

## LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, NO SALT-WATER TAFFY TODAY

Published in the *Brown Alumni Monthly*, March 1970

*This was the first of several articles that I wrote for the Brown Alumni Monthly. The editor who later became a vice president and friend invited me to write about getting my first novel published right after college. Neither of us had any idea that within months I would be joining the Brown faculty for a 17-year stint.*

The most a rookie can expect is to be given credit for hitting the long ball.

Few of the cigar smokers in the front office expect a rookie to blast the ball over the fence. What they do is “look ’em over” during that first year and decide if he *might* be able to knock it out of the park and into someone’s living room, perhaps in his second or third year. That is the essential critical decision that the men up front make about a first novelist: can he knock it out of the park next season?

Of course, the rookie—brash, arrogant, egotistic, audacious, bumptious and immodest—feels that indeed, he has knocked the ball out of the park. Nobody saw it go over the fence. He explains the amnesiac blindness by falling back on Pound:

“And no one knows, at sight, a masterpiece.”

Ladies and gentlemen, should the rookie go back to selling salt-water taffy in Atlantic City, or should he stick it out for another season?

Then, the rookie, perhaps standing in the batter’s box after the last game—the rookie re-living the way he moved into the high, hard one during the third inning and airmailed it to the bleachers—reminisces about how he got mixed up in this whole business. At the end of his first year in the majors, the rookie looks back. Is it worth another season?

He had really dug the game since he could remember, and he had started out clumsily, not getting real guidance until he entered the University and subsequently took a few courses on technique. Mostly, he bunted, got a few scattered hits, struck out occasionally and didn’t take too many wild swings, not having enjoyed Updike’s *The Centaur*. Park Honan was the first to give him some valuable tips. The rookie particularly remembers: “Don’t worry about using profanity, everybody in the English department does.”

But it was John Hawkes who became—what best to name him?—Jackie Robinson, DiMag, Mays? The rookie, although he had known of Hawkes as a slugger, had really not seen many of his games, but the hard-hitter’s reputation covered the Providence stadium like a tarpaulin, so it wasn’t necessary to have *seen* him play to be

convinced that his would be one of the names going toward the Hall of Fame committee one day.

The rookie made Hawkes' 12-man team, called the English 9-10 Giants, and even got off to an auspicious start by being the first to read a manuscript in class. When a player was asked to demonstrate in these sessions, he knew he had scored. It was not considered abnormal for the members of the team to sit perspiring as Hawkes, sitting down to begin the session, would pull out the manuscripts that had been submitted the previous week. Then, looking at one of the hitters, and pushing the Eaton's Corasable bond toward him, he would say, "Would you like to read this?"

You only read if you were *good*. And now it occurs to the rookie that he had been asked to read only three times during the year, two of them coming in the second semester. In fact, the rookie's performance on Hawkes' farm team might be called short of spectacular. A couple of the players, including one female, seemed to dominate the sessions. At least two of the hitters had received, it was rumored, A+, while the rookie had to scramble to bat A-for the semester.

Now, being neither vindictive nor impudent, manifesting neither malice nor resentfulness, the rookie, realizing that he is the first and only one from that team to go on to the majors, uses those grades to buttress his contention that no one (including wife and mother) will have more confidence in your ability than you yourself. If there's one lesson to be learned from that A-, it's this: believe in yourself.

Hawkes' influence on young players was remarkable. Briefly, if you listened to what he said, you would end your apprenticeship hitting in this style: infrequent use of adverbs; an eye for the "fictional moment"; rhythm in description and dialogue; an appreciation for the macabre; precise grammar and diction. Although it could be said that the famed slugger was imposing his own stylistic concerns, one could easily show how the accusation carried little weight when it is understood that Hawkes appreciates good writing that is stylistically miles away from his. If a man was a southpaw, Hawkes would not try to right him.

So it was a couple of nights before one of these sessions—late in the night, too—when a formula for hitting the ball out of the park came to the rookie. Understand this: he had never set his sights as low as the long ball. For the rookie, it was out of the park—straight out—or nothing. It is such a true case of rare, spooky inspiration, the rookie is often embarrassed to recite it. (There may be something about the rookie that is spooky, for one radio interviewer told him his insights into human nature were the result of his having "been here before.")

He didn't have the entire formula, but he knew when it was finished, it would be out of sight. He wasn't sure what he was after thematically, but he knew it would be a gas. He wasn't even sure of all the characters. Right then, he was typing like a madman drugged with No Doz, and he knew this was it. This would put him in the big time.

