

Crime and Punishment

By Father John S. Kennedy

Agonized shrieks of "Foul ball!" have greeted the publication of Jim Bouton's book "Ball Four" (World Publishing Company, \$6.95). The idea seems to be that Bouton has sullied the hitherto spotless name of baseball and is a dastardly corrupter of American youth. You can hardly imagine a charge graver than that.

Certainly, Bouton has not written a nice book. It is provocatively peppered with profanity and obscenity. Its heavy insistence on the juvenile peeping Tom proclivities of baseball players is itself juvenile. Its rancor against those who doubt the prowess of a 30-year-old pitcher far gone from his pristine excellences, is tiresome. Its small-town agnostic's maunderings about religion are pontifically trite.

Nonetheless, it does give an insider's view of the seamy-glamorous world of big league baseball. Its irrelevant candor is a relief after the arrant nonsense perennially peddled by baseball's publicity men and all too many sportswriters.

Its contents were spoken into a tape recorder during the 1969 season, which saw Bouton with the Seattle Pilots, demoted to the minors, recalled to the majors, and traded to the Houston Astros. From spring training to the verge of the World Series, Bouton pours out his daily doings, recollections of his glory days, impressions of baseball personalities, and musings on the game.

All this time, Bouton was struggling to make a comeback. No longer did he have the power of his earlier years. Now he was a knuckleball pitcher, used mostly in relief. Sometimes he elatedly believed that he was on the threshold of a whole new career; sometimes he thought he was all through.

He was not popular with his teammates, who seem to have regarded him as something of a freak. After all, he read books and played chess. But it is his opinion that baseball players are never really friends in any case. And the moment the news breaks that one of them is being consigned to a minor league team, he is shut off from even such artificial camaraderie as may exist. He is then a complete outsider, and humiliation is visited upon him.

Nobody cares — that lament sounds all through the book. Certainly management doesn't. Management, according to Bouton, is expert and ruthless in lying to the players. It will resort to the shabbiest tricks to cheat a man of money he deserves and needs. It may intend to drop a player, yet do nothing about helping him catch on with another team which would be interested in him if it knew of his availability.

The spectator sees the manager conferring with a player on the field, coaches applauding him, trainer and doctor solicitously hovering over him. But Bouton's testimony indicates that this is mostly show.

The one thing, he says, which managers and coaches do not want is to be approached by players. There is no discussion, no advice. He has some good words for one pitching coach, Johnny Sain, but the rest of those he knows he dismisses as unhelpful, doubletalk artists, and gaseous second-guessers. In fact, he maintains that all coaches do extremely little.

His fellow players may applaud his strictures on the non-playing people, but they will hardly approve what he has to say of his peers.

"Baseball players are far from being the best-conditioned athletes," he declares. "A lot more than half of them" swallow some kind of pep pills before playing. They take pride in their crudity of speech and manner. They make nasty jokes about one another's wives. Many of them are given to racial prejudice. They are egotistical, but very few plan or save for the future. They live

in a cramped, sweaty, ignorant, dull circle all their own.

For a few the rewards are considerable and enduring. But for most? Bouton recalls Dusty Rhodes, "the guy who in 1954 helped win a pennant and a World Series pinch-hitting for the Giants." When Bolton visited the New York World's Fair less than ten years later, he encountered Rhodes—driving one of the little tour buses there.

Bouton has disparaging remarks or stories about Mickey Mantle, Carl Yastrzemski, Johnny Keane, Elston Howard, Joe Pepitone and many another baseball celebrity. They don't seem sprinkled with stardust once he has paid them his disrespect.

Much of this book is hilariously funny, much of it is on the level of backfence graffiti. Cumulatively, it is as exhausting as a 20-inning game. These exceptions have to do with taste, tone, form.



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