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### **Collision at Home Plate: The Lives of Pete Rose and Bart Giamatti**

By James Reston, Jr.

HarperCollins, 326 pp. (plus 16 pages b&w photos)

Howard Cosell was dead wrong: sport is *not* merely the toy department of life. To the late Angelo Bartlett Giamatti, most recent in the long line of baseball's poets laureate, "a trip to the ballpark [is] really a search for paradise, a quest for a place only east of Eden." To Pete Rose, who performed the hardest act in sport--hitting a major league pitch--with record-breaking success, baseball gave life its meaning: "I'd walk through hell in a gasoline suit to keep playing baseball."

Their rhetoric reflects both the common love that bonded them and the conflicting natures that James Reston, Jr. concludes brought them to a collision as inevitable as sundown. For Giamatti, Renaissance literature scholar, Yale president and baseball commissioner, the poetry of baseball was intellectual, an emblem in green and white of America's sustaining myths. For Rose that poetry was kinetic and elemental: you see the ball and you hit it. Each view is aesthetic; one an aesthetic of mind, the other of body.

This absorbing dual biography captures men of equal passion and opposing values, enacting a tragic drama pre-ordained before their births.

Each man was the product of his father's dreams. Val Giamatti, son of an immigrant laborer, earned a Phi Beta Kappa Yale degree and a Harvard doctorate. Dante scholar and Ivy League professor, Val lacked confidence in his English. He never wrote his "great book" nor forgot the tormenting he received at the hands of patrician sons. He created a home where his son Bart would bathe in the beauties of English, mastering its rhythms and nuances as early as he mastered walking. Simultaneously, Bart grew infatuated with baseball and became that most heartbroken of fanatics, a Red Sox fan.

Frustrated accountant Harry Rose drilled into his undersized boy Pete what male life at a MidWestern river crossing is supposed to be about: compulsive dedication to athletic performance spiced with a few harmless bets at the racetrack for fun. Adopting his father's obsession as his own, Rose became the kind of star we cheer for most empathetically, the man of average gifts who excels through grit and force of will. So great became his achievements that Rose felt certain he could indulge and even flaunt a boyish lust for cars, women and bookmakers.

As Giamatti's career advanced through articles on the garden in Elizabethan poetry as metaphor for paradise, his values embraced order, gentility, rules and structure. When he left Yale for baseball, among the most infuriating acts he first had to address was that Rose, in an infraction he would soon dwarf, had shoved an umpire. To Giamatti, an umpire was a treasured blue centurion whose finger in the dike kept chaos from flooding throughout the game. That baseball remain honest and clean became Giamatti's life's mission.

Thus, Reston suggests, the clash between Giamatti and Rose actually began two decades before each was born, in the dugouts of Chicago and bookmaking halls of New York. The discovery that eight White Sox had conspired to throw the 1919 World Series threatened to destroy the national game. Its honor shattered, only the combined influence of Babe Ruth and Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis saved baseball at the brink of ruin. Ruth provided the heroism so desperately needed. Landis, newly appointed baseball's first commissioner, disinfected the sport with an Olympian decree: the eight Sox were permanently banished and so too would anyone whose involvement in gambling threatened the integrity of the game.

When allegations of Rose's gambling surfaced, so squarely did Giamatti feel he stood in Landis's shoes that he read the judge's biography throughout the entire ordeal. But there were no shoes for Rose. Hardly hero Babe Ruth, he was fallen angel Shoeless Joe Jackson, soiler of baseball. The smoking gun was presented to the FBI, a betting slip in Rose's handwriting with baseball games clearly listed (photographically reproduced in Reston's book). Giamatti was convinced: the game's most prolific hitter and Cincinnati's hometown hero had done what Landis said baseball must never tolerate. An agonized Giamatti banished Rose from baseball forever. Days later, Giamatti died of a massive heart attack.

Reston, award-winning author of *Father Cares: The Last of Jonestown*, suffers serious lapses of accuracy in the telling. He contradicts himself about which year of high school Rose had to repeat, loses track of whether Rose or Johnny Bench scored on a Tony Perez homer in the 1975 World Series, forgets that Oakland preceded Cincinnati in winning back-to-back Series, substantially misquotes a Pete Rose T-shirt, gives the wrong year for Jay Howell's playoff pine tar infraction, and--a gaffe that would most dismay Giamatti--misquotes Shakespeare and even cites the wrong play. While such slips shake the credibility of a book reconstructing a complex legal case, Reston's research otherwise appears exhaustive and solid.

In the dual biography Reston has chosen a particularly challenging structure. But if he braids merging histories less gracefully than did, say, Fielding in *Tom Jones*, Reston paints bold, rich portraits of two fascinating men, linked by a common love yet destined for the battle that may have destroyed them both.