***Elegy for Ebbets* by Michael Steinberg**

**Review by Alan Zaremba, Associate Professor, Northeastern University**

*Elegy for Ebbets* by Michael Steinberg is a collection of seven essays and a short introduction about the author’s experience with and enthusiasm for baseball. Steinberg, according to the promotional literature that arrived with the book, has had a “love affair” with baseball since his days as an avid Brooklyn Dodger fan. That affection for the game comes through in every essay and nearly every page of this 100 page collection.

*“*Elegy for Ebbets*”* is one of the essays in the anthology. It is a sentimental piece about the old Brooklyn Dodgers’ ballpark, and, in general, the quality of older baseball parks when compared to many of their replacements. Two of the other essays (“Trading Off” and “Chin Music”) are about oppressive coaches the author had to endure during his high school days. “LA Breakdown” centers on Steinberg’s difficult first year of college at UCLA. That freshman year, however, included--as a lone positive element--the author’s experience managing and playing on his fraternity’s intramural softball team.

“Surgical Strike” and “The Last Road Trip” attest to what borders on the obsession Steinberg has for baseball. The former describes how seriously the author prepared to throw out the first pitch at a Michigan State baseball game. The latter--my favorite among the many very good pieces in the collection--describes an eight hour night journey the author and his wife took so that Steinberg could watch and potentially play in a championship softball game. The couple embarks on the journey the day before they must make an eight hour return trip in order to pack, and then travel two more hours to make a flight for a Paris vacation that his wife had planned for months. We are talking obsession.

The last article in the collection, “My Default Career*.”* describes how and why Steinberg became a professor, and writer of personal sports memoirs.

If being able to relate to the author’s experience is an important criterion, I am an excellent person to write a review of this book. Like the author, I am from Brooklyn, played stoopball and stickball with a red rubber Spaulding ball which everyone pronounced “spauldeen.” I went to Riis Park as a kid and was more taken by the softball games there than the beach, played hardball inside school gymnasiums, knew more than one Michael Saperstein (an obnoxious if skilled athlete who appears in “Trading Off*”)*. I’ve even had a hip replacement, write about sports, am a member of the tribe, and am a college professor who has sat through many of what Steinberg aptly labels “mind numbing meetings.”

So, as I read through the book, I said to myself, “I know this guy.”

And I like him and what he has written. It is an indication of my reaction to the volume that as soon as I completed it, I went searching for, found, and requested, another book by Steinberg, *Still Pitching.*

The author does an excellent job of describing situations and characters. While I knew Sapersteins—I never met a Jack Kerchman or Tom Sullivan—the tyrannical coaches in “Trading Off*”* and “Chin Music*.”*  I know them now. They may be anomalies but are depicted realistically and not as caricatures. Such coaches force teenagers to succumb to or challenge authority. Steinberg does the former in *“*Trading Off*”* (for the trade-off) and earns the reader’s admiration for how courageously he does the latter in “Chin Music.”

Like Steinberg, I am a zealot. I’ve been known to assume peculiar postures while watching ball games, irrationally believing that, for example, tapping one foot while holding onto the top of a chair might bring good fortune to the televised image of a baseball player in another time zone. However, my fanaticism pales in comparison to his as effectively depicted in “The Last Road Trip*”* and “Surgical Strike.” Those who study fandom can learn much by reading these two essays.

Some suggestions. I get the point in the title essay, “Elegy for Ebbets.*”* We look back nostalgically and sentimentally on our childhood sports experiences. However, a key here is that sometimes our adult recollections of these joyful times are the stuff of selective perception and retention. While I think the author suggests this with the juxtaposition of Ebbets Field and newer parks, it is not altogether clear that the critical comments he makes about newer parks acknowledges a selective retention.

The description of Shea Stadium for example is not entirely accurate. The Mets began play there in ‘64 not ‘63, and while some seats were not optimal, the same could be said for the old parks. In ‘63 for example, when the Mets were indeed still playing in the Polo Grounds, my dad took us to see Willie Mays’s return with the Giants in a doubleheader against the Mets. (Mays homered in his first at bat and I did not have to look it up). However, the fact is that we sat very near a pole and had to sway this way and that to avoid staring at a concrete slab for 18 innings. The author speaks of his positive experience with Fenway Park and how he once went there impulsively and was delighted that he did. Well, he caught a break. Had he been seated on the right field line beyond the foul pole he would have had to visit a chiropractor the next day as those seats face center field and not home plate. Also, if you happen to be seated at Fenway, (or the Polo Grounds, or Ebbets Field for that matter), next to a person who has not missed the buffet line, it can be an uncomfortable afternoon or evening despite the excitement on the field. I don’t doubt that Steinberg knows all this, and that his point was not that the stadiums of the past were jewels in every way, but it would have been good to bang out the point about sentimentality distorting the lens when making comparisons.

All who have ever published a book or even an article have experienced the embarrassment of having read and proofread, and have had others proofread, their works only to see, upon publication, spelling errors that cause one to cringe. I have certainly had that experience, even when a host of editors have taken a turn staring at the pages, and I’ve meticulously read through each line ten times. There are a number of typos in this book, and I imagine the author has now seen them. I hope readers who have not published books and not experienced this, are not off put by these errors.

Readers from Brooklyn and those eligible for social security might like this book especially, but any student of baseball and sports fandom regardless of vintage or where they hail will be glad they read the essays in this collection.

And they will, after reading “Chin Music” make sure their children read it as well.