

Writers and words: Spring reading

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 10, 2009](#) issue

When unusually balmy weather occurs after a season of cold and snow, some of us cannot resist thinking about baseball. As I write, pitchers and catchers are packing up for their spring training—an event that for baseball fans is like the first Sunday in Advent for Christians. Like sap rising in the spring, hope again rises in our hearts.

Baseball inspires devotion and great writing. One of my favorite books on the subject is the collection *Diamonds Are Forever: Artists and Writers on Baseball*. Among other remarkable essays, it contains John Updike's "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," about Boston Red Sox slugger Ted Williams's last game. (In Updike's title, which mimics the sports page headlines, "Hub" refers to Boston; "Kid" was Williams's nickname.)

Updike, who died in January, and whom I have been quoting for several issues, describes Fenway Park, the fans and the home run that Williams hit with his final swing. It's the stuff of sport mythology, and Updike was up to recording it. He tells of how Williams was running around the bases "at the center of our beseeching screaming . . . as he always ran out home runs—unhurriedly, unsmilingly, head down, as if our praise were a storm of rain to get out of." The crowd continued to cheer after Williams entered the Red Sox dugout, pleading with him to return to the field for a tip of his hat. Updike's words may be the best ever written about that moment in baseball: "Our noise for some seconds passed beyond excitement into a kind of immense, open anguish, a wailing lament to be saved. But immortality is nontransferable. . . . Gods do not answer letters."

I never met Updike, but I'm still grieving his death because he has been a stimulus to my thinking, a resource throughout my ministry. His death reminded me of two other authors who died recently and who also had provocative things to say about religion and God. Norman Mailer was a colorful character who seemed to love the roughest and seamiest side of life. Not long before he died he granted a series of interviews, which are published in the book *On God*. Mailer said that he was an atheist for 30 years before coming to acknowledge that he did believe in God. He

tried reading theology and was repelled. Theologians, Mailer concluded, “were undernourished in their appetite for inquiry.” I wish he could have had a conversation with the theologian Joseph Sittler, for one. Mailer came to believe in God, he said, because of his intense lifelong “exploration of human reality.” He envisioned God as “an artist, not a lawgiver, a mighty source of creative energy,” and human beings as God’s “most developed artwork.”

Novelist Kurt Vonnegut, who died two years ago, referred to himself as an “unbelieving believer.” The author of *Slaughterhouse-Five* once said that perhaps the most important words anybody ever uttered are “blessed are the meek.” Not long before his death, Vonnegut said: “If I should ever die, God forbid, let this be my epitaph: The only proof he needed for the existence of God was music.”