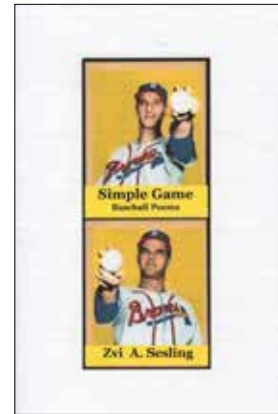


**Zvi Sesling's Simple Game, Baseball  
Poems, published by Presa Press,**

*Reviewed by Gregory J. Wolos*

*Put me in Coach, I'm ready to play today  
Look at me, I can be Centerfield  
--John Fogarty, "Centerfield"*



**W**hat is Baseball? It's a sport, of course, but it's more than just that. It's not a religion, but it's close. It's called America's pastime, but its time is more than simply the "past"—baseball encompasses past, present, future in a way that makes the passing of time irrelevant. Which isn't to say that baseball doesn't live in its moments—in fact, it's the moments that snag in our memory—a hit, a catch, a pitch, a play at the plate, an argument with an umpire, a portrait on a baseball card.

On one level, each of us lives within our own version of what the game means. For some of us, there are on field memories: I, like the singer in John Fogarty's song, played centerfield; after fifty years my mind and body remember chasing down and gloving certain fly balls as if they'd just been struck. But just as firm in my memory are games I've experienced only as a fan: games I've sat through on the edge of my seat, rooting for my team with a combination of superstition and prayer. And then there's the baseball I know through its lore—anecdotes and personalities I've read or been told about. So, though my idea of "baseball" is mine and mine alone, the scope of baseball is so universal that I and every other true baseball fan can recognize and take pleasure in the individual baseball world of another, especially when that private world is rendered as vividly and joyfully as Zvi A. Sesling renders his in *Simple Games*, his chapbook of baseball poems.

Poetry is perfect for baseball: the form is meant to express the ineffable. Through their poems, writers strive to make their individual experiences available to the reader, and, to fans of the sport, the language of baseball is a perfect conduit for such sharing.

In Sesling's first poem, "Sibby Sisti," he describes his "first baseball hero," a player whose name, to Sesling represented "a poetic sound, an alliteration." Before reading this poem, I'd never heard of this player. But, as a baseball fan, I can identify with the attachment—I have my own cache of favorite players, and Sesling taps into my definition of what "favorite" means. But his descriptions of this and other players, sites, and events do more than just connect me to past pleasures; the beauty of these poems, and of baseball, is that the lore actually expands my own experience. For example, I'd heard of Warren Spahn, but, after reading Sesling's poem, "Warren's Arm," I can now picture him, as he "let's the ball go like a prisoner escaping/ from jail, fast and low." I learn about Spahn's pitching motion, his uniform, his number, and his statistics—because, after all, one of the threads that connects baseball fans as both a private and universal phenomenon is its numbers.

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Through Sesling's memory, skill, and generous spirit, my own world of baseball now includes Sam the Jet, the first black player in Boston, former MVP Bob Eliot, and Rabbit Maranville. And while, as a Yankee fan, I'm well acquainted with Don Larsen's perfect game in the 1956 World Series, Sesling's poem about the feat, "Larsen's No-No" fills in details with the names of no less than twelve participants in that contest in twenty-one lines. But more than just contributing to the totality of my baseball world, Sesling's poems vitalize parallel associations. Both "Earl of Snohomish" and "Mr. Team" portray their subjects on their baseball cards. Although I never knew these players, Sesling's descriptions, such as of Bob Eliot posed "on one knee/ in the on-deck circle leaning on his bat/ not in prayer, but studying the pitcher/ waiting to hit" evoke memories of my own card collections— of my personal favorites and of the card-flipping games I played as a ten-year old on the school playground.

Some of Sesling's poems lament baseball's darker moments, such as "Kenesaw's Revenge," which discusses the commissioner's decision to void a female player's contract and a 1952 decision that "strikes out women by banning/ them completely from pro ball." In "Black Sox," Sesling describes a gambler in the stands, "looking every bit a rich dandy . . . / waving like he is drowning" during baseball's most infamous cheating scandal. It is clear that the poet feels that these events intrude on the purity of the game he loves so dearly. But even these poems expand beyond the history they depict, leading me to reflect upon other times the sport has disappointed its fans, such as the decade during which the rise in performance enhancing drugs forced asterisks upon some of baseball's most revered records.

Zvi Sesling in *Simple Game* often uses baseball as a lens through which to revisit important moments of his life, such as in the poem "The First Girl I Kissed," which equates his memory of that event with one of the sports well known tragedies. When pitcher Herb Score's career was ended by a line drive, "just as suddenly as the shot that/ takes out Score, I break up with the girl of the first kiss." Eventually, Sesling is "[f]orced to recover in a new town with a new girlfriend/ While the Indians pursue their first World Series win since 1948." The use of baseball history as the palimpsest upon which to transcribe our most enduring memories is a phenomenon shared by all true fans of the game.

"A poem," Archibald MacLeish writes in "Ars Poetica," "must not mean/ But be." Zvi Sesling in *Simple Game* transforms his life experience with baseball into poetry; his poems not only afford us entry into his world of Baseball, they lead us to a fresh assessment of our own memories. John Fogarty in his song "Centerfield" doesn't write, "Look at me, I can play centerfield" —it's "I can be centerfield." Because when we are part of this game, we become it: Sesling's baseball is my baseball and is the baseball of all fans who have surrendered themselves to this game. The memories we inhabit are conjoined, and though we may seem to live and die for particular teams, it's really one perpetual, timeless game that defines our world.