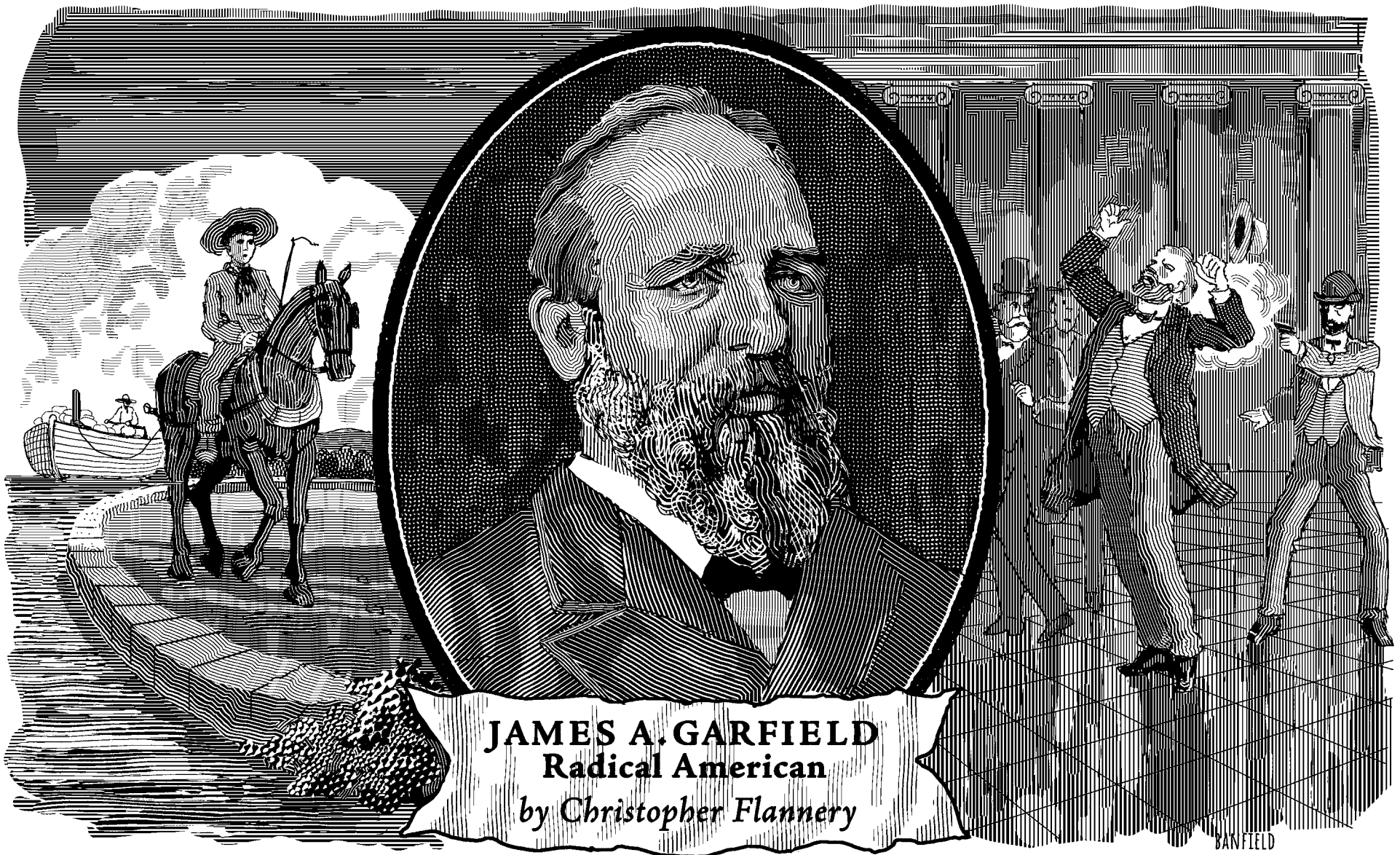


VOLUME XXIII, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2023

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Essay by Douglas A. Jeffrey

## ONCE UPON A NATIONAL PASTIME

*Roger Angell, baseball's bard.*



THE LATE CATHOLIC PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL Michael Novak once attributed sports fandom to the fact that players remain ever youthful, allowing those who watch them the illusion of being ageless as well. Baseball writer Roger Angell allowed his readers this illusion by outliving most of them. With his death in May 2022 at the age of 101, this year's opening day was the first he missed since Babe Ruth, at age 26, broke out of the pack by hitting 59 home runs and *Popular Science Monthly* assigned a writer to investigate his secret.

