

THE NEW YORKER BOOK OF BASEBALL CARTOONS

REVISED
AND
UPDATED



EDITED BY ROBERT MANKOFF
INTRODUCTION BY MICHAEL CRAWFORD

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— BY MICHAEL CRAWFORD —

INTRODUCTION

Like all things we cartoonists love and cherish, baseball lends itself, generously, to humor—obvious or otherwise. We find baseball funny. For one thing, as even infants know, it's never been just a game. It is—it can be—absurd, maddening, breathtaking, tedious, perfect, exhilarating, and an engine of deep despair. It is, in a word, funny. Cartoonists know this and we exploit the fact. Sometimes the ribbing can be harsh, but it's never cruel; it's playful, and it springs from love—love, maybe a bit aggravated. The proof of this is in your hands.

The funny, formidable *New Yorker* cartoonists included here—present company recused—don't miss much. They provide a glimpse of the evolution of our love for and attitudes about baseball over the past ninety years. Witness the delicious 1940s specificity of Peter Arno's cleric enunciating biblical imprecations to the ump. Or Kim Warp's sly 2009 take on a contentious mother–player/son bond. David Sipress distills the pre-2004 Red Sox fan pathology. William Steig, with a 1951 Small Fry flourish, shows us on what stuff diamond dreams are still made. Charles Addams applies his dark prescience to the business of The Game. Lee Lorenz reveals a side of an ump's personality we wouldn't have

guessed at. And who can imagine blithely surrendered authority in this most rule-obsessed of all games? You'll find him under "Mankoff" in the yellow pages. Charles Saxon's gift is a pitch-perfect 1970s take on a game on the tube as it registers in the battle of the sexes.

This happy collection also includes loving depictions of what now seem painfully antiquated uniforms and equipment. And it charts the trickle of the sport's concerns into family life and popular culture. Among others here, Mick Stevens, Jack Ziegler, Peter Steiner, and Bob Weber are astute comics famous for finding humor in many things, not least the Mets' perennial agonies and the Yankees' (almost) perennial ecstasies—hard facts of life in the relentlessly plumbed psyche of New York City.

The gags abound from Gregory to Kanin to Acocella (Alex, Zachary, and Marisa, respectively), a double-play combination that provides nutty, absurdist takes on matters legal, animal, and criminal. But what about balks, you ask, and sight lines and royalty? Stevenson, Maslin, and Barsotti have these bases wryly covered. And stalwarts Cullum, Wilson, Levin, and Shanahan hit for the cycle with a shared penchant for the refreshingly wacky.

One word of caution: as funny as these baseball cartoons are, they're also Inevitable Reminiscence Triggers for me—and they may be for you.

I grew up in a household where it seemed the only adult voices I heard were Red Barber's and Mel Allen's—the Yankee game was always on—and my parents seemed always to be "howling" (their word) at the latest George Price cartoon in *The New Yorker*. So, in cracking me up, these cartoons remind me of the first laughs that baseball, via my parents, produced when I was a little kid.

Case in point: A sultry August Sunday afternoon in rural upstate New York, 1955 or '56. Mom and Dad smoking in the front seat of a four-door Ford Something, tooling the back roads of Oswego County, where my Dad served as the big-deal, 24/7, glad-handing state legislator.

My dad drove with the window down, his white Brooks Brothers sleeve rolled up, elbow stuck out into the sunshine, freckling. Both his and my mom's vent windows were raked at broad angles, spinning cool air like fans into the back seat, where my sister Kate (nine years old) and I (ten) sat hypnotized by the passing livestock.

My dad sipped a cold can of Ballantine Ale, which he passed back and forth with my mom. The drone of an interminable Yankee game from Comiskey Park poured from the radio. Chicago sounded like a distant riot of lethargic drunks. Red Barber periodically gave the Yankee diehards in the front seat the bad news in clipped, courtly cadences. As usual, Billy Pierce, the Yankees' nemesis du jour, was stifling the champs. Whitey Ford was not quite sharp enough for the likes of the Cuban antagonist Minnie Miñoso. My dad hated it when the Yankees weren't cruising, yet the only disgust he ever registered was a mildly contemptuous "Judas Priest!"

Kate and I were content to watch the cows speed by, suppress our laughter, and, poker-faced, marvel at the spectacle of responsible, conservative Republican parents blithely breaking the speed limit and the drinking laws while caring only that Mantle's next swing must dismantle the White Sox.

(This was the same martini-mad attorney-at-law cutup who had tickets to Game 5 of the 1956 World Series—what would be Don Larsen's perfect game against the Dodgers—but who refused to use them! Who, after having

treated me to the two previous Series games at Yankee Stadium on Saturday and Sunday, insisted I be back in sleepy Oswego first thing Monday morning for school. So my dad gave our tickets to a Manhattan buddy and we drove the three hundred miles home that Sunday night. I don't remember much conversation in the Ford. I went to school Monday morning. The nuns grudgingly turned the radio on once during the early innings. I heard the words "Pee Wee," "sunny," "Stengel"—that was about it—and, by the time we were dismissed that afternoon, Larsen's gem was history. For the rest of his life, Dad never mentioned that game.)

I don't recall how that Sunday game in Chicago ended, but I have a vivid picture of my high-school German teacher mom casting the empty Ballantine can out the window and far into the roadside Queen Anne's lace of Redfield, New York. She had a pretty good arm.

And, as it turned out, a pretty good way with Joe DiMaggio. (Just one more, I promise.) My mom relished telling me that once, on leaving Yankee Stadium after a game in the early fifties, she was jostled by a knot of unruly fans surrounding Joe DiMaggio, scurrying along a ramp, begging for autographs, everybody shouting, "Joe! Hey, Joe! JOE!"

Suddenly, the Clipper broke free of the horde, stepped within a few feet of my mom, adjusted his coat and tie, and beamed at her. She greeted him with a pencil and her ticket stub and a "Would you be so kind, Mister DiMaggio?"

And he was. She loved the man for that.

And I think she'd love this book as much as I do, if for no other reason than other idols of hers—George and Garrett Price, Peter Arno, and Perry Barlow—are here making us laugh.

But enough. Honored as I am to be introducing my funny, illustrious betters, I really would rather be playing baseball with my kids than writing or cartooning about it. It is best, then, that I refer you to my favorite—and wordless—cartoon in the book. It’s by Mischa Richter (page 33). It’s a perfect sketch: quick, deft, romantic. The player and the fan do what they do at their own delighted risk, with only “serendipitous interference” likely to be ruled by the ump. Could an artist conjure a more vibrant expression of the felicitous embrace this funny game offers and, one hopes, will never relinquish?



"Then we're agreed—it's a great day for a ball game."