

## Review Essay

### **‘Wandering among old Dodgers’: The Sports Journalism of Roger Kahn**

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Although he is best known as a sports journalist, only two of the six books Roger Kahn has so far published have had sports as their subject. A third, a selection of his writings, has nine selections concerned with sports out of fourteen. These books appeared consecutively in the mid-seventies, beginning with *The Boys of Summer* in 1972. *How the Weather Was* was published in 1973, followed by *A Season in the Sun* in 1977.<sup>1</sup> This essay will be concerned with the usefulness of these books to the historian of sport. First, what can we expect in the way of information from Kahn? What sorts of subjects is he attracted to and how does he treat them? Secondly, we need to know how he understands the importance of sport within the social order. Finally, we should note the nature of his thematic concerns; we should ask, what do Roger Kahn's books tell us about the meaning of sports in America now?

*How the Weather Was* and *A Season in the Sun* rest comfortably in the shadow of *The Boys of Summer*; they are lesser achievements, they are less ambitious, and I wish to deal with them first. A glance at the two books tells us that Kahn likes best to deal in his reporting with a single individual. In *How the Weather Was* there are essays on Babe Ruth, Leo Durocher, Willie Mays, Al Rosen, and the Jackie Robinson family (revised from *The Boys of Summer*). In addition there are accounts of Bobby Thomson's home run to end the National League pennant race in 1951 and of the sportswriter John Lardner. Kahn is at his best in these when he contrives to let the subject reveal himself, either by his words or his actions.

While *How the Weather Was* is by nature a miscellaneous book, being a selection of articles and excerpts from previous books, *A Season in the Sun* is a more ambitious effort. Kahn is clearly interested in giving his character studies (of Wally Moon, Walter O'Malley, Pat McKernan and his minor league

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team, Artie Wilson, Roberto Clemente's Sports City in Puerto Rico, Bill Veeck, and Johnny Bench) a kind of coherence: they are to convey the look and feel of a typical baseball season. In the introductory chapter of *A Season in the Sun*, Kahn discusses his own past propensity to explain the meaning of baseball. "At twenty-eight, I was susceptible to suggestions that I explain—not describe but explain—baseball in America. I published in small quarterlies. I addressed a Columbia seminar. I developed a showy proficiency at responding to editors who asked me to 'equate the game in terms of America.'" (p. 8).

How games are important within society is also the subject of the first chapter of *How the Weather Was*, "Road Map." Kahn begins with a disclaimer:

From a distance, sports appear to the shallow end of the American sea; puerile speeches at the letter-club banquet, the hustling of transparent con men, simple adults pursuing childhood activities, amiable anecdotes repeated on old-timers' day. The same man who demands harsh film criticism and likes his political reporting merciless accepts a pabulum view of sports. He may find it sheer relief to turn to the sports page as a kind of toy department. He may have suffered from myopia at seven; in that case he enjoys putting down great hitters by pointing out that baseball is only a game. (p. 5).

Kahn's own experience has convinced him, however, that sports are "a better area than most to look for truth" (p. 5). He concludes that "clearly sport is significant. It is big business and that matters and it is a theater of truth and it holds up a mirror to society and humanity" (p. 11). The relation of these three significances, probably not adequately indicated by the word "and," is of interest. For Kahn, sport reflects both society and humanity. I take this to mean that sport can tell us something about both the uniqueness of particular cultures and about our common condition as humans. The word "mirror" suggests that we receive these messages by a process which reveals an image of ourselves which we ordinarily can't see. I take "big business" to be a unique feature of American social order and "a theater of truth" to be the means whereby our common humanity is dramatized. But at this point, we arrive at a conceptual difficulty: "mirror" and "theater" are two very different metaphors, both used to describe the process of conveying ideas and images. A dramatic presentation is a deliberate distortion of reality in order to highlight particular concerns; a mirror is a passive reflection of the object before it. The viewer himself selects the significant elements in the mirror. Here are Kahn's in *How the Weather Was*:

Sports tell anyone who watches intelligently about the times in which we live: about managed news and corporate politics, about race and terror and what the process of aging does to strong men. If that sounds grim, there is courage and high humor, too. (p. 5).

The first chapter of *A Season in the Sun* tells the story of Kahn's tension between explaining and his dramatizing of the meaning of sports and concludes in favor of the latter:

I do believe this: that baseball's inherent rhythm, minutes and minutes of passivity erupting into seconds of frenzied action, matches an attribute of the American character. But no existential proclamation, nor any tortured neo-Freudianism, nor any outburst of popular sociology, not even, or least of all, my own, explains baseball's lovelock on the American heart.

You learn to let some mysteries alone, and when you do, you find they sing themselves (pp. 8-9).

Dramatizations are going to be more effective than reflections; the meaning of baseball in America is, for Kahn, essentially mysterious. It cannot be explained; it must be played out. Here is a scene from the beginning of *A Season in the Sun*.