Angell's mother, Katharine Sergeant White, was the founding fiction editor of *The New Yorker* magazine, and his stepfather from the age of nine was E.B. White, of *Charlotte's Web* and Strunk & White fame. But it was his father, Ernest Angell, a Wall Street lawyer and future national board chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union, who mostly raised him and who passed on to him his love of baseball.

Graduating from Harvard in 1942, Angell served in the Army Air Corps and worked at *Holiday* magazine before beginning his six-decade run (during which he wore many hats, including that of fiction editor) at *The New Yorker*. In 1962, editor William Shawn invited him to travel to Florida to write about Spring Training. Neither Shawn nor Angell could have foreseen that "The Old Folks Behind Home"—in which Angell described pre-season baseball as "a sun-warmed, sleepy exhibition celebrating the juvenescence of the year and the senescence of the fans"—would be the first in a long series of baseball essays that would be collected into six books: *The Summer Game* (1972), *Five Seasons* (1977), *Late Innings* (1982), *Season Ticket* (1988), *Once More Around the Park* (1991), and *Game Time* (2003).

Angell was the best chronicler of the game I know. Anyone unfamiliar with his writings would do well to introduce themselves by

reading "Agincourt and After," his account of the fantastic 1975 World Series between Cincinnati and Boston that manages to weave in the death of Casey Stengel and other notable events and accomplishments during that season. Yet Angell often expressed the idea that he was more a fan of the game than a professional baseball writer: "Friends and critics have sometimes called me a historian of the game or a baseball essayist or even a baseball poet," he wrote in 1988, "but I decline the honors. It seems to me that what I have been putting down for a quarter century now is autobiography: the story of myself as a fan."

As a fan, what he enjoyed most was talking and listening to other fans (and players, coaches, managers, and other writers) about the sport. Joe Bonomo, author of *No Place I Would Rather Be: Roger Angell and a Life in Baseball Writing* (2019), describes his writ-



ings as “packed with enthused gabbing.” Accepting the J.G. Taylor Spink Award from the Baseball Writers’ Association of America (he is the only non-member ever to receive it) at the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 2014, Angell owned up to the fact that gab was his obsession: “I collected great lines and great baseball talkers—lifetime .300 talkers—like a billionaire hunting down Cézannes and Matisses. I stalked these guys and buttered them up and got their flow into my notebooks and onto my tapes.” One of the .300 talkers was Roger Craig, who while managing the San Francisco Giants was once asked if he had read Angell’s latest book and replied: “Read it? Hell, I wrote half of it.”

Is there any sport other than baseball that allows, even demands, so much talk? In the dugouts, bullpens, and stands—even around the bases and behind home plate between pitches—people are talking about baseball and life. It probably explains why we have traditionally seen more nuclear families in ballparks than in football stadiums or basketball arenas. There is plenty of time to talk to your wife or husband and kids during a baseball game, even if you are filling out a scorecard.

In “The Companions of the Game” in 1975, Angell writes of spending an afternoon with Giants owner Horace Stoneham—one of the last surviving team owners who “owned nothing but their team and cared for nothing but the game”—at Candlestick Park while watching the home team play the Padres. Stoneham, 72 at the time, regales Angell with a lifetime’s worth of baseball stories while shouting encouragement to his players (“Bear down, John!”). When an old friend happens by and asks Stoneham if he had told Angell about an epic 16-inning pitcher’s duel they had witnessed between a young Juan Marichal and an aging Warren Spahn, it dawned on Angell “that [they and their friends] had talked hundreds of times about each of these famous games and vanished companions. Old afternoons were fresh and past players stayed young, and it was the talking that kept them that way.”

### Delicate Balances

**F**OR TALKING, YOU NEED TIME, OF course, with which baseball is naturally generous. In 2017, Angell referred fondly to the game as “stuffed with waiting.” You might be waiting on a pitcher like Luis Tiant, whose machinations on the mound Angell described in 1972:

Stands on hill like sunstruck archeologist at Knossos. Regards ruins. Studies sun. Studies landscape. Looks at arti-

fact in hand. Wonders: Keep this potsherd or throw it away? Does Smithsonian want it? Hmm. Prepares to throw it away. Pauses. Suddenly discovers writing on object. Hmm. Possible Linear B inscript.? Sighs. Decides. Throws. Wipes face. Repeats whole thing.

