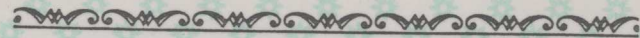
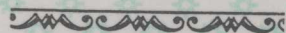


PHILIP ROTH



THE  
GREAT  
AMERICAN  
NOVEL



HOLT, RINEHART AND WINSTON

New York | Chicago | San Francisco

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BOOKS BY PHILIP ROTH

Goodbye, Columbus  
Letting Go  
When She Was Good  
Portnoy's Complaint  
Our Gang  
The Breast  
The Great American Novel

THE GREAT AMERICAN  
NOVEL



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FIRST EDITION

*To Barbara Sproul*

... the Great American Novel is not extinct  
like the Dodo, but mythical like the Hippogriff ...

Frank Norris, *The Responsibilities  
of the Novelist*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The baseball strategy credited to Isaac Ellis in chapters five, six, and seven is borrowed in large part from *Percentage Baseball* by Earnshaw Cook (M.I.T. Press, 1966).

The curve-ball formula in chapter five was devised by Igor Sikorsky and can be found in "The Hell It Doesn't Curve," by Joseph F. Drury, Sr. (see *Fireside Book of Baseball*, Simon and Schuster, 1956, pp. 98-101).

The tape-recorded recollections of professional baseball players that are deposited at the Library of the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, and are quoted in Lawrence Ritter's *The Glory of Their Times* (Macmillan, 1966) have been a source of inspiration to me while writing this book, and some of the most appealing locutions of these old-time players have been absorbed into the dialogue.

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P. R.

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THE GREAT AMERICAN  
NOVEL





## PROLOGUE



CALL ME SMITTY. That's what everybody else called me—the ballplayers, the bankers, the bareback riders, the baritones, the bartenders, the bastards, the best-selling writers (excepting Hem, who dubbed me Frederico), the bicyclists, the big game hunters (Hem the exception again), the billiards champs, the bishops, the blacklisted (myself included), the black marketers, the blonds, the bloodsuckers, the bluebloods, the bookies, the Bolsheviks (some of my best friends, Mr. Chairman—what of it!), the bombardiers, the bootblacks, the bootlicks, the bosses, the boxers, the Brahmins, the brass hats, the British (*Sir Smitty* as of '36), the broads, the broadcasters, the bronco-busters, the brunettes, the black bucks down in Barbados (*Meestah Smitty*), the Buddhist monks in Burma, one Bulkington, the bullfighters, the bullthrowers, the burlesque comics and the burlesque stars, the bushmen, the bums, and the butlers. And that's only the letter B, fans, only *one* of the Big Twenty-Six!

Why, I could write a whole book just on the types beginning with X who have called out in anguish to yours truly—make it an encyclopedia, given that mob you come across in one lifetime who like to tell you they are quits with the past. Smitty, I've got to talk to somebody. Smitty, I've got a story for you. Smitty, there is something you ought to know. Smitty, you've got to come right over. Smitty, you won't believe it but. Smitty, you don't know me but. Smitty, I'm doing something I'm ashamed of. Smitty, I'm doing something I'm proud of. Smitty, I'm not doing anything—what should I do, Smit? In

transcontinental buses, lowdown bars, high-class brothels (for a change of scenery, let's move on to C), in cabarets, cabanas, cabins, cabooses, cabbage patches, cable cars, cabrioles (you can look it up), Cadillacs, cafés, caissons, calashes (under the moon, a' course), in Calcutta, California, at Calgary, not to be confused with Calvary (where in '38 a voice called "Smitty!"—and Smitty, no fool, kneeled), in campaniles, around campfires, in the Canal Zone, in candlelight (see B for blonds and brunettes), in catacombs, rounding the Cape of Good Hope, in captivity, in caravans, at card games, on cargo ships, in the Caribbean, on carousels, in Casablanca (the place *and* the movie, wherein, to amuse Bogey, I played a walk-on role), in the Casbah, in casinos, castaway off coasts, in castles (some in air, some not), in Catalonia (with Orwell), Catania, catatonia, in catastrophes, in catboats, in cathedrals, in the Catskills (knaidlach and kreplach with Jenny G.—I taste them yet!), in the Caucasus (Comrade Smitty—and proud of it, Mr. Chairman!), in caves, in cellars, in Central America, in Chad, in a chaise longue (see under B burlesque stars), in chalets, in chambers, in chancery, in a charnel house (a disembodied voice again), in Chattanooga (on Johnny's very choo-choo), in checkrooms, in Cherokee country, in Chicago—look, let's call it quits at Christendom, let's say *there*, that's been Smitty's beat! Father confessor, marital adviser, confidant, straight man, Solomon, stooge, psychiatrist, sucker, sage, go-between, medicine man, whipping boy, sob sister, debunker, legal counselor, loan service, all-night eardrum, and sober friend—you name it, pick a guise, any guise, starting with each and every one of the Big Twenty-Six, and rest assured, Smitty's worn that hat on one or two thousand nights in his four score and seven on this billion-year-old planet in this trillion-year-old solar system in this zillion-year-old galaxy that we have the audacity to call "ours"!