He insisted on borrowing my bat. Thirty-two ounces. A fat-barreled Ron Santo model. Either Roger did not know the rules of pepper or he didn't know how suddenly strong he had become. I made a pepper toss. Roger whipped the big bat. We stood thirty feet apart. The blackened baseball hurtled at my nose. I threw a glove up and deflected the ball and stumbled. Sitting on charred grass, I remembered that from my father in Brooklyn fields that have vanished under high-rises. Seventy years ago, he learned that from his father on fields that have disappeared under slum. And now my son, in careless, innocent excitement, had reinforced a family lesson old as the century. (pp. 4-5).

This scene between Kahn and his son dramatizes for him the essential human mystery at the heart of the sport. "The game begins with fathers and sons," Kahn says, "fathers and sons. The theme is older than the English novel, older than Hamlet, old at least as the Torah. You play baseball with love and you play baseball to win, and you play baseball with terror, but always against that backdrop, fathers and sons" (p. 6).

It is this theme that unifies *The Boys of Summer*. This autobiographical narrative is superficially somewhat miscellaneous in its subject matters. It is the story of Kahn's youth with his parents; the story of his two years as a reporter for the New York *Herald Tribune*, during which he covered the Brooklyn Dodgers; and it is a series of interviews with twelve of those Dodgers some twenty years later. The persistent focus throughout is the fact of human mortality: Kahn says in the introduction that "I covered a team that no longer exists in a demolished ball park for a newspaper that is dead" (p. xix). The basic drama of the book is the making of meaning within these confines. Kahn says on the dust jacket of the first edition of *The Boys of Summer* that "there are a plethora of books on sports. This one is not on sports but on time and what time does to all of us. *King Lear* is on the same subject as *The Boys of Summer*, and my work differs from *Lear* in that it isn't as good."

It also differs from *Lear* in that it is concerned with American society in the middle of the twentieth century. Kahn presents the notion that in mid-twentieth century America "the dominant truth of the Jackie Robinson Dodgers was integration. They were the first integrated major league baseball team and so the most consciously integrated team, and, perhaps, the most intensely inte-

grated team. All of them, black and white, became targets for the intolerance in which baseball has been rich” (p. xvi). *The Boys of Summer* charts the uncertain course of integration across several decades of American life. Jackie Robinson’s life is the principal focus. His difficulties as the first black player to enter the majors in the twentieth century are documented in part I of the book and in the book’s penultimate chapter (pp. 386-411). But Robinson’s political career also interests Kahn.

Goldwater’s capture of the candidacy shook [Robinson]. He recognized the nature of the campaign, Goldwater playing to conservative whites, Lyndon Johnson courting liberals and blacks, and said that we could well have a white man’s party and a black man’s party in America. “It would make everything I worked for meaningless,” he said, “if baseball is integrated but the political parties are segregated.” In Nelson Rockefeller he saw a great dark hope (p. 398).

Clearly, American society has not developed according to Robinson’s integrationist hopes.

The career of Roy Campanella provides a counterpoint to Robinson’s in the book. They are presented as vastly different men in temperament. Robinson’s ferocity is balanced by Campanella’s good nature. Robinson’s unwillingness to be considered anything other than a man is balanced by Campanella’s ability to be a little boy.

Yessir, it gets me real excited to be in a Series and see these writers here and all them flags. It makes me feel like I was at a circus, and to play this game good, a lot of you’s got to be a little boy (p. 355).

Campanella tells of an incident in which Lew Burdette first brushed him back twice, then called him “nigger,” then struck him out, but later, when Campanella was badly hurt and paralyzed from an automobile accident, had thought to come by and see him in the hospital (p. 365). This incident suggests, at least to Campanella, the possibilities of the success of his way of achieving racial equality.

Several kinds of forces are ranged against these versions of integration in the book. One kind is the organization of the New York Yankees, the Dodgers’ American League neighbors in the Bronx.

[The New York Yankee] organization was both aloof and deceptive. Taking my check for \$36 a week earlier, the fourth highest Yankee executive had said, “We don’t usually take care of rookie writers with such good tickets. You’re an exception. You’re pretty lucky to get tickets at all.” The third highest executive, after three martinis, said he would never allow a black man to wear a Yankee uniform. “We don’t want that sort of crowd,” he said. “It would offend boxholders from Westchester to have to sit with niggers.” Just as the humanity of the Dodgers burst past the limits of a ball field, so did Yankee arrogance (p. 164).

Another kind of force is represented by Dodger third baseman Billy Cox. The book's final chapter, "Billy Alone," presents a rather grim picture of the future of the blacks' struggle for equality because it depicts Billy Cox tending bar in Newport, Pennsylvania, a town where no blacks live. This key player on the first integrated major league baseball team in the twentieth century lives in a town which "is a refuge for certain whites, raising young families, who talk about 'the niggers stealing America.' "

. . . As much as excellence and pride, the team was black and white together. Preacher Roe felt it and Joe Black, and this untinted friendship was the richest element in Carl Erskine's career. But here was Billy Cox, who was not very good at talking or dealing with other people, not brilliant at anything truly but picking up ground balls, alone now in a prison of intolerance. (p. 420).

