors, described as 'unholy jargon, that tendency to call things by names other than their own.' So a base may become a cushion or a hassock. A double play is a twin killing. Mr. Okrent apparently is aware of the jargon and wants to find unusual ways to say things. But he tries so hard that you can see him thumbing the family thesaurus...Jargon and pretention are fatal to baseball writing. When Mr. Okrent is not forcing phrases, he collapses into cliché and slang. Fans are ardent. Someone who means to be funny is a press box joker.⁵³

In the end, Kahn's review dismissed Okrent as a poseur. He didn't know enough about the game to understand the difference between important details and pointless trivia: "It is as if he had learned a good deal about baseball all at once and wanted to share everything with us, *everything*. In a single book."

Okrent's review notwithstanding Kahn continued to write and found some success here and there. Some of his later work was rightly praised while other books came and went without much notice. In 2014 he was 86 and published what would be his last book: *Rickey and Robinson: The True, Untold Story of the Integration of Baseball*, returning him to the glory days as a young writer at the *Herald Tribune*.⁵⁴ The book has the feel of finality, of a writer cognizant of the reality that this was his last chance to speak to the world before he left it. And what he wanted to say, apparently, was that anybody and everybody who had ever attempted to capture the Brooklyn Dodgers of the

1950s – *his* Brooklyn Dodgers – had it wrong. The world had gotten progressively more complicated, messy, ugly, crass. It had produced true beauty in Brooklyn once upon a time and then snatched it away, never to return. He had chronicled it, he was there. And he was determined to own the story into eternity. *Rickey and Robinson* was going to be the document by which he was going to plant his flag within that golden era. And nobody dare approach it. It was a distressing, angry, and sad capstone to a literary life well-lived.

Ostensibly, the book was Kahn’s attempt to chronicle the relationship between Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey. But, really, it was several hundred pages worth of chest-thumping and score-settling. None of it was pretty. *New York Daily News* writer Dick Young – who by this point was already well-known for being cruel, petty, and bitter – absorbed more body-blows from Kahn despite the fact that he’d been dead for 37 years and had few if any defenders left. Kahn described him as simplistic, a lush, a philanderer.⁵⁵ He seemed to revel in pointing out on multiple occasions that Young was short.⁵⁶ Petty: meet petty. Sportswriter Maury Allen, who had recently written a book with the old Brooklyn Dodger Dixie Walker’s daughter on the topic Kahn was now tackling – the integration of the Dodgers -- was “a tireless self-promoter who was often a stranger to truth.”⁵⁷ Kahn dismissed Allen’s work on the Dodgers – Kahn’s Dodgers – by pointing out that while Allen claimed “to have covered the Dodgers in their late years in Brooklyn,” in fact “during that period he was a lowly fact-checker working within the Manhattan offices of *Sports Illustrated*.”⁵⁸ A cheap shot on its own but one made worse by the fact that Kahn himself had engaged in puffery in his *Rickey and Robinson* author bio wherein he claimed that his book, *The Era*, had been nominated for the Pulitzer

Prize.⁵⁹ Technically this may very well be correct but in fact any published book can be nominated simply by paying the entry fee; the Pulitzer Prize Board accepts all submitted nominations so long as the check clears. *The Era* is not listed anywhere on the Pulitzer's website as having been either a winner or a finalist.⁶⁰

Within the book Kahn torched any writer who had the temerity to approach what he considered his turf. *New York Times* writer Harvey Araton, who worked with Allen on the Dixie Walker book and then wrote his own piece on whether Walker deserved scorn or sympathy for his role in trying to prevent the integration of the Dodgers in 1947, did a "workmanlike" job on the book, Kahn wrote, but his subsequent article was "tendentious" and, worse, simplistic.⁶¹ In the end, Araton didn't understand much of what he was writing about when it came to Kahn's Dodgers, at least according to the man himself.