O what a race we are, fans! What a radiant, raffish, raggedy, rakish, rambunctious, rampaging, ranting, rapacious, rare, rash, raucous, raunchy, ravaged, ravenous, realistic, reasonable, rebellious, receptive, reckless, redeemable, refined, reflective, refreshing, regal, regimented, regrettable, relentless, reliable, religious, remarkable, remiss, remorseful, repellent, repentant, repetitious (!!!!), reprehensible, repressed,

reproductive, reptilian, repugnant, repulsive, reputable, resentful, reserved, resigned, resilient, resistant, resistible, resourceful, respectable, restless, resplendent, responsible, responsive, restrained, retarded, revengeful, reverential, revolting, rhapsodical, rhythmical, ribald, rickety, ridiculous, righteous, rigorous, riotous, risible, ritualistic, robustious (*adj. Archaic or Humorous* [pick 'em], meaning "rough, rude or boisterous," according to N.W.), roguish, rollicking, romantic, rompish, rotten, rough-and-ready, rough-and-tumble, roughhousing, rowdyish, rude, rueful, rugged, ruined, runny (*chiefly Brit.* don'cha know. *Slang* odd; queer), rundown, runty, ruthless race!

A' course that's just one man's opinion. Fella name a' Smith; first name a' Word.

And just who *is* Word Smith? Fair enough. Short-winded, short-tempered, short-sighted as he may be, stiff-jointed, soft-bellied, weak-bladdered, and so on down to his slippers, anemic, arthritic, diabetic, dyspeptic, sclerotic, in dire need of a laxative, as he will admit to the first doctor or nurse who passes his pillow, *and in perpetual pain* (that's the last you'll hear about that), he's not cracked quite yet: if his life depended on it, the man in the street could not name three presidents beginning with the letter J, or tell you whether the Pope before this one wore glasses or not, so surely he is not about to remember Word Smith, though it so happened old W.S. cracked a new pack of Bicycles with more than one Chief Exec, one night nearly brought down the republic by cleaning out the entire cabinet, so that at morn—pink peeking over the Potomac, you might say—the Secretary of the Treasury had to be restrained by the Secretary of the Interior from dipping his mitt in the national till to save his own shirt at stud, in a manner of speaking.

Then there are the Popes. Of course no poker, stud, straight, *or* draw, with Pontiffs, other than penny ante, but rest assured, Smitty here in his heyday, kneepans down on terra firma, has kissed his share of rings, and if no longer up to the kneeling-down, still has starch enough left in these half-palsied lips for tasting the papal seal and (if there should be

any takers) touching somewhat tumescent flesh to the peachier parts of the softer sex, afore he climbs aboard that sleeper bound for Oblivion. Chucklin': "George, what time she due at Pearly Gates?" Shufflin': "Don' you worry none, Mistuh Smitty, I call ya' in time fo' you to shave up and eat a good heffy breakfass' fo' we gets dere." "If we gets there, George. Conductor says we may all be on a through train, from what he hears." "Tru'? To where, Mistuh Smitty? De end of de line?" (Chorus behind, ahummin' and astrummin', "Tru' train, tru' train, choo-choo on tru', I wanna choo-choo on home widout delay!") "Seems there isn't any 'end' to this line, George." Scratchin' his woolly head: "Well, suh, day don' say nuttin' 'bout dat in de schedule." "Sure they do, old George, down in the fine print there: 'Stops only to receive passengers.'" "Which tru' train dat, Mistuh Smitty?" "Through train bound for Oblivion, George." "Oblivion'? Dat don't sound lak no stop—dat de name of a little girl!" ("Tru' train, tru' train, lem-me choo-choo on home!")

