



OBSERVER & ECCENTRIC GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

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Cranbrook grad writes engaging baseball novel

Battle Creek
By Scott Lasse
(William Morris)



LITTMANN

Brook and the varsity of Michigan graduate Scott Lasser. It takes us back to baseball as it should be played: for the love of the game, without million-dollar contracts, artificial turf and pricey box seats.

Koch & Sons Class A Amateur Baseball Club of Chicago has had a "dynasty" for four years in a row. A "dynasty" in its own right, it has spawned more big-league players than any other amateur team. Yet each year, when the national championship is held in Battle Creek, the Michigan boys' team is absent. "If Gividen swears it won't happen again. This year he'll be hard. No more keeping 'two-fifty hitters who play all positions adequately but none exceptionally.' The normally soft-hearted coach is determined this year will win, no matter what the cost.

And cost it does, although the price ordinarily seems small. Gividen is encouraged to recruit Luke James, a rookie who spent five years in prison for a crime of passion. Cautioning him not to "go down the rabbit" to meet the

young parables, but "when Gil sees Luke James; seeing the bat he believes, believes in the game and a God who intends men to play it." Luke is a natural. With him on board, the team can't lose.

But there's another cost to winning — a financial one. Uniforms, travel expenses and equipment don't come cheap. And the team can't make these days. So it's up to Gil to make up the difference from his modest income as a steel sales rep. Ironically, his aging Jewish immigrant father, who dislikes sports and made certain the younger Ben had no interest in the game, is inadvertently financing the team. With power of attorney, Gil can draw on his father's bank account, no questions asked. That's OK, provided the old man doesn't linger too long.

With a coach isn't the only one with a passion to win. There's also Ben Mervor, who "loves the game ... the dance of the infield practice and the pop of the ball in the catcher's mitt, the clutch of a signaller's bat on the catcher's arm on second, and the lean of a bigplayer as he rounds third base."

In fact, Ben is even more enamored with the game than with Emily, an Ann Arbor native, sister of an attorney, and a front door sign of "Property is Theft," believes her willingness to spend the considerable commissions Ben earns as stockbroker. Once a player in the major leagues, Ben is the star pitcher for his team. He's lately upped his batting average to .300. What will happen when ice picks and pain killers no longer

work? Does he have the guts to do whatever it takes to win, like throwing illegal spitters loaded with Vaseline?

Lasser's approach to story telling is like a summer breeze: soft and beguiling. We move easily from the conflict-ridden baseball diamond to the sterile order of a nursing home, from the gleaming, polished deck of a "magical place where bicycles hang from trees, refrigerators rest on porches ... and paint chips float in the wind." Plot construction is seamless, as events seem to unfold naturally, often subtly.

Then, for Lasser's characters, they are sympathetic and it's easy to identify with their goals and frustrations; the competitive spirit is, after all, universal. And like us, they are flawed. Lasser's characters are less than perfect, but their behavior has become a way of life.

Literature that is judgmental or draws straight lines between cause and effect is not longer fashionable. Yet it's hard to read Lasser's first novel without feeling that it's a morality tale. "Battle Creek" shows us what the price of winning - at any cost - can be. As the story suggests, all too often an innocent victim rather than the perpetrator pays the price.

"Battle Creek" will be available in local bookstores in May.

Eather Littmann is a resident of Bloomfield Township and a tutor in English and German. You can reach her by message at (313) 446-1006, phone at (313) 953-2047, mailbox number 1893. Her fax number is (248) 644-1314.

Martha Raye had local roots

Take It From the Big Mouth:
The Life of Martha Raye
By Jean Maddern Pitrone
(The University Press of Kentucky, \$25)



VICTORIA DIAZ tal in Butte
Montana in the

themselves at one location for more than about three days. Education for school-age performers often fell by the wayside, and consequently, she was only marginally literate for the rest of her life, according to this biography.

By the time her brother and sister died, Raye was an established screen star, stage performer and nightclub entertainer. Eventually, she would make a name for herself in television, also, hosting "The Martha Raye Show" in the early '60s, and making numerous guest appearances on other TV shows alongside her husband, Phyllis Diller.

cemetery, the only civilian so honored by the famed Special Forces Unit, the Green Berets.

