HAND TO MOUTH; a Chronicle of Early Failure
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A cloth edition of this book was published, I gather, in the same year. It comprises a text (Auster's account of his youthful efforts to make a living) and three appendices: a) three plays; b) a description of a baseball card game Auster invented; and c) and Squeeze Play, a detective story published in 1982 under the name of Paul Benjamin that involves major league baseball. Only the three plays contain no mention of baseball. Each of the other sections has its interest for SABR members.

Auster's chronicle of early failure contains an account of his invention of a baseball card game and of his efforts to have that game manufactured and marketed (p.108-122). He hoped to make enough money selling the game to free up time for his writing. The game itself involves two decks of 96 cards each. There were two major problems: 1) timing - "computer games were all the rage that year...and I was hoping to strike it rich with an old-fashioned deck of cards" (p.115); and 2) "the consensus here," articulated a toy company executive, "is that without big league players and their statistics, the established competition is insurmountable" (p.120).

The same executive called the game "unique, innovative and interesting...it is the only table-top baseball game without a lot of trappings, which makes it faster-moving" (p.120). Appendix 2 (p.215-235) prints the rules of the game and color reproductions of all 192 of the playing cards. There is a Viking-Penguin edition of Hand to Mouth, probably more readily available than these Holt editions, but it does not reproduce the playing cards in color.

Auster describes the curious publishing history of Squeeze Play at the very end of his memoir (p.126-129). He never mentions the name of the publisher of the cloth edition but includes this intriguing description (p.128): "Production of my novel dragged on for two years. By the time it was printed, he had lost his distributor, had no money left, and to all intents and purposes was dead as a publisher. A few copies made it into a few New York bookstores, hand-delivered by the publisher himself, but the rest of the edition remained in cardboard boxes, gathering dust on the floor of a warehouse somewhere in Brooklyn. For all I know, the books are still there." A mystery of sorts here: I have never seen a cloth copy, and my paperback copy (Avon Books, 1984) lists a copyright date of 1982 but no previous publisher.

The text of Squeeze Play is of limited but genuine interest to SABR members. There are, throughout, portraits (speculative, I imagine) of a rapacious owner and a self-centered former ballplayer, the latter dead before the action of the book begins. Of much more interest is the description of a baseball stadium and a game there that takes up a chapter late in the book (p.420-429).
Auster catches the awe of entering an urban baseball stradium (p.422): "It's almost impossible to take it all in at once. The sudden sense of space is so powerful that for the first few moments you don't know where you are. Everything has become so vast, so green, so perfectly ordered, it's as if you've stepped into the formal garden of a giant's castle."

He also comments on the mesmerizing quality of the game itself (p.422): "For the next two or three hours the geometry of the field in front of you will hold your attention completely. In the middle of the city you will find yourself enveloped in a pastoral universe watching a white ball fly around in space and dictate the actions of eighteen grown men." The game, as might be expected, ends in a squeeze play, and contemplating this enables the narrator to solve the mystery.

[Andy McCue adds the following information: "I have never seen a hardbound copy of Squeeze Play, but I do have a 1982 paperback. This could explain the 1982 copyright of Terry's 1984 Avon reprint (the most common available version). The trade-sized paperback has a highly garish pinky/purple cover, with a series of shapes breaking up the cover into several sections, most of them filled with drawings. The drawings are fairly amateurish, as are the production values of the book as a whole. The publisher is listed as Alpha/Omega Book Publishers, Inc. of New York. There is no separate ISBN or other indication that a hardbound copy is available."]