

Smith, Red. *To Absent Friends from Red Smith*. New York: Atheneum, 1982. Pp. xxv, 478. \$17.95 (cloth).

His given name was Walter, but to more than a generation of newspaper readers he was known simply as Red Smith. For 37 years, from 1945 until his death in January 1982 at age 76, Red Smith's sports column appeared in a New York City newspaper; first in the *Herald Tribune* and later in the *Times*.

Sportswriters have a reputation within journalism, often an unwarranted one, of being poor writers whose work is nothing but a string of clichés. Red Smith was a great writer. He had a keen understanding of the English language and how to use it. Unlike the poison pen wielded by many of today's sportswriters, Smith's commentary was more subtle and showed a great deal more knowledge behind it. In 1976, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary, a rare honor for a sportswriter and one richly deserved.

The book is a compilation of fond farewells from Smith to almost 200 old friends he associated with over the years. Smith selected the columns himself and edited the manuscript, but he died shortly before the book was published. At first glance the reader might think this is a book of sports obituaries, but in fact the book is full of life, of Red Smith's memories of hundreds of happy and sad moments spent with his friends.

Dozens of famous athletes from the past are included in the book, including Babe Ruth, Rocky Marciano, Joe Louis, Ernie Nevers, Napoleon Lajoie, Bill Tilden and Lefty Grove. There are too the coaches and managers and owners—Connie Mack, Joe McCarthy, Branch Rickey, Walter O'Malley, Vince Lombardi and Glenn (Pop) Warner; the writers—Grantland Rice, Westbrook Pegler, James Thurber, Bob Sherwood and Ed Burns; and even the horses (horse racing was Smith's favorite spectator sport)—Whirlaway, Your Host, Seabiscuit and Find.

Red Smith clearly had a remarkable memory to recall so many anecdotes about the people he met. In a column about Chalky Wright, the featherweight boxing champion of the world in 1942, Smith recalled a publicity agent who wrote in a press release saying that one of Wright's challengers was devoted to great music. So a music reporter asked Wright his feeling on the subject.

"What do you think of Mendelssohn?" Wright was asked. "Who'd he ever lick?" Chalky said. "How about Brahms?" "A little too heavy for me," said the featherweight. "Do you know Schubert?" "I can't say I know him, exactly," Chalky said, "but my actor friend, Canada Lee, introduced me to J. J. Shubert and his brother Lee, both." (p. 297)

Smith writes lovingly in many columns of the great sportswriter Grantland Rice, affectionately known as "Granny." Of all the columns about friends who have gone to the grave, none are more heartfelt than those about Rice.

A longtime Seattle sportswriter was once asked why he did not put some of his best columns into book form so readers could enjoy them again. He said no, that he did not think sports columns wear well over time, that their meaning would be lost over the years.

His response can be applied to this book. While many of the columns are interesting to read, others have a "You Should Have Been There" quality to them. Unless you are familiar with many of the sports figures of which Smith wrote, there is not a great deal of meaning to them.

That some of his columns do not have lasting value should not detract from the fact that Red Smith, as colleague Dave Anderson says in the Introduction, "made sportswriting important." (vii) Smith brought respect to a part of the profession where it had been lacking.

It is interesting to compare Red Smith's columns with those of most sports columnists today. Smith put a great deal more feeling in his work than those writing today. Today we look at the sports page to see who the columnist attacked. Red Smith's criticism was never that personal. Smith never took himself too seriously or the events he covered as being of worldly importance. "I'm just writing about games that little boys play," he is quoted in the Introduction by Dave Anderson. (ix)

To some that might make Smith sound like a Pollyanna, but it was very sincere. To the fans of Red Smith, who must number in the hundreds of thousands, the book serves as a lasting reminder of the simpler days of sport.

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