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Donald Hall and Baseball

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - Donald Hall and Baseball
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The former Poet Laureate of the United States, Donald Hall, died last weekend at the age of 89 at his home in New Hampshire. He was a poet, an essayist, and an amazingly productive writer. He loved his farm, his Red Sox, and his wife Jane Kenyon, (a poet of major talent who died in 1995). Some of you may know them from their work, and from Bill Moyers' 1993 award winning Public Television Documentary, "Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon: A Life Together."

Those of you who are members of the Sport Literature Association (SLA) or the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) may remember Donald Hall as the guest speaker for the joint meeting of these two organizations in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in late May of 1993. The memory of that event, now twenty-five years in the past, has faded in time but the news of his death rekindled memories of that appearance. My recollection is that he read from his work (both poetry and prose), told stories of his beloved and still futile Red Sox, and talked of his remarkable friendship with "Doc" Ellis, Pittsburg Pirate pitcher who once had a no-hitter while under the influence of LSD.

Steve Gietscher has this memory of the appearance in Albuquerque: "He spoke a little, read some of his own stuff, and then read "Casey at the Bat. Of this poem he said, 'Many people think this is a bad poem. If you think so, read any of the parodies and imitations. They are all much, much worse.'"

Hall had a very deep love of baseball about which he wrote often in his poetry and in his prose. For some of you, he may be best remembered as the author of *Father's Playing Catch With Sons: Essays on Sport [Mostly Baseball]* published in 1985. This has become a widely read collection among baseball fans, lovers of sport literature, and lovers of good. It is a collection of twelve essays and two poems which reach across the wide spectrum of sports.

The title of the collection has become a cliché in the language of baseball, and it is a line that has been spoken over and over again across the last two decades. Over the years, under the influence of Title IX, it has been transformed to cover fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, and mothers and daughters. The passage that recalls the actual process of Hall playing catch with his father is not long, but it is powerful. The context

gives it much of its emotional punch, but even a short quotation conveys at least some of its power.

"My father and I played catch as I grew up. Like so much else between fathers and sons, playing catch was both tender and tense at the same time. He wanted to play with me. He wanted me to be good. He seemed to *demand* that I be good. I threw the ball into his catcher's mitt. Atta boy." The passage gets considerably more complicated and powerful as you move down the page, but I think this short excerpt offers some of the flavor of it.

Some of the other essays of note are a chronicle of his spring training with the Pittsburgh Pirates and his budding friendship with Doc Ellis. (Ultimately that friendship led to *Doc Ellis in the Country of Baseball* co-authored by Hall and Ellis.) One essay deals with baseball writing as literature, while another pays tribute to the great reporters of sport as serious essayists. These two pieces serve as one of the best guides to writing on sport that you will find. In the second of the essays, Hall identifies the writers and analyzes what makes them great. It is, in its own rite, a rich piece of prose. Also included in this volume are essays on ping pong, basketball, Kevin McHale, and Hall's recollection of his own fledgling sports-writing days as a young boy. There are two poems: "The Baseball Players" and a Couplet, "Old Timers Day at Fenway Park, 1 May 1982" in which he evokes the diminished figure of Ted Williams.

On the lighter side, well not always so light, is *Doc Ellis in the Country of Baseball* that takes the reader on a wild ride through the baseball life of the colorful Pirate pitcher. Not exactly a biography, but, in fact something both more and less than that, it is in turn funny, sad, and a highly entertaining effort from a great writer and from an endlessly complicated baseball player who came together and produced this baseball bio.

In 1993, the year of Hall's appearance at SLA/NASSH, *The Museum of Clear Ideas* was published. In this small volume of poetry, there is a magnificent epic poem titled simply "Baseball." The poem contains nine innings, each containing nine stanzas, and presents itself as a vehicle to explain baseball to the German Dada collagist, Kurt Schwitters, Merz-poet and artist. Schwitters, as the notes explain, created his own artistic movement called Merz. He fled Germany in 1937 for Norway and went on to England in 1940.

I will not attempt to describe or analyze "Baseball" except to say that baseball, within the poem, is a device, perhaps at times a metaphor, for considerably more than the national pastime. After the Nine Innings are completed, the collection of poems goes off to other subjects, but then near the end of the volume, baseball returns to the page as "Extra Innings," the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth innings. Each inning has the corresponding number of stanzas.

In "Extra Innings" baseball seems to be more central, almost a soundtrack for Hall's life. As one might expect the twelfth inning ends with Carlton Fisk's iconic home run. Hall calls it quite simply "a poke over the wall."

After I read Hall's obituary in the *New York Times*, I went to my bookshelves and re-read sections of Hall's baseball books and poured over, as I once did extensively, *The Museum of Clear Ideas*, confounded by some of it and elated and highly amused by much of it.

You might want to have a look. It is more than a simple poke over the wall.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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