

Route 7 Review

Vol. 2 / 2014

www.route7review.com

McBride

JOSEPH McBRIDE

My Circuitous Path to Becoming a Writer

I have three people to thank for turning me to a career as a writer: my mother, Casey Stengel, and John F. Kennedy. An odd assortment indeed.

Both my parents were newspaper reporters. My father, Raymond E. McBride, wrote for the Milwaukee *Journal* for more than forty years. My mother, Marian Dunne McBride, was forced to leave the *Journal* when they married but later worked for the rival Milwaukee *Sentinel*, covering women in politics, including at the Johnson and Nixon White Houses. I learned a lot about writing and politics from both my parents, but my mother was more supportive of my writing career than my father, who often seemed to view it as a form of rivalry. My mother helped me get my first professional article published when I was twelve. It was a feature about Greg Spahn, the son of Warren Spahn, the greatest left-handed pitcher in baseball history. Greg and I were on the same Little League team, and my mother suggested I write about him. She edited and polished the piece and arranged for a friend to publish it in a national school magazine, the *Young Catholic Messenger*.

The same week it was published, in May 1960, I received a letter from Kennedy thanking me for my help as a volunteer in his successful Wisconsin presidential primary campaign. Again I have my mother to thank for recruiting me for that campaign, since she was vice chairman of the Wisconsin Democratic Party. Baseball remained my primary interest for the next three years, however. In May 1963, as a high school sophomore, I started writing a book on baseball slang. I was inspired by eavesdropping on the legendary baseball manager Casey Stengel as he talked his inimitable "Stengelese" before a Mets game at Milwaukee County Stadium. I wanted to learn more about baseball slang but couldn't find a book on the subject, so I had to write my own; such is often a writer's motivation. I had to teach myself how to write a book and felt I had

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to keep the project secret, since I worried that my parents would stop me from writing it. Imagine their surprise when, three years later, I came downstairs holding the finished manuscript. It seems strange that they never asked what I had been doing up there with the door of my room closed for three years. I didn't know how to get a book published, but my father was helpful in prodding me over the years to put it back on the market. It was finally published (in 1980, updated) as *High and Inside: The Complete Guide to Baseball Slang*. I updated it again in 1997 as *High and Inside: An A-to-Z Guide to the Language of Baseball*. I have yet another edition on my agenda; once you start on a book subject, you can never stop.

In the early months of writing my book on baseball, part of me must have seen myself as pursuing a career as an author, but consciously, at least, inspired by Kennedy and my parents, I planned to become a lawyer and run for political office. But when Kennedy was shot that November, my world was turned inside out. I was already in the process of losing my faith in my education and my religion, and I stopped believing in my country's political system after my candidate was murdered and the government did not want to solve the crime. I didn't realize at first that this would lead me eventually to becoming a full-time writer and abandoning any political aspirations. But by the time I started writing my second book, *Orson Welles*, at the University of Wisconsin in 1966, I knew that books were my vocation. And at heart I have always been an investigative reporter. My dedication to finding the truth about what happened to President Kennedy kept growing over the years, until, in 1982, I launched my own investigation. That led to my seventeenth book, *Into the Nightmare: My Search for the Killers of President John F. Kennedy and Officer J. D. Tippit*, published in 2013. I wondered if finishing that labor of love would help me put the assassination to rest emotionally, but I found that while I felt more at peace with my need to make a contribution toward finding the truth, that search for me will never end, and a writer can never stop writing.

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