Or you might be waiting on a batter while he runs through several rituals (such as undoing and redoing his batting gloves, knocking

enormous changes it has undergone... remains somehow rustic, unviolent, and introspective. Baseball’s time is seamless and invisible, a bubble within which players move at exactly the same pace and rhythms as all their predecessors. This is the way the game was played in our youth and in our fathers’ youth, and even back then—back in the country days—there must have been the same feeling that time could be stopped.

*New Yorker* editor David Remnick, in a remembrance of Angell, called him “insistently modern.” This accords with Angell’s often-expressed self-image. He understood change to be inevitable and disliked nostalgia. *Field of Dreams* was not his cup of tea. In a 2016 interview with Bonomo he declared himself an “anti-sentimentalist.” In the preface to his penultimate collection of essays, he said he “would hate it if this book made anyone yearn for baseball time gone by, or otherwise tainted our pleasures in the game.” Despite this, none of his books save the first were entirely free of the sense that the game was no longer what it used to be, that both it and we were losing something vital, even that we should think about giving it up.

As early as 1964, in “Two Strikes on the Image,” Angell worried that the interests of television would come to exert such influence that “the ultimate shape of baseball... its size, its franchise locations, and even its rules—will be largely determined not by tradition or regard for the fans or regard for the delicate balances of the game, but by the demands of the little box.” Over the next three decades he would decry changes such as “the extension of the season far beyond its appropriate weather,” “the extension and promotion of the...designated-hitter device,” “hyperglottal” broadcast crews that “succeed only in shattering the process of waiting that is such a crucial part of the game,” and the extension of postseason eligibility to the point of absurdity. “Baseball feels like the rest of America now,” he would write in 1995. “It feels like television.”

And that was before the appearance of the smart phone. Angell complained in his interview with Bonomo about the obvious fact that people in ballparks these days—not to mention people in cars, on sidewalks, in restaurants, and everywhere else—are paying less attention, both to what’s going on around them and to each other. In a short piece in 2011 on Derek Jeter’s pending 3,000th hit, a milestone only 27 players had previously attained, he lamented that most fans would likely be “too busy tweeting ( ! SAWT ! )” to

#### Books by Roger Angell:

*The Summer Game.* Bison Books, 303 pages, \$19.95 (paper)

*Five Seasons: A Baseball Companion.* Bison Books, 413 pages, \$19.95 (paper)

*Late Innings: A Baseball Companion,* Simon and Schuster, 432 pages, \$25.99 (paper)

*Season Ticket: A Baseball Companion,* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 406 pages, out-of-print

*One More Time Around the Park: A Baseball Reader.* Ballantine Books, 351 pages, out-of-print

*Game Time: A Baseball Companion.* Mariner Books, 416 pages, \$24.99 (paper)

*Let Me Finish.* Mariner Books, 320 pages, \$19.99 (paper)

#### Also mentioned in this essay:

*No Place I Would Rather Be: Roger Angell and a Life in Baseball Writing,* by Joe Bonomo. University of Nebraska Press, 232 pages, \$27.95 (cloth), \$21.95 (paper)

the dirt from the cleats on his shoes, adjusting his pants and helmet, rubbing his nose) after each pitch, before stepping up to the plate: former Ranger and Indian first baseman Mike Hargrove, nicknamed “The Human Rain Delay,” comes to mind.

“Within the ballpark time moves differently,” Angell noted in “The Interior Stadium” in 1971,

marked by no clock except the events of the game. This is the unique, unchangeable feature of baseball, and perhaps explains why this sport, for all the



stand and cheer—or perhaps even to see the hit in a meaningful way, a way permitting of remembrance. In baseball as in life, unless one takes great care, technology becomes destructive of what Angell, in “The Interior Stadium,” calls “the mind game”—a game that “has no season, but it is best played in the winter, without the distraction of other baseball news.”

Along these lines, Angell refers more than once in his writings to something catcher Carlton Fisk told him about Fisk’s dramatic game-winning homer off Fenway Park’s foul pole in the 12th inning of game six of the 1975 World Series: whenever the video of that hit comes on T.V., Fisk said, he either turns it off or leaves the room so that he can “keep a crystal memory of what that was like.” Angell himself was a master of the mind game. In “So Long at the Fair” (1977), he wrote that he had “read so much about the old-timers and heard older players and writers and fans (including my father) talk about them so often that they are almost as visible to me as the stars I have watched on the field.”