An interviewer: "Where did the inspiration come from?"

The Rookie: "From the strangest of all places."

In sum, the inspiration had come from the sudden cumulative impressions that the beginnings of three major works had made on the rookie that night. Suddenly, he was mesmerized with the first lines of Byron's *Don Juan*, Hawkes' *Second Skin* and *Beowulf*.

Byron: "I want a hero, an uncommon want."

Hawkes: "I will tell you in a few words who I am:"

Beowulf: "Hear me! We've heard of Danish heroes."

The character as hero. First person narrative. Pensive, yet vivacious tone. Character kills mother. Maine woodlands. The mental construct could not have been too different from the foregoing.

He read the first chapter in class and received a mind-blowing reception. Everybody dug the rhythms, the language, the puns, the situation, the story line and the character. "This," announced the rookie, "is the first chapter of a novel." And he hadn't the slightest idea of what the second chapter would be like. In all, he continued to hit safely for each of five games before the season ended. They were mostly doubles and singles, maybe one triple. In other words, the rookie would have deserved being called a flash in the pan for half the season. Had he been on the mound, they would have said his fast ball has lost its hop. He hadn't hit consistently, although there had been a couple of long ones, sending the outfielders back against the wall, so no one suggested that he was doing the wrong thing when, sitting on the Green, and facing Sayles Hall one June day, the rookie declared that he would forego a crack at the majors to study the law.

The rookie enrolled at Columbia. The pressure of reading cases while changing diapers (his wife worked in the evening) melted his resolve in two months. Having decided to take off for a year, the rookie carried everything he had written under Hawkes and showed it to one Harvey Swados, who was coaching evening sluggers at Columbia's School of General Studies. Today, he is not sure exactly what transpired between him and that well-respected player-manager, but he does remember Swados' giving him permission to register for the team (the rookie was too embarrassed to admit that he couldn't register because he hadn't the money), and he particularly remembers Swados saying, "You can write. I think you'll make it, but you may be too young."

That should have been enough incentive, but the rookie had a wife and new-born baby to take care of, a fact contributing to his doing two things: he joined the Friends of Chase Manhattan and he took courses to help him advance in his job (economics and accounting).

At the bank, he was lucky enough to get a job batting for the monthly, the *Chase Manhattan Newsmen*, and although it was a different kind of hitting, he found the experience valuably instructive. And it made him long for the diamond again. He wanted to try for the majors again. The rookie registered for an evening course at NYU under

Sidney Offit, and he played it cool. We are now talking about September, 1967.

The first cool thing he did was to submit the same first chapter (with a few changes) that he had gotten raves about in Providence. The class and Offit went for it. Offit praised the rookie for his vision. Next, the rookie submitted another chapter from the five he had written at Brown. He was asked to read this in class also, and the enthusiasm was again encouraging. But now the rookie was stuck. The other Brown chapters weren't as good as he'd like them to be, and it is from this point that *My Main Mother* begins to take shape. After chapter two, there is nothing that has been written at Brown.

Surely these classes were the most important sources of reassurance that the rookie had received to date. Before season's end, he got to read seven chapters in class and the other hitters responded well. He was working under a rhythm and the chapters were rolling off the typewriter as if they had been ordered. He was going so well, Offit refused to allow adverse criticism.

Sidney Offit asked the rookie, at the end of the semester, to join him in another class for the spring, 1968 semester. The reasoning was that he would work closely with the rookie until they had an outline and a stack of good chapters, and then, that summer, Offit himself would submit the chapters and an outline to editors-in-chief whom he knew personally. Fortunately, the rookie had the same problem with getting on Offit's roster as he had had with registering for Swados': lack of money. So he made up an excuse for not taking another course with Offit, and the teacher-novelist said something like, "Oh, I think it's good enough for a publisher after you make these changes anyway." He planned to send the manuscript—five chapters and an outline—to editor friends at three houses: Putnam's, Walker and Dial.

The manuscript never reached Dial, and Putnam's refused it about three weeks after Sidney Offit sent it to his editor friend there. In essence: a fine talent, great career ahead of him, but the subject matter is not for us. Walker got a crack at it. In June, 1968, Editor-in-Chief Ed Burlingame offered him an advance and a contract. When could he finish it?

"January, 1969," said the rookie.

