ForeWord Reviews

Line Drives
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The sub-genre of baseball-related poetry is probably one of the most under-appreciated in the great tradition of poetry and literature. “No matter how good a baseball poem is,” the editors write in the introduction, “some will always feel that baseball as subject matter relegates a poem to also-ran status.” Horvath is a professor of English at Kent State University; Wiles is director of research at the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

This anthology is divided into sections, each analogous to a part of the baseball cycle. The first two concern “birth” (i.e., spring training, when all things are possible and optimism is high) and “adolescence”—when the glow fades from the rose, as the season progresses and reality sets in. The next two sections are downright depressing as they muse on “lost youth, lost fathers, lost time, lost hope, lost love”—somewhat akin to having one’s team buried in last place with six weeks left to go. Hope is reborn in the final segment, as thoughts of next season keep fans warm through the cold days.

Some of the pieces are light, while others are excruciatingly sad, such as Mark Schraf’s “Question and Answer,” about the different consequences a watershed throw held for two pitchers: Ralph Branca, who surrendered Bobby Thomson’s dramatic home run a half-century ago, and Donnie Moore, whose similar sin in 1986 led to his eventual suicide.

The entries run from the subconsciously complex to the absurdly simple, as exemplified by Edward R. Ward’s “Limited Power” with its poignantly missing letters:

allgame Tonig t
7:3 pm
Arkan as v. Shrevepo t

If brevity is the soul of wit, one of the most thought-provoking of the (sand)lot is Ron Vazzano’s “Baseball Haiku”:

Nine men stand waiting
under storm clouds that gather.
Someone asks for time.

The editors offer an interesting analysis of this piece in their introduction, but the other ninety-nine are left to the reader's interpretations.

Of the 100 entries, only one was written by a professional ballplayer. Dan Quisenberry, a standout relief pitcher for the Kansas City Royals (who has since passed away too young), offers "Baseball Cards," an extremely sensitive and accurate portrayal of the too-brief life-within-a-life of the athlete, starting out fresh-faced and starry-eyed and ending up old (at age thirty-five) and tired-as seen through his own image in the yearly progression of his trading cards.

Other poems mark the passage of time, from carefree youth to callow adult ("Polish-American Night, Tiger Stadium") and the competitive nature between fathers and sons, despite the traditionally warm image of sharing a love of the sport ("Isn't it pretty to think so" and "Catch"). The themes, ranging from Little League to lusting after one's best friend's mother, are amazingly scattered, yet held together by the stitches of the ball that has held our national attention for more than a hundred years.

Despite the uneven nature of such anthologies, Line Drives, taken as a whole, is a well-conceived collection of an overlooked aspect of baseball lit.

Ron Kaplan