Smitty! Prophet to porters, padre to pagans, peacemaker for polygamists, provider for panhandlers, probation officer to pickpockets, pappy to parricides, parent to prostitutes, "Pops" to pinups, Paul to pricks, plaintalker to pretenders, parson to Peeping Toms, protector to pansies, practical nurse to paranoids—pal, you might say, to pariahs and pests of every stripe, spot, stigma, and stain, or maybe just putty in the paws of personae non gratae, patsy in short to pythons. Not a bad title that, for Smitty's autobio.

Or how's about *Poet to Presidents*? For 'twasn't all billiards on the Biggest Boss's baize, sagas of sport and the rarest of rums, capped off with a capricious predawn plunge in the Prez's pool. Oh no. Contract bridge, cribbage, canasta, and casino crony, sure; blackjack bluffer and poker-table personality, a' course, a' course; practiced my pinochle, took 'em on, one and all, at twenty-one; suffered stonily (and snoozed secretly) through six-hour sieges of solitaire, rising to pun when they caught me napping, "Run out of patience, Mr. P.?" listen, I played lotto on the White House lawn, cut a First Child for Old Maid in the Oval Office on the eve of national disaster . . . but that doesn't explain what I was there for. Guessed yet how I came to be the intimate of four American

presidents? Figured me out? Respectful of their piteous portion of privacy, I call them henceforth ABC, DEF, GHI, and JKL, but as their words are public record, who in fact these four were the reader with a little history will quickly surmise. My capital concern?

I polished their prose.

GHI, tomb who I was closer than any, would always make a point to have me in especially to meet the foreign dignitaries; and his are the speeches and addresses upon which my influence is most ineradicably inked. "Prime Minister," he would say—or Premier, or Chairman, or Chancellor, or General, or Generalissimo, or Colonel, or Commodore, or Commander, or Your Excellency, or Your Highness, or Your Majesty—"I want you to meet the outstanding scribbler in America. I do not doubt that you have a great language too, but I want you to hear just what can be done with this wonderful tongue of ours by a fellow with the immortal gift of gab. Smitty, what do you call that stuff where all the words begin with the same letter?" "Alliteration, Mr. President." "Go ahead then. Gimme some alliteration for the Prime Minister." Of course it was not so easy as GHI thought, even for me, to alliterate under pressure, but when GHI said "Gimme" you gam, get me? "The reason they call that 'elimination,' Prime Minister, is on account of you leave out all the other letters but the one. Right, Smit?" "Well, yes, Mr. President, if they did call it that, that would be why." "And how about a list for the Prime Minister, while you're at it?" "A list of what, Mr. President?" "Prime Minister, what is your pleasure? This fella here knows the names of just about everything there is, so take your choice. He is a walking dictionary. Fish, fruits, or flimflam? Well now, I believe I just did some myself, didn't I?" "Yes, you did, Mr. President. Alliteration." "Now you go ahead, Smitty, you give the Prime Minister an example of one of your lists, and then a little balance, why don't you? Why, I think I love that balance more than I love my wife. Neither-nor, Smitty, give him neither-nor, give him we cannot-we shall not-we must not, and then finish him off with perversion." "Perversion, sir, or inversion?" "Let's leave that to the guest of honor. Which is your preference, Your Honor? Smitty here is a specialist in both."

Do not conclude, dear fans, from this or any GHI anecdote that he was buffoon, clown, fool, illiterate, sadist, vulgarian only; he also knew what he was doing. "Smitty," he would say to me when he came in the morning to unlock the door of the safe in the White House basement where I had passed the night in an agony of alphabetizing and alliterating, "Smitty," he would say, studying the State of the Union address whose inverted phrases and balanced clauses seemed at that moment to have cost me my sanity, "I envy you, you know that, locked away down here in blessed solitude behind six feet of sound-proof blast-proof steel, while just over your head the phone is ringing all night long with one international catastrophe after another. Know something, my boy? If I had it to do all over again—and I say this to you in all sincerity, even if I do not have the God-given gift to say it backwards and inside out—if I had it to do all over again, I'd rather be a writer than President."

