

Turning a Celebrity's Story Into a Salable Book

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New York Times (1857-Current file); Mar 23, 1992;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006)

pg. C18

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Whose voice do we hear in "Darryl," the as-told-to "jockography" of Darryl Strawberry? That of the former New York Met or of his writer, Art Rust Jr.?

The book has gained notice as much for Mr. Strawberry's opinions about his old teammates and personal problems, as for how ornately they are expressed.

Strong opinion and augmented phraseology mingled in his claim that being black on the mainly white Mets made Mr. Strawberry feel "as if I were playing baseball at Dred Scott Memorial Park in glorious downtown Johannesburg."

That statement is one of many in "Darryl" that are hard to plausibly expect from Mr. Strawberry, now a Los Angeles Dodger, who never spoke with the book's frequently florid style during his eight years in New York.

Here is Mr. Strawberry on a home run: "I put the kibosh on Sweet Lou's

little Redlegs by bouncing a 450-foot corker of a shot off the BALL sign on the Shea scoreboard."

On his father during a family fight: "He was weaving, kind of staggering, but all the more menacing because you knew he was speaking a version of the real truth, even though it was 'potentiated,' shall we say, by the liquor."

On his personal demons: "Evil was at work, throwing long shadows across my triumph, like the coming of night."

Mr. Rust, who was the host of a popular sports-talk show on WABC Radio and now contributes commentary to WBLS-FM, said the thoughts behind "Darryl" were Mr. Strawberry's, but the style and occasional poetic license were his.

"I knew this would happen," said Mr. Rust. "I'm not putting words in his mouth. I might change a phrase, but not the meaning. From time to time, he'd say things one way, I'd say, 'Blah, blah, blah,' and he'd say, 'O.K.'"

The Co-Author as Educator

And about Dred Scott? Said Mr. Rust: "I was teaching him some history. I asked, 'Do you like that analogy?' He said, 'Yes.'"

The relationship between a writer and an athlete, an entertainer or a politician is tricky. The celebrity has the story, but lacks the ability to write it. The writer has the technical skills but needs to draw the story out of the star.

"I tell people that my job is to write the book you would write if you were a writer, not the book I want to

write," said David Fisher, who has collaborated with sports figures such as Ron Luciano, the former umpire, and Tom Lasorda, the Dodgers manager.

"It's a challenge to get out of the way," said Jerry Jenkins, the writer of "Miracle Man" (Word Publishing), the new autobiography of Nolan Ryan, the 45-year-old future Hall of Fame pitcher. "I didn't want Nolan to sound like me."

A collaborator spends as much time as possible interviewing a star athlete to understand the star's life, speech patterns and syntax to create a narrative that sounds as if the celebrity were telling the story, albeit with the language expurgated and articulation added.

Easy on the Metaphors

"You can't make him sound like F. Scott Fitzgerald," said Rick Reilly, who wrote the autobiographies of Wayne Gretzky, the all-time leading hockey scorer, and Brian Bosworth, a former football player. "You scale down your style. I write short sentences without many metaphors."

The best collaborators raise issues and ideas that challenge the subjects to think differently about themselves. Telling Mr. Strawberry about Dred Scott may have motivated the player to regard his experience with racism in a new vein, but the reference may have been too old or obscure to stick with Mr. Strawberry, or with many Americans who may not recall the slave who figured in an 1857 United States Supreme Court case. "I am

sorry about that one," said Mr. Rust.

The process of turning taped transcript into a cogent narrative involves creating a literary mold in which the subject plausibly fits. Lonnie Wheeler said that for all the time he spent with Hank Aaron, major league baseball's home-run king, before he wrote "I Had a Hammer" (HarperCollins), he struggled to transform transcript into prose.

"If he said something one way, how could I write it differently?" he said. "But I was there to make the subject more literary. The way people talk isn't the way you write. I wrote it in something reflective of his voice."

Bo Knows Good Lines

A writer is blessed if a celebrity possesses the rare gift of a distinctive voice. Dick Schaap, who wrote "Bo Knows Bo" (Doubleday), with Bo Jackson, the former football and baseball superstar, said: "You don't want lines to stand out that aren't the athlete's. My favorite line from Bo is what he said about the general manager of the Kansas City Royals: 'His crackers don't sit well in my bowl of soup.' A Jewish guy from Brooklyn couldn't make that up."

How involved a star becomes with the final product varies. Some regard their "co-written" book with seriousness, others cavalierly as the equivalent of a product endorsement, and others don't read it at all.

Charles Barkley, the bald basketball superstar of the Philadelphia 76ers, exhibited the worst case of literary star neglect. He said he had been misquoted (a charge he later retracted) in his new book, "Outrageous," written by Roy Johnson, and admitted he had not even read the book.

Jeff Neuman, the Simon & Schuster editor who acquired the Barkley book, said: "The things Charles said were misquoted were things that had been said before. It can't help a book when the person whose book it is gives any reason to question its credibility."

His Book, but Not His Words

Mr. Strawberry has not disowned his book, but he apparently didn't read it carefully before its release and did not remember Dred Scott. But even though Mr. Strawberry backs his book (which has 75,000 copies in print), his collaboration with Mr. Rust went a step beyond the traditional star-writer relationship.

The book's tone, reminiscent of Mr. Rust's natural locutions, is an admission that Mr. Strawberry has a story to tell, but it was told in the style the writer knew best: his own.

"Art dealt with it the way he wanted to, and Darryl did not object," said Stuart Applebaum, the senior vice president of Bantam Doubleday Dell, the publisher of the book. "He has a trust in Art to put in his words what Darryl felt."

Mr. Rust dramatized the controversy in "Darryl" but is it still Mr. Strawberry's story or one channeled through his writer? Would his story have been told differently in the hands of a less venturesome collaborator?

That is a nonissue to Mr. Rust, who said: "Any collaborator injects himself. It doesn't change the substance. I wasn't thinking about my style. I wanted it to sound intelligent, not like The Police Gazette."

Tom Diyja, one of the editors of the book, said many of the objections to "Darryl" stemmed from Mr. Strawberry's speaking out on subjects he had rarely discussed, and not from Mr. Rust's style. He said the private Mr. Strawberry speaks with great personal reflection. "If an idea was well expressed, I let a lot of it go," Mr. Diyja said. "It is patronizing to think that some guy would say, 'Strawberry's not smart enough to say that.'"