When the rookie handed the completed manuscript to his editor on Monday, Jan. 13, he hadn't expected that the editor would ask him to make changes. Like most rookies, he was over-confident, felt that he had contributed more than the requisite amount of re-writing and re-reading, and frankly, he had knocked the ball far toward the centerfield wall. It might go over. In fact, the editor made no demands on the manuscript. It was ready to go. But there were a few suggestions: the tone of the last and first chapters didn't jibe; the scene where the mother is killed doesn't exactly get to the editor. So the rookie takes the manuscript, marked with proofreader's comments, examines it a seventy-fourth time and decides to make some changes in the first chapter, a few deletions in later chapters and that's it.

Nine months later, the rookie and his new editor (the old has left to join another house) lunch on publication day. Big deal. The *Times* doesn't review it that day, the bookstore on the same corner that the publisher inhabits doesn't have it in stock, and there is very little to suggest that this is a day out of the ordinary. The waiter has sat the rookie at the wrong table, so for 10 minutes he waits for the editor to arrive while the editor is already seated, waiting for the rookie.

That is the real sore biting at the rookie: not only that publication day itself did not yield fireworks, a rush into a second printing and instant fame, but that the entire phenomenon of writing the book itself is a ho-hum affair. No one (well, maybe two) takes the event for more than batting practice. At the most, you have hit the long ball, but to think you have knocked it out of the park—preposterous.

It might be equally preposterous to think that reviewers would offer germane comments. How the rookie had labored with his allusions, tacked on leitmotifs, dealt with a theme he thought to be *the* theme of the age (insecurity and its resolution through violence), punned and symbolized, mixed surreal with the real, made his character a schizo with all the symptoms (usually caused by parental or environmental stress, bringing on distorted perceptions, delusions and feelings of persecution). If Americans were not schizo, the rookie was saying as part of his message, then Sonny Liston is a punk.

The reviewers stayed away from these concerns like a timid infielder sticking his glove out at a hot grounder down the line. Really, then, the rookie might be easily led to believe, were he not as overconfident as they come, that he had attained none of these goals. Now, get it together. He wasn't complaining about bad reviews, but the failure of the reviewers to address themselves to more than a rehashing of the plot. Invariably, they spent 70 percent of the review space explaining what happens from chapters one to 17, and when the rookie was lucky, they tagged on the end such sentences as: "We eagerly await his second season."

"Hey, cool it," the rookie would shout, "my first one is still on the shelves, gentlemen. Will you please check that out? If you keep this up, I may just drop out of the majors and become a free agent. I don't need you guys, you know. I mean, if you aren't going to recognize me for what I am, then I'd just as soon stay with the Friends and become a vice-president."

But the rookie is just fooling himself out there in the batter's box. He would trade corporate life for the majors at the drop of a pop fly if he thought he could earn enough to support his family. Basically, when he examined his motives closely, he agreed with his conscience that the real reason he was reminiscing out by home plate had to do with 12 months of pent-up pressure and expectation that had to be released. He knew slinging the bat after striking out (although he had not struck out) had a therapeutic effect on many players. When push comes to shove, as they say, or when the deal goes down, despite the disappointments, he is still happy to be in the majors.

And actually, he is not certain that he did knock the ball out of the park. Yes, it did send the outfielder back and he would probably have to leap for it while the rookie rounded third, but now the rookie was putting his head down as he headed home because he was afraid to look toward the outfield wall. He wasn't positive it would or should go over, particularly since he had discovered something when bat met ball. He had discovered that there was more power in his wrists than he had used. He had power left over—for next year.

And suddenly that becomes the most important reminiscence for the rookie standing by the batter's box. He forgets that taking advantage of that power means working for The Man from nine to five and then coming home for dinner, watching one TV show with his wife, playing one half-hour with his children, then locking himself up in his den until maybe three in the morning. He forgets it means no more movies, ignoring a ringing phone, falling behind in his reading, leaving notes in the bathroom, scowling at uninvited visitors, declining party invitations.

He forgets that the second season may be a rehash of the first and that he may have to repeat the process for four, five, six seasons. Never mind; he forgets everything. He will play and play and play under any circumstances until he falls out or makes it, because he loves the game. The memorable event is that he had power left over when he hit the long ball, and what did that excess mean but that his second season's slugging average would be considerably higher than the first. If that were the case, it would be some year. And suddenly, the rookie is damned glad that he's in the majors. He knows he will shake up the league. And he has youth on his side. He could sense now how the Duke, big Newk and Campy felt when they used to say, "Wait till next year."

Next season would be straight over the fence, first game, first pitch. The rookie looks back no more. Ladies and gentlemen, no salt-water taffy today.