Waybackwhen, in my heyday (d.), when "One Man's Opinion" counted for something in this country—being syndicated as it was on the sports page of the *Finest Family Newspapers* (d.)—back when the American and the National Baseball Leagues existed in harmonious competition with the Patriot League (d.) and I traveled around that circuit for the *Finest Family*, whose *Morning Star* (the whole constellation, d.) was the daily tabloid in the seven Patriot League cities (I see now they are putting Sports Quizzes on cocktail napkins; how about this then, napkineers—*Query*: Which were the seven cities of the old P. League? What drunk has the guts to remember?), back before teams, towns, trusting readership simply vanished without a trace in the wake of the frauds and the madness, back before I was reduced to composing captions for sex-and-slander sheets (not unlike a Jap haiku genius working for the fortune cookie crumbs—in my prime, remember, I was master of that most disparaged of poetic forms, the headline), back before they slandered, jailed, blacklisted, and forgot me, back before the Baseball Writers' Association of America (to name a name, Mr. Chairman!) hired a plainclothesgoon

to prevent me from casting my vote for Luke Gofannon at the Hall of Fame elections held every January just one hundred miles from this upstate Home of the D. (sixty-three home runs for the Ruppert Mundys in 1928, and yet Luke "the Loner" is "ineligible," I am told—just as I am archaic in my own century, a humorous relic in my own native land, d. as a doornail while still drawing breath!), back before years became decades and decades centuries, when I was Smitty to America and America was still a home to me, oh, about eleven, twelve thousand days ago, I used to get letters from young admirers around the country, expressing somewhat the same sentiment as the President of the United States, only instead of sardonic, sweet. O so sweet!

Dear Smitty, I am ten and want to grow up to be a sports righter two. It is the dream of my life. How can I make my dream come true? Is spelling important as my teacher say? Isn't good ideas more important and loving baseball? How did you become so great? Were you born with it? Or did you have good luck? Please send me any pamphlets on being like you as I am making a booklit on you for school.

O sad! Too sad! The sight of my own scratchings makes me weep! How like those schoolchildren who idolized me I now must labor o'er the page! Sometimes I must pause in the midst of a *letter* to permit the pain to subside, in the end producing what looks like something scratched on a cave wall anyway, before the invention of invention. I could not earn passage into the first grade with this second childhood penmanship—how ever will I win the Pulitzer Prize? But then Mount Rushmore was not carved in a day—neither will the Great American Novel be written without suffering. Besides, I think maybe the pain is good for the style: when just setting out on a letter like the lower case w is as tedious and treacherous as any zigzag mountain journey where you must turn on a dime to avoid the abyss, you tend not to waste words with w's in them, fans. And likewise through the alphabet.

The alphabet! That dear old friend! Is there a one of the Big Twenty-Six that does not carry with it a thousand keen memories for an archaic and humorous, outmoded and out-

dated and oblivion-bound sports-scribe like me? To hell with the waste! Tomorrow's a holiday anyway—Election Day at the Hall of F. Off to Cooperstown to try yet again. My heart may give out by nightfall, but then a' course the fingers will get their rest, won't they? So what do you say, fans, a trip with Smitty down Memory Lane?

aA  
bB  
cC  
dD  
eE  
fF  
gG  
hH  
iI  
jJ  
kK  
lL  
mM  
nN  
oO  
pP  
qQ  
rR  
sS  
tT  
uU  
vV  
wW  
xX  
yY  
zZ

O thank God there are only twenty-six! Imagine a hundred! Why, it is already like drowning to go beyond capital F! G as in Gofannon! M as in Mundy! P as in Patriot! And what about I as in I? O for those golden days of mine and yore! O why must there be d for deceased! Deceit, defeat, decay, deterioration, bad enough—but d as in dead? It's too damn tragic, this dying business! I tell you, I'd go without daiquiris,

daisies, damsels, Danish, deck chairs, Decoration Day double-headers, decorum, delicatessen, Demerol, democratic processes, deodorants, Derbys, desire, desserts, dial telephones, dictionaries, dignity, discounts, disinfectants, distilleries, ditto marks, doubletalk, dreams, drive-ins, dry cleaning, duck au montmorency, a dwelling I could call my own—why, I would go without *daylight*, if only I did not have to die. O fans, it is so horrible just being defunct, imagine, as I do, day in and day out