The inescapable implication of this, in the book's last chapter, is that integration's movement cannot be called progress. Juxtaposed with the chapter on Robinson, it asks whether we have not arrived instead at a "prison of intolerance."

Whites are not the only ones "alone in a prison of intolerance." Kahn quotes Carl Erskine on Jackie Robinson's relation to young black radicals.

Now I hear people putting [Robinson] down. Black people. To Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown, he's a period piece. When I hear that, I feel sorry for *them*. Carmichael and Brown can never understand what Robinson did. How hard it was. What a great victory. "But he can understand *them*. He was a young black man once, and mad and hurt. He knows *their* feeling, and their ignorance just hurts him more" (p. 251).

This passage, of course, comments on more than the difficult course of race relations in this country; it comments on the difficult course of relations between the generations, and here we arrive again at Kahn's universal theme: the relation of father and son.

This theme unites the story of the Dodgers with the third of the book which deals with Kahn's family. They illustrate, not so much the cultural theme of integration, but the universal theme of the ravages of time: failure, defeat, terror, and death. Gordon Kahn, his father, dies suddenly at the end of Roger Kahn's second and final season as reporter for the Dodgers. The passage which ends the section of the book devoted to this reporting shares both an aloneness and a bleakness of outlook with the passage about Billy Cox quoted above. Kahn is returning from buying his father's coffin.

Outside the summer sun was taunting. I walked to the car, a lawyer at each elbow, wholly alone. The wrongness of things seized me. At the Parade Grounds boys were throwing footballs. It was that season; baseball would come again. The team was broken up and with my father dead there was no one with whom I wanted to consider that tragedy, and because there was no one I recognized that the breaking of a team was not like greater tragedy: incompleteness, unspoken words, unmade music, withheld love, the failure ever to sum up or say goodbye (p. 196).

Here the failure of the team is first equated with, then distinguished from, his father's death. These are two kinds of defeat and, according to Kahn, "you fall in love with a team in defeat. Losing after great striving is the story of man, who was born to sorrow, whose sweetest songs tell of saddest thought, and who, if he is a hero, does nothing in life as becomingly as leaving it" (p. xii). The movement from the team's defeat to his father's death is a terrible movement from the illusion to the actuality. We are not heroes, and, the book seems to say, neither are the Dodgers, though they may once seem to us to have been.

My father and I and the straw-hatted man jumped up and cheered together. In the dead sunlight of a forgotten spring the major leaguers were trim, graceful and effortless. They might even have been gods for these seemed true Olympians to a boy who wanted to become a man and who sensed that it was an exalted manly thing to catch a ball with one hand thrust across your body and make a crowd leap to its feet and cheer (p. 19).

This illusion an older Kahn loses, and "in the 1970s our own confusing, crowded present, I have been able to seek out the 1950s, to find these heroic Dodgers who are forty-five and fifty, in lairs from Southern California to New England, and to consider them not only as old athletes but as fathers and as men, dead as ball players to be sure, but still battling, as strong men always battle, the implacable enemy, time" (p. xxi).

In this world of universal defeat, where time always triumphs, it is the complex relation of fathers and sons which gives human activity meaning for Kahn. At the very end of *The Boys of Summer*, he tells a long anecdote about an out-of-work colleague who had been studying Shakespeare in his leisure time. This writer announces one evening "that he had grasped the basic universal theme. 'What's going on,' he said, 'is war between generations. It's waged everywhere, if you know how to look' " (p. 433). Kahn concludes after having heard the whole story that

wandering among old Dodgers I again heard the echoing Shakespearean theme. There is only so much space on the planet. Fathers perish to make room for sons. At the end, some go with grace, but the middle years—shake with contention. Jack and Jackie Robinson; Clem and Jay Labine, father and son circling one another in a spiky maze of love (p. 434).

And this applies as well to Gordon Kahn and his son Roger as we see them in the book. This contest transcends the struggle for racial equality in universal significance and provides the theme which unifies the book, a book "not on sports but on time."

In the last few years, while continuing to work as a sports journalist, Kahn has turned more and more to the writing of fiction. The writing of novels appears to give him more room to develop the theme which interests him most. *But*

*Not To Keep*, published in 1978, is concerned not with sports but with the relations of a father and his son as both grow through the father's divorce and remarriage. The central question worked out in the course of the narrative is contained in an understanding of Christianity stated by the father, David Priest: "The Christian story was about *father* and child. And the child was full of promise and the father failed the son."<sup>2</sup> Kahn is working on two novels now: the first focuses on an aging baseball player, the second is a *roman a clef* about a family-owned baseball team. It will be interesting to see how Kahn's theme develops when these books appear, and to see it re-envisioned in a sports setting.

## Notes

1. I will quote from the following editions of these books: *The Buys of Summer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) and *How the Weather Was* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). *A Season in the Sun* was published by Harper & Row in 1977. I will quote from the Berkeley edition published in 1978. Page numbers will be included in parentheses in the text of the paper.

2. Roger Kahn, *But Not To Keep* (New York: Playboy Press Paperback, 1980), p. 71.