Jules Tygiel's attempt to distill Kahn's Dodgers was similarly found wanting. His book, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, was "plodding" and uninformed because Tygiel was an academic and not a newspaper writer like Kahn. Tygiel's discussion of the Walker incident was fatally flawed, he wrote, because Tygiel "had never covered major-league baseball on a daily basis, nor was he aware of the workings of big-city newspapers. These shortcomings probably led him to a conclusion that was thumpingly incorrect."⁶² Jonathan Eig's book on the '47 Dodgers, *Opening Day*, was likewise doomed: "Eig sometimes writes effectively, but he simply does not understand what went on in 1947, a season that unfolded roughly two decades before he was born."⁶³ Of course, Kahn wasn't there, either, as he didn't join the Dodger beat until five years after the club was integrated.

Kahn didn't have a kind word for nearly anybody. Red Barber, whom Kahn defended in the *Herald Tribune* decades earlier as a treasure when his contract wasn't renewed by the Dodgers after the 1953 season, was now dismissed as "a distressingly self-important man."⁶⁴ Few who traveled within Kahn's orbit were safe from the wrath of his pen. The exception was Branch Rickey, the hero of *Rickey and Robinson*, who Kahn venerated to the point of describing on more than one occasion as being the one to break the game's color barrier rather than Jackie Robinson.⁶⁵ The undercurrent of the book was a suggestion that Robinson received perhaps an outsized amount of credit for the work that Branch Rickey did to integrate the game. Rickey was the hero but, to Kahn's dismay, "the New York press did not gush with praise.... the press generally declined to applaud Rickey's merits."⁶⁶ While the former newsman certainly understood that the role of the press is to question rather than cheerlead, Kahn wrote that his colleagues were derelict in their duty by not raising a glass to Rickey and his Boys of Summer on a daily basis as they took the field: "Under Rickey, Jackie Robinson was integrating baseball and the country. Under Rickey, the greatest of all Brooklyn teams was coming together with Hall of Fame players at shortstop, second base, home plate and in center field. The Boys of Summer had arrived! Yet the most popular paper in New York [the *Daily News*] blew no triumphal trumpets."⁶⁷

Rickey's presence and puppet-mastery was so much in evidence throughout the book that he even found his way into Robinson's decision to marry, with Kahn writing that Robinson's decision was met "with Rickey's enthusiastic support".⁶⁸ Robinson, so much the hero in *The Boys of Summer*, appears within the pages of Kahn's final book as more of a prop than anything else, obligingly referred to here and there as a hero but

nearly always with the qualification that much of his heroism could be laid at the feet of Branch Rickey. Worse, Kahn bookended *Rickey and Robinson* with a pair of unseemly utterances. The first alleged that while the Hall of Fame had for decades turned a blind eye toward racial prejudice in its inductees, it was now “overcompensating” when it came to inducting Black players.⁶⁹ The second came in the book’s final pages, with Kahn recounting an interaction he’d once had with Robinson: “‘You know,’ [Robinson] told me once, ‘more white women want to take me to bed than I’ve got time for.’”⁷⁰

It was an anecdote that would have perhaps fit within the pages of Bouton’s *Ball Four* but never within *The Boys of Summer* and was representative of the sort of “superior and almost leering viewpoint” that infected the entirety of *Rickey and Robinson* but which Kahn found so repulsive in Bouton’s book.⁷¹ “Ballplayers, and even their wives, are people; prick them and they bleed,” he wrote in his *Esquire* review of *Ball Four*.⁷² Robinson was of course long gone by the time Kahn’s final book was released in 2014 but his widow Rachel was 92. Prick her and she would undoubtedly bleed.

The Roger Kahn who penned *Rickey and Robinson* seemed like a wholly different writer than the one who once criticized Jim Bouton for feeling “free to describe and laugh at the sexual habits of others, whom he names.”⁷³ One wonders whether even Jim Bouton at his most devilish would have had the good sense to leave the Robinson anecdote – not merely indecorous but ultimately pointless -- on the cutting-room floor. But the octogenarian Roger Kahn had little choice. He had spent his life telling stories, many of them revolving around the amber-encased Brooklyn Dodgers of his twenties, and by this point he was, well, spent. He had devoted his adult life to drawing from that well and it had at last run dry. We can debate the possible high-minded or journalistic

rationales for his decision to include the Robinson anecdote or we can accept the one that's staring us in the face: he simply had nothing else left. So he used it.

The storyteller was out of stories.

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