## D E A T H

Ten days have elapsed, four in an oxygen tent, where I awoke from unconsciousness believing I was a premature infant again. Not only a whole life ahead of me, but two months thrown in for good measure! I imagined momentarily that it was four score and seven years ago, that I had just been brought forth from my mother; but no—instead of being a premature babe I am practically a posthumous unpublished novelist, ten days of my remaining God only knows how few gone, *and not a word written*.

And worse, our philistine physician has issued an injunction: give up alliteration if you want to live to be four score and eight.

"Smitty, it's as simple as this—you cannot continue to write like a boy and expect to get away with it."

"But it's all I've got left! I refuse!"

"Come now, no tears. It's not the end of the world. You still have your lists, after all, you still have your balance—"

Between sobs I say, "But you don't understand! Alliteration is at the foundation of English literature. Any primer will tell you that much. It goes back to the very beginnings of written language. I've made a study of it—it's true! There would have been no poetry without it! No human speech as we know it!"

"Well, they don't teach us the fundamentals of poetry in medical school, I admit, but they do manage to get something through our heads having to do with the care of the sick and the aged. Alliteration may be very pretty to the ear, and fun

to use, I'm sure, but it is simply too much of a stimulant and a strain for an eighty-seven-year-old man, and you are going to have either to control yourself, or take the consequences. Now blow your nose—"

"But I *can't* give it up! No one can! Not even *you*, who is a literary ignoramus by his own admission. 'Stimulant and strain.' 'To control yourself or take the consequences.' Don't you see, if it's in every other sentence even *you* utter, how can I possibly abstain? You've got to take away something else!"

The doctor looks at me as if to say, "Gladly, only what else is left?" Yes, it is my last real pleasure, he is right . . .

"Smitty, it's simply a matter of not being so fancy. Isn't that all really, when you come down to it?"

"My God, *no*! It's just the opposite—it's as natural as breathing. It's the homiest most unaffected thing a language can do. It's the ornamentation of ordinary speech—"

"Now, now."

"Listen to me for once! Use your ears instead of that stethoscope—listen to the English language, damn it! Bed and board, sticks and stones, kith and kin, time and tide, weep and wail, rough and ready, now or—"

"Okay, that's enough, now. You are working yourself into another attack, and one that you may not recover from. If you do not calm down this instant, I am going to order that your fountain pen and dictionary be taken away."

I snarled in response, and let him in on a secret. "I could still alliterate in my head. What do you think I did for four days in the oxygen tent?"

"Well, if so, you are deceiving no one but yourself. Smitty, you must use common sense. Obviously I am not suggesting that you abstain from ever having two neighboring words in a sentence begin with the same sound. That would be absurd. Why, next time I come to visit, I would be overjoyed to hear you tell me, 'Feelin' fit as a fiddle'—if it happens to be true. It is not the ordinary and inevitable accidents of alliteration that occur in conversation that wear down a man of your age, or even the occasional alliterative phrase used intentionally for heightened rhetorical effect. It's overindulgent, intemperate, unrestrained excursions into alliteration that would leave a writer half your age trembling with excitement. Smitty,

while you were comatose I took the liberty of reading what you've been writing here—I had no choice, given your condition. My friend, the orgy of alliteration that I find on the very first page of your book is just outright ridiculous in a man of your age—it is tantamount to suicide. Frankly I have to tell you that the feeling I come away with after reading the first few thousand words here is of a man making a spectacle of himself. It strikes me as wildly excessive, Smitty, and just a little desperate. I wish I could tell you otherwise, but there's no sense pulling punches with an eighty-seven-year-old man."

"Well, Doctor, much as I welcome your medical school version of literary criticism, you have to admit that you are not exactly the Pulitzer Prize Committee. Besides, it is only the prologue. I was only opening the tap, to get the waters running."

"Well, it still seems needlessly ostentatious to me. And a terrible drain on the heart. And, my friend, you cannot write a note to the milkman, let alone the Great American Novel, without one of them pumping the blood to your brain." He took my hand as I began to whimper again—he claims to have read "One Man's Opinion" as a boy in Aceldama. "Here, here, it's only for your good I tell you this . . ."