In her research, Michigan writer Pitrone has uncovered several events in Rayo's life that will hold special appeal for Detroit-area readers. Among them: the week of Aug. 7, 1937, when the entertainer broke all admission records at Detroit's glittery Michigan Theater; the night in 1940 when she danced with Al Jolson at the Club City; the night with Al Jolson and Ruby Keeler in "Hold on to Your Hats"; and her sometimes rowdy appearances at Hamtramck's hot night spot "The Bowers" during the boom-

this century. Her brother, Buddy, was born literally backstage at a Grand Rapids theater when she was still a toddler. Both were groomed for show business, but they could walk away. Margo would go on to fame and fortune, and change her name to Martha Raye. Buddy would die in obscurity in his early 20s, an alcoholic, related to the showbiz world by a younger sister, Melody.

Martha Raye made her stage debut at age 3-1/2, singing a spirited version of the pop tune "Jade," as her mother, Peggy, sang immediately in the background. The little girl's initial performance drew so much applause that her parents, always looking for ways to acquire more and better bookings, interposed her in the show. By the time she was seven, she was "the star of the show" and her first bows onstage, and a year later, the talented brood's sister team "adapted themselves

But her professional success was nearly always shadowed by what her friend Milton Berle called "personal disaster." She was married three times — the first shortly after she arrived in Hollywood, to makeapp marriage; Bud Westmore; the last to Martin Harris, a "fan" 33 years her junior. Perhaps the most unfortunate of her marriages was her third, which was unhappy as the distant, rather cold relationship she had with her only child, Melody, who obviously if we are to believe this biography, played a major role in her mother's all-important career.

Readers who will remember Rayna chiefly as the "lark-in-the-bigmouth" apoke of the first of the big-mouthed television commercials may not be aware of the true extent of her singular devotion to her favorite audience, the American airman. Until they have read this book, they will not know that Rayna would give

Prizefighter Rocky Graziano said of Raye's performances that she "burned up more energy in the first 10 minutes of a fight than most of the other girls." And those of us who have never witnessed Raye perform in any medium will remember her rapid-fire speech, her exaggerated mannerisms, her unabashed use of profanity and lib. Even if we were not diehard fans of Martha Raye, few in an audience would complain that she lacked verve.

And, perhaps, for that very reason, the one wishes that the writing of this initial biography contained more liveliness. While "Take It from the Big Mouth" includes a substantial amount of revealing details about Raye's life, it fails to have taken special pains to present it fairly and objectively to the writer's style seems slightly dry and remote, tending to make us feel rather distanced from the subject. The book is well written, clear, quite often. "Take It from

While the children's appeal audiences brought the family measure of financial success they had never enjoyed before, came at a price that would affect Martha Raye permanently. The nature of the vaudeville circuit in its heyday required that performers travel almost constantly from city to city. In fact, it was unusual if entertainers found

and entertain some of the most remote outposts on her own, even helping out as a "nurse" in field hospitals and extending invitations to the soldiers to visit her when they returned home (many took her up on the invitation). Eventually, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. On her death, she was laid to rest at Fort Bragg military

Victoria Diaz is a Livonia freelance writer who specializes in book and theater reviews. You can reach her by voice mail at 953-2045, then press 1854.

LOCAL BESTSELLERS

- Bestsellers in the Great Lakes Region**
For the Week of April 12
Hardcover Fiction
 1. Tara Road, Maeve Binchy, Dell
 2. Testament, John Grisham, Doubleday
 3. Ashes to Ashes, Tami Hoag, Bantam
 4. The Innocent, Danielle Steel, Dell
 5. The Vampire, Ann Rice, Random House
 6. Abide with Me, E. Lynn Harris, Doubleday
 7. Hush Money, Robert B. Parker, Putnam
 8. Single & Single, John Leare, Scribner
 9. Poisonwood Bible, Barbara Kingsolver, Harper/Collins
 10. While I Was Gone, Susan Miller, Knopf
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