### Running Battle

ONE WONDERS WHAT ANGELL WOULD have made of this year’s assaults on baseball’s integrity and traditions. For the first assault—the introduction of a pitching clock, limiting the pitcher to 15 seconds before each pitch with the bases empty and 20 seconds with runners on base—MLB marketers chose actor Bryan Cranston, best known for portraying a methamphetamine dealer, as their pitchman. “It’s the best game in the world. Now, it’s even better,” Cranston assured the baseball public across various social media platforms.

Admittedly, games were becoming too long. But for anyone who knows baseball, the obvious solution, consistent with the game’s traditions, would have been to limit the number of pitchers teams could carry on their rosters and/or the number of pitching changes per game, the steady increase of which has been the actual cause of longer games. For anyone who loves baseball, the idea of introducing a clock, which eliminates baseball’s “unique, unchangeable feature,” the source of its special charm, would have been unthinkable.

Then there is the reckless politicization of baseball. The Dodgers honoring the anti-Catholic Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence this past June is the most publicized example, but the Dodgers are not an exception. The un-called-for intrusion of cultural warfare into the current season has a lot of fans thinking along the lines Angell was thinking during the baseball strike of 1981. In “The Silence,” he wrote of the fans’ sense that year that “the old fixed shape of the game has shifted somehow, away from its past pleasures and assured summer sounds and rituals, and that the only response available to them now is to give way to their anger—to care less about what they once cared about so much, and perhaps to stay away from games altogether.”

It was a running battle for Angell himself to remain a fan. In 1976, he wrote that baseball “may well be on the point of altering itself, if not out of existence, then out of any special or serious place in the American imagination.”

### For talking, you need time, of course, with which baseball is naturally generous.

In 1980, he confessed: “Each year, just before spring comes, I begin to wonder if I shouldn’t give up this game.” But he persevered. The loyalty fans feel to baseball, he wrote in 1982, “is shown not only in their dogged, comical attachment to this hopeless team or that fading star but in their adherence to the sport in the face of repeated injuries they have suffered at the hands of the careless men who have bought their way into baseball’s seats of power.”

For his own stubborn loyalty to baseball, Angell relied on memories that a small and diminishing number of Americans have today. “Sports were different in my youth,” he wrote in “Early Innings” in 1992, “a series of events to look forward to and then to turn over in memory, rather than a huge, omnipresent industry, with its own economics and politics and crushing public relations. How it felt to be a young baseball fan...can be appreciated only if I can bring back this lighter and fresher atmosphere.”

In the same essay—which would later form a chapter in his 2006 memoir, *Let Me Finish*—Angell attempts to conjure up the “lighter and fresher atmosphere” of the past by describing his father’s early-progressive era confidence and contrasting it with today. His father was sensitive to injustice and had a zeal for political and social reform, Angell writes, yet he believed that “every problem was capable of solution somewhere down the line”—a belief we Americans don’t hold to anymore, “about our freedoms or about anything else.” The same confident attitude, Angell goes on to say, explains why his father (“not a great natural athlete”) was unself-consciously willing to jump into organized baseball games at the drop of a hat, even in late middle age, and to play with great competitiveness.

Many today might consider his father “a privileged WASP, who was able to pursue some adolescent, rustic yearnings far too late in life,” Angell writes. “But that would miss the point.” If his father’s confidence “sounds like a romantic or foolish impulse to us today, it is because most of American life, including baseball, no longer feels feasible.” We today—Angell includes himself in this observation—“must make prodigious efforts to rearrange our profoundly ironic contemporary psyches in order to allow [baseball’s] pleasures to reach us.” Lacking such a psychic obstacle, Angell concludes, his father “wasn’t naïve; he was lucky.”

Roger Angell, a .300 hitter in the mind game and a great writer in the clutch, was able to share in his father’s luck and to share it with his readers. He had seen Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig hit back-to-back home runs, pitcher Lefty Gomez win his first major league game, and, three decades later, outfielder Willie Mays make his first major league overhead catch and blind spinning throw on-the-fly to home plate. He retained a real memory of a time when baseball was America’s national pastime—“no other sport owns so sweet a moniker or qualifies for this one,” he once wrote—and died a lifelong fan. Literally: his last words were “Check the score.”

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