"And—and how's about reading alliteration, if I can't write it?"

"For the time being, I'm going to ask you to stay off it entirely."

"Or?"

"Or you'll be a goner. That'll be the ballgame, Smitty."

"If that's the case, I'd *rather* be dead!" I bawled, the foulest lie ever uttered by man.

Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.

So said Chaucer back in my high school days, and a' course it is as true now as then.

And specially, from every shires ende  
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,  
The holy blisful martir for to seke,  
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seke.

That is copied directly (and laboriously I assure you) from the famous Prologue to his immortal (and as some will always say, immoral) *Canterbury Tales*. I had to copy it only so as to get the old-fashioned spelling correct. I can still recite the forty-odd lines, up to "A Knight ther was," as perfectly as I did in tenth grade. In fact, in the intervening million years—not since Chaucer penned it, but since I memorized it—I have conquered insomnia many a night reciting those dead words to myself, aloud if I happened to be alone, under my breath (as was the better part of wisdom) if some slit was snoring beside me. Only imagine one of them bimbos overhearing Smitty whaning-that-Aprille in the middle of the night! Waking to find herself in the dark with a guy who sounds five hundred years old! Especially if she happened to think of herself as "particular"! Why, say to one of those slits—in the original accent—"The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote," and she'd kick you right in the keester. "There are some things a girl won't do, Mr. Word Smith, not even for dough! Goodbye!" On the other hand, to do women justice, there is one I remember, a compassionate femme with knockers to match, who if you said to her, "So priketh hem nature in hir corages," she'd tell you, "Sure I blow guys in garages. They're human too, you know."

But this is not a book about tough cunts. Nat Hawthorne wrote that one long ago. This is a book about what America did to the Ruppert Mundys (and to me). As for *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, I admit that I have by now forgot what it all meant, if ever I knew. I'm not just talking about the parts that were verboten either. I take it from the copy that I have before me, borrowed on my card from the Valhalla Public Library, that those "parts" are still taboo for schoolkids. Must be—they are the only ratty-looking pages in an otherwise untouched book. Reading with the help of magnifying glass and footnotes, I see (at nearly ninety) that it is mostly stuff about farting. Little devils. They have even decorated the margin with symbols of their glee. Appears to be a drawing of a fart. Pretty good one too. Kids love farts, don't they? Even today, with all the drugs and sex and violence you hear about on TV, they still get a kick, such as we used to, out

of a fart. Maybe the world hasn't changed so much after all. It would be nice to think there were still a few eternal verities around. I hate to think of the day when you say to an American kid, "Hey, want to smell a great fart?" and he looks at you as though you're crazy. "A great what?" "Fart. Don't you even know what a fart is?" "Sure it's a game—you throw one at a target. You get points." "That's a dart, dope. A *fart*. A bunch of kids sit around in a crowded place and they fart. Break wind. Sure, you can make it into a game and give points. So much for a wet fart, so much for a series, and so on. And penalties if you draw mud, as we called it in those days. But the great thing was, you could do it just for the fun of it. By God, we could fart for hours when we were boys! Somebody's front porch on a warm summer night, in the road, on our way to school. Why, we could sit around a blacksmith's shop on a rainy day doing nothing but farting, and be perfectly content. No movies in those days. No television. No nothin'. I don't believe the whole bunch of us taken together ever had more than a nickel at any time, and yet we were never bored, never had to go around looking for excitement or getting into trouble. Best thing was you could do it yourself too. Yessir, boy knew how to make use of his leisure time in those days."

Surprising, given the impact of the fart on the life of the American boy, how little you still hear about it; from all appearances it is still something they'd rather skip over in *The Canterbury Tales* at Valhalla High. On the other hand, that may be a blessing in disguise; this way at least no moneyman or politician has gotten it into his head yet to cash in on its nostalgic appeal. Because when that happens, you can kiss the fart goodbye. They will cheapen and degrade it until it is on a level with Mom's apple pie and our flag. Mark my words: as soon as some scoundrel discovers there is a profit to be made off of the American kid's love of the fart, they will be selling artificial farts in balloons at the circus. And you can just imagine what they'll smell like too. Like *everything* artificial.

