

Smelser, Marshall. *The Life That Ruth Built*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993. Pp. xiv, 592. Notes, photographs, appendices, index. \$16.95.

1974 and 1975 were good for Babe Ruth, although he did not pitch a winning game or hit a home run in either year. Three biographies appeared within months of each other, all chronicling the life of baseball's legendary home run king: Robert W. Creamer's *Babe: The Legend Comes to Life*; Kal Wagenheim's *Babe Ruth: His Life and Legend*; and Marshall Smelser's *The Life That Ruth Built*. Both the Creamer and Wagenheim volumes are currently in reprint, and now the Smelser book has a new reprinting from Bison Books and the University of Nebraska Press.

Bison Books, founded in 1961, specializes in reprinting scholarly works that may not have had an extensive distribution and have now fallen out of print. In the last few years, according to editor-in-chief Dan Ross, Bison has focused on books in the field of sports history, starting with their first major effort, a reprinting of the 1928 volume, *Babe Ruth's Own Book of Baseball*, which they brought out in conjunction with the recent John Goodman film, *The Babe*. The success of this book led to more baseball books including *Mudville's Revenge* by Ted Vincent, *Men in Blue* and *Steamboat Johnson*, two books about umpiring in baseball, and a reprinting of Christy Mathewson's work, *Pitching in the Pinch*. Smelser's *The Life That Ruth Built* is one of the first in a reprint biography series that will also include works on

Ty Cobb and Satchell Paige. So popular have these reprints been that Bison is currently working on new works, notably several volumes on baseball in the nineteenth century.

The Smelser book deserves to be reprinted because despite generally good reviews during its initial release, its impact originally had been lost in the acclaim for the Creamer book published a year earlier. The books have much in common: both develop a traditional chronological narrative covering the major highlights of Ruth's career, both rely on eyewitnesses for colorful commentary, both seek to demythify Ruth by contrasting the legends of Ruth with the various realities of his life. And in both there is the abiding affection of men who like baseball and celebrate Ruth's high authority in the game.

The differences in the two books are more telling. Creamer bases his work on a traditional historic perspective. The well-written text takes the form of third-person narrative with data incorporated into the story. There is a clean narrative line as Creamer moves from event to event in Ruth's life without any unnecessary or intrusive commentary on the action. The author's note in the preface apologizes for "a certain flatness of perspective" because Creamer wants "to keep surmise, conjecture and amateur psychoanalysis to a minimum." From the beginning, Creamer announces himself as a Ruth supporter, recalling with fond memories watching The Babe play in Yankee Stadium; yet, he also positions himself in the role of the objective reporter. All material, he states, derives from one source or another, but the presence of those sources are never allowed to get in the way of the narrative. Creamer's presence is obvious in the introductory chapter, but after that, he disappears into that fly-on-the-wall objectivity we associate with traditional historic work. Even the deep emotions surrounding Ruth's last days are objectified and kept distant, with the final words in the text not a summary by Creamer but a quote from friend and ghost writer, Ford Frick, on the event of Ruth's death: "I stayed a few minutes and left and I spoke to Claire again across the hall and then I went home and the next day he was dead" (424). He calls his work a popular rather than a scholarly biography and, except for a brief acknowledgement in the first chapter, does not list a bibliography (425).

Smelser places himself at the opposite end of the spectrum. In his preface, he states "This is not a fan book" and while he also does not include a complete bibliography, *The Life That Ruth Built* does contain an extensive list of people interviewed and sources consulted. In a final appendix entitled "A Note on the Sources," Smelser lists the places where his research took him; if you are familiar with the periodicals and newspapers and general texts on Ruth, it is easy to follow along and know what a lot of the references are. For those not familiar with the sources, Smelser states he has placed his working notes, a list of citations by chapter, and an extensive bibliography with the National Baseball Library.

Smelser's approach is less a good read and more of a cultural studies approach to the text of Babe Ruth. The work is filled with dips and turns, meandering facts that develop good and sometimes startling pathways. In the midst of Ruth's chronological progress as a hitter is a small chapter entitled, "The Emblem of the Game," about how early twentieth-century baseball bats were made. Another chapter, "The Commissioner or the Player (1921)," is more about Judge Landis and the hierarchy of organized baseball than Ruth's highly publicized bouts with the commissioner's office. Smelser creates a picture of the culture of America and then places the events of Ruth's life into that special context. Each year of the chronology starts with a page entitled, "Outside the Park" and lists briefly some of the newspaper headlines of that year. Some of them cover world news events—"Body of Pope Benedict XV Lies in State"—while others are trivial and more personal—"Corset Stay Kills Skier" (235). Central to Smelser's work then is this idea of placing Ruth's life and escapades into a vivid social context. Such an approach not only adds a textual reality to Ruth as a person but also demythifies many of the stories and legends that grew up around the Home Run King.

