

Baseball Lit 101: A Casual Seminar

by [Samuel Hux](#) (August 2019)



He Called It, Robert Thom, 1932

Parents named Smith should never name a kid "Robert." The

black-and-white photo on the jacket of *Baseball in the Afternoon* suggests a redhead, but he couldn't be called "Red" for obvious reasons, given the fame of the sports columnist Red Smith. So, in spite of his productivity, and the recognition he received from peers during his lifetime, *this* Robert Smith is, today, practically anonymous. Try to find him among the dozens of prestigious Robert Smiths on Wikipedia and he apparently never existed. The *New York Times* obituary, after he died in 1997 at the age of 91, is too skimpy to bother with—telling us he wrote some novels and a couple of baseball books without mentioning the one noted above. What an injustice: as *Ecclesiasticus* in The Apocrypha instructs us, we have a duty to honor the dead. The ethics of memory, I call it.

His earlier book, *Baseball*, 1947, revised 1970 (something amusing about such a simple and proud title by someone of the simplest of names), is a great, great achievement. You will find little there about who won the Series in what year, who led the league in you-name-it. This is a social-cultural history of baseball, essentially a series of bio sketches of figures who represent this or that aspect of the game, all arranged chronologically and coalescing into a collective narrative. That it was dedicated to the poet Conrad Aiken is probably irrelevant—but not to me: Robert Smith had class. His last book, appearing in 1993, is neither social history pleasantly disguised as baseball lore (Donald Honig's *Baseball America*), nor sustained thesis (William Curran's *Big Sticks*), nor detailed chronological recreation (Robert Creamer's *Baseball in '41*