Yes, fans, as the proverb has it, verily there is nothing like a case of fecal impaction to make an old man wax poetic about the fart. Forgive the sentimental meandering.

And specially, from every shires ende  
Of AMERICA to COOPERSTOWN they wende  
The holy BASEBALL HEROES for to seke,  
That hem hath holpen whan that they were SIX.\*

For the ambulatory among my fellow geriatrics here our annual trip to Cooperstown is something very like the kind of pilgrimage Chaucer must have been writing about. I won't go into the cast of characters, as he does, except to say that as I understand it, his "nine and twenty" were not so knowledgeable in matters of religion as you might at first expect pilgrims to be who are off to worship at a holy shrine. Well, so too for the six and ten it was my misfortune to be cooped up with on the road to Cooperstown, and then all afternoon long at the Baseball Museum and Hall of Fame. Ninety-nine per cent of their baseball "memories," ninety-nine per cent of the anecdotes and stories they recollect and repeat are pure hogwash, tiny morsels of the truth so coated over with discredited legend and senile malarkey, so impacted, you might say, in the turds of time, as to rival the tales out of ancient mythology. What the aged can do with the past is enough to make your hairs stand on end. But then look at the delusions that ordinary people have about the day before yesterday.

\*A "shire" is a county. Thus the word "sheriff"—he is the reeve ("an administrative officer of a town or a district") of a shire. I am using "holpen" to mean "inspired": the baseball players who inspired them when they were six years old. I realize of course from reading the footnotes that it does not mean inspired any more than it means "helped." But it will if you want it to, and I want it to. A writer can take certain liberties. Besides, the word "inspired" appears just twelve lines earlier (line six): "Inspired hath in every holt and heeth." I will not go into what it means there or how it is pronounced—though I do hope you will note hath, holt, and heeth, Doctor!—but the point is I didn't just pull "inspired" out of left field. On the other hand, if you want to understand the line as G. Chaucer (1340–1400) intended, with "holpen" meaning "cured," then change the last word to "sixty." Something like: the baseball players whom they would like to have cure them of being sixty. Not bad. But then you lose the rhyme. And the truth is that these boys are over sixty. Though I suppose you could insert the word "over" in there. I recognize, of course, that "six" does not exactly rhyme with "seke" either, but that is the only word I could think of to get my meaning across. Writing is an art, not a science, and admittedly I am no Chaucer. Though that's only one man's opinion.

Of course, in the way of old men—correction: in the way of all men—they more or less swallow one another's biggest lies whole and save their caviling for the tiniest picayune points. How they love to nitpick over nonsense and cavil over crap all the while those brains of theirs, resembling nothing so much as pickles by this time, soak on in their brine of fantasy and fabrication. No wonder Hitler was such a hit. Why, he might still be at it, if only he'd had the sense to ply his trade in the Land of Opportunity. These are three homo sapiens, descendants of Diogenes, seeking the Truth: "I tell you, there was so a Ernie Cooper, what pitched four innings in one game for the Cincinnati in 1905. Give up seven hits. Seen it myself." "Afraid you are thinking of Jesse Cooper of the White Sox. And the year was 1911. And he pitched himself something more than four innings." "You boys are both wrong. Cooper's name was Bock. And he come from right around these parts too." "Boggs? Boggs is the feller what pitched one year for the Bees. Lefty Boggs!" Yes, Boggs was a Bee, all right, but the Cooper they are talking about happened to be named Baker. Only know what they say when I tell them as much? "Who asked you? Keep your brainstorm for your 'book'! We are talking fact not fiction!" "But you're the ones who've got it wrong," I say. "Oh sure, *we* got it wrong! Ho-ho-ho! That's a good one! Get out of here, Shakespeare! Go write the Great American Novel, you crazy old coot!"

Well, fans, I suppose there are those who called Geoffrey Chaucer (and William Shakespeare, with whom I share initials) a crazy coot, and immoral, and so on down the line. Tell them what they do not wish to hear, tell them that they have got it wrong, and the first thing out of their mouths, "You're off your nut!" Understanding this as I do should make me calm and philosophical, I know. Wise, sagacious, and so forth. Only it doesn't work that way, especially when they do what they did to me ten days ago at Cooperstown.