The chapter on Ruth's formative years in Baltimore is an excellent text on the sociological, political, and cultural forces that shaped urban life in American cities at the turn of the century. Ruth himself starts off his 1948 autobiography by stating "I was a bad kid" (*The Babe Ruth Story*, 1), but Smelser puts that statement into perspective: "A rotten start it may have been, but not unusual. Most city children of medium-poor parents grew up in the streets, unguided . . . if you had been maimed or black or retarded it would have been worse. He was white, splendidly endowed in body, and quick to learn what he wished to know. His early childhood was bleak but not crippling" (3).

Smelser uses facts, in the presence of first-person, eyewitness accounts, to dispel the layers of myth surrounding Ruth. In his chapters on Ruth's early years, he refutes the idea of St. Mary's Industrial School being simply a reform school and orphanage for incorrigible boys. Over half the boys there were boarders enrolled by their parents to learn a vocation or gain a better education than was thought possible in Baltimore's public schools. The Xaverian Brothers who ran the school maintained a firm but kind hand and corporal punishment was the exception rather than the rule (12-13). Smelser also suggests that Ruth's legendary appetite for drink, food, and women was nothing extraordinary; he reports that the Yankee teams of the early 1920s were considered, by reputation, to be the most alcoholic of all ball clubs (246) and the famous "bellyache heard round the world" was not a result of overeating (or syphilis, as the team's business manager, Ed Barrow, thought) but perhaps an acute case of peritonitis from an erupted inflammation in the intestine (312-313).

Where Smelser breaks away from traditional sport history is in his desire to complete a picture of Ruth's emotional and psychological make-up. He

indulges in the psychoanalysis that Creamer carefully avoids. but in doing so, creates a more vivid and questioning portrait of Ruth as a product of the times. Smelser speculates that a large part of Ruth's generous nature was "the purchase of love his parents had no time for?" (18). On Ruth's skills as a batter, Smelser claims "Ruth's skill as a ballplayer was partly the result of relaxation . . . this ability to 'hang loose' is very hard for a thin-skinned front-rank player, because his job is always threatened by newer men. Ruth lacked that kind of feeling. Having no fear of rivals, Ruth was loose and ready to act at any moment as needed" (136). Often, such speculations debunk the usual image of Ruth as an unthinking animal. "Ruth consciously helped to create the fable of Babe the Glutton. He often grossly overate when strangers or new friends were with him, in order to keep alive his reputation as a greedy feaster. He seemed to think he owed such a show to the spectators" (140).

This psychological analysis is not simple speculation. Smelser uses quotations, eyewitness accounts, and newspaper and magazine sources of the day to support his theories. The preface is an impressive list of names and organizations he contacted, everyone from Mrs. Wilbur Moberly, Ruth's surviving sister, to umpire Jocko Conlan, who was also a close personal friend of St. Mary's Brother Mathias. Included is a list of 66 ball players who played either with Ruth or against him for an extended time. Throughout the text are bold-face inserts quoting the papers of the time and making comment on the events in Ruth's life. Anyone familiar with the body of research sources will be able to recognize where certain stories and articles come from; however, those unfamiliar are left somewhat stranded since, like Creamer, Smelser does not include footnotes. Also present are numerous citations on interviews with players, writers, and friends who add much needed support and color to Smelser's work.

If Creamer's work is a popular read, factual, informative and well written, it lacks the research and contextual depth that Smelser brings to the subject. Smelser's work, on the other hand, is lumpy, often awkwardly written with more redundancy than you would expect in such a major work. The result is a somewhat strained literary style that is both more florid and pedantic at the same time. For example, in describing Ruth's early days of stealing fruit off the produce wagons, Smelser wrote, "The shouts, the cracking of whips, the rattle of iron tyres on cobblestones, the clap of hoofs, and the prospect of stolen fruit or just plain mischief usually drew troublesome numbers of tanned, fleet, idle street urchins such as George Ruth, out to raid the carts and drays, brave the wagoners' whips, and cheerfully enrage their elders and betters" (4).

Still, if Creamer starts as a fan, Smelser concludes by writing with the fervor of a convert. His chapter on Ruth's last year is heroically entitled "An Ability to Die Well," and his summary chapter, "What Did He Have to Merit This?" is a strongly defended justification for Ruth's place in the pantheon of sport and American cultural heroes. While he seeks to demythify Ruth's life,

he celebrates the man's accomplishments both on and off the field. Part of the joy of reading Smelser's book is that he recognizes that the separation of fact and fiction is difficult and not a totally fruitful endeavor. The title of the book suggests that the celebrity of such a person as Babe Ruth is a construction, a sum of real-life events, half-truths, and outright fabrications supported by the media, by the audience that consumes such stories, and the personality himself. The value of Smelser's approach is that it not only finds the factual events in Ruth's life, but it also places those events into a context that has, more than any other in sport history, been clouded by myth and legend. To understand the life of Babe Ruth, we must understand the full realm of American experience in the time of his life.

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