Book Reviews

Drawing From Life by Joel Oppenheimer. Edited by Robert J. Bertholf and David W. Landrey

Reviewed by Terry Smith

Those of us who enjoyed Oppenheimer's account of the New York Mets' 1972 season titled The Wrong Season (1973) (reviewed in the Committee newsletter for April 1995) will want to know about Drawing From Life, a selection of 92 of the some 300 columns Oppenheimer wrote for the Village Voice between 1969 and 1984. These were selected by Bertholf (curator of the poetry collection at SUNY Buffalo) and Landrey (associate professor of English at Buffalo State University), neither of whom had the SABR membership in mind when they made their selections.

Nevertheless, it's clear that both saw Oppenheimer's interest in following and writing about baseball as a significant dimension of his life. In their introduction, they present this interest as one of the alternatives Oppenheimer embraced to the America of the 1970s and 1980s and cite from perhaps the best of his baseball columns (p.xvii, 5) "the universe (of baseball) exists if you say it does. It's the only one you can say exists, instead of having it shoved on you. That's why games exist." Some 14 of the 92 columns have baseball as their principal subject, and several of these were used in composing The Wrong Season.

That leaves nine columns that were wholly new to me, eight published after the appearance of The Wrong Season. They include "Meanwhile, Down in the Gap: Sports, Children and Philosophy" (p.77-78), which is in part about being a Yankee-hater; "Master of Deceit and Other Sports News" (p.80-82), about the 1974 World Series; "This Series Was Top-10 Stuff" (p.106-108), about the 1975 World Series; "Angry at the Hall of Fame" (p.125-127), an essay on the Baseball Hall of Fame; "No Runes, No Wits, No Airers" (p.185-187), on watching sports on television; "In the Gold Old Summertime" (p.210-212), on Duke Snider and Rex Barney; and "The Long View" (p.275-278), on the 1984 Mets.
Finally, there is my own favorite: "No, I Can't Stay Away from Opening Day" (p.4-6). The column is both an account of the Mets Opening Day in 1971 through the eyes of a Mets fan and a kind of hymn to the uniqueness of baseball and a declaration of its superiority over all other sports. Ordinarily, this sort of essay makes me wince. When George Will or Tom Boswell or Donald Hall begin to speak on this subject, there always seem to be an air of pretense or self-congratulation that puts me off even as I nod in agreement. Oppenheimer's writing on baseball, like his writing on other subjects, seems utterly without pretense, and when he concludes this piece with "baseball, I love you", I know he means it, and I know why.

A glance at the index of Lyman Gilmore's new biography Don't Touch the Poet: The Life and Times of Joel Oppenheimer (Talisman Publishers) - which I haven't had a chance to read - reveals no entry for "baseball". There are entries for the Dodgers and the Mets. The name of Ron Swoboda, one of the speakers at Oppenheimer's memorial service in Feb. 1989, comes up three times. There is a five-page section of the book devoted to The Wrong Season. Gilmore mentions that Oppenheimer was cremated wearing his Brooklyn Dodgers cap and, like Bertholf and Landry, asserts the importance of baseball in Oppenheimer's life.

In Drawing From Life, Bertholf and Landrey have also provided a chronological list of all Oppenheimer's appearances in The Village Voice. Alas, it is not always possible to tell from their titles which are about baseball.

**Baseball For Dummies** by Joe Morgan, with Dick Lally  
Foster City (CA): IDG Books Worldwide, 1998. 406pp. $19.95 ...and...  
**Tim McCarver's Baseball for Brain Surgeons and Other Fans: Understanding and Interpreting the Game So You Can Watch It Like a Pro** by Tim McCarver, with Danny Peary  

**Reviewed by Ron Kaplan**  
23 Dodd Street, Montclair, NJ 07042

One can assume that most SABR members are no dunces when it comes to the national pastime. But those who aren't up on their game needn't feel embarrassed. *Baseball For Dummies* can bring even the most horsehide-impaired up to speed. (Don't worry, there's plenty to entertain
Morgan, a Hall Of Fame second baseman, now an analyst for ESPN games, teams up with Lally for this volume of everything you would want to know about baseball (but were too chagrined to ask). One of the drawbacks of the book is that it's heavy in instructionals. Want to learn how to play second base? It's here. (When still with the Reds, Morgan wrote *Baseball My Way* (Atheneum, 1976), which was strictly a "how-to" book.) But there are also many entertaining aspects to *Dummies*. For example, there's a study of each major league stadium, with suggestions on where to sit to maximize your chances of catching a foul ball and how the architecture and climate favor the batters or pitchers.

For many of us, statistics are the lifeblood of our enjoyment, so the authors have included a section on how to calculate those batting percentages and earned run averages. And lest anyone forget that the pro game is not just played in the United States and Canada, *Dummies* reminds us that there's a great big baseball world out there, as the authors discuss the sport as it's played in Asia, Australia, and South America.

Morgan and Lally aren't shy about offering expert opinion as they select their ten greatest players - past, present, and future. They also choose the records they believe are least likely to be broken and the events that transformed the game. Readers may find these lists subjective, but such arguments are part of the fun, part of what being a fan is all about. The appendix offers a glossary of baseball terms, a plethora of records (always welcome by trivia buffs), and a list of contacts for information on just about every aspect of the game, from T-ball to senior leagues, from professional leagues to team Web sites.

As a juxtaposition to *Baseball For Dummies*, there is Tim McCarver's *Baseball for Brain Surgeons and Other Fans*. McCarver, who appears on New York Mets and Fox telecasts, is another former star who has become one of the game's foremost commentators and analysts. Where *Dummies* spends more time on the rudiments of the game, McCarver and Peary delve deeper in to strategy and nuance. This is perhaps the best book I've ever encountered to understand how a pitcher decides what to throw, what goes through the hitter's mind as he steps into the batter's box with the game on the line, how an outfielder positions himself, or how a speedy runner uses his savvy to know when *not* to steal a base. Readers will be nodding their heads and saying: "Ahhh. So that's how (and why) they do that." While *Brain Surgeons* doesn't instruct you on how to play the game yourself, not instructional on the same level as
*Dummies*, McCarver examines the minutiae required for each aspect of the game. McCarver offers plenty of examples and anecdotes drawn from nearly forty years of experience.

Those who prefer to watch baseball from the comforts of their living rooms will find a new appreciation for television broadcasts as McCarver explains how the director puts the action together, what he looks for, and what is *not* seen on the screen.

Between these two volumes, if you'll pardon the pun, you'll have covered all the bases when it comes to covering the game.