First off, as everyone knows, the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown was founded on a falsehood. No more than little George Washington said to his father, "Dad, it is I, etc.," did Major Abner Doubleday invent the game of baseball on that



sacred spot. The only thing Major Doubleday started was the Civil War, when he answered the Confederate Beauregard by firing the first shot from Fort Sumter. Yet, to this day, shout such "heresy" in the bleachers at a Sunday doubleheader, and not only will three out of four patrons call you crazy, but some self-styled authority on the subject (probably a Dad with his Boy—I know the type) will threaten your life for saying something so awful in front of innocent kids.

My quarrel with Cooperstown, however, is over nothing so inconsequential as who invented the game and where. I only draw attention to the longevity of this lie to reveal how without conscience even the highest authorities are when it comes to perpetuating a comforting, mindless myth everyone has grown used to, and how reluctant the ordinary believer, or fan, is to surrender one. When both the rulers and the subjects of the Holy Baseball Empire can sanctify a blatant falsehood with something supposedly so hallowed as a "Hall of Fame," there is no reason to be astonished (I try to tell myself) at the colossal crime against the truth that has been perpetrated by America's powers-that-be ever since 1946. I am speaking of what no one in this country dares even to mention any longer. I am speaking of a chapter of our past that has been torn from the record books without so much as a peep of protest, *except by me*. I am speaking of a rewriting of our history as heinous as any ordered by a tyrant dictator abroad. Not thousand-year-old history either, but something that only came to an end *twenty-odd years ago*. Yes, I am speaking of the annihilation of the Patriot League. Not merely wiped out of business, *but willfully erased from the national memory*. Ask a Little Leaguer, as I did only this past summer. When I approached, he was swinging a little bat in the on-deck circle, ironically enough, resembling no one so much as Bob Yamm of the Kakoola Reapers (d.). "How many big leagues are there, sonny?" I asked. "Two," he said, "the National and the American." "And how many did there used to be?" "Two." "Are you sure of that now?" "Positive." "What about the Patriot League?" "No such thing." "Oh no? Never heard of the Tri-City Tycoons? Never heard of the Ruppert Mundys?" "Nope." "You never heard of Kakoola, Aceldama, Asylum?" "What are those?" "Cities, boy! Those were big league towns!"

"Who played for 'em, Mister?" he asked, stepping away from me and edging toward the bench. "Luke Gofannon played for them. Two thousand two hundred and forty-two games he played for them. Never heard his name?" Here a man took me by the arm, simultaneously saying to the boy, "He means Luke Appling, Billy, who played for the White Sox." "Who are you?" I asked, as if I didn't know. "I'm his Dad." "Well, then, tell him the truth. Raise the boy on the truth! You know it as well as I do. I do not mean Luke Appling and I do not mean Luke 'Hot Potato' Hamlin. I mean Luke Gofannon of the Ruppert Mundys!" And what does the Dad do? He puts a finger to his temple to indicate to this little brainwashed American tyke (one of tens of millions!) that *I* am the one that is cracked. Is it any wonder that I raised my cane?

You can look in vain in the papers of Friday, January 22, 1971, for a mention of the vote I cast the previous day at the annual balloting for baseball's Hall of Fame. But the fact of the matter is that I handed it personally to Mr. Bowie Kuhn, so-called Commissioner of Baseball, and he assured me that it would be tabulated along with the rest by the secretary-treasurer of the Baseball Writers' Association of America. WELL, MR. BOWIE KUHN IS A LIAR AND THE HALL OF FAME SHOULD BE NAMED THE HALL OF SHAME.

Of course, the plainclothesgoon they hire especially to keep an eye on me during these annual election day visits greeted our contingent at the Museum door pretending to want to do no more than make us gentlemen at home. "Well, if it isn't the senior citizens from over Valhalla way. Welcome, boys."

Oh yes, we are treated like royalty at Cooperstown! How they love "the elderly" when they behave like *boys! Choir-boys*. So long as the only questions we ask have to do with Bock Baker and Lefty Boggs, everything is, as they say over there, "hunky-dory."

"Greetings, Smitty. Remember me?"

"I remember everything," I said.

"How you feeling this year?"

"The same."