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# HOW 'BOUT THEM O'S?

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By Mary McAllister



WINNER OF FLORIDA PEN WOMEN  
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

## **How 'Bout Them O's?**

I was three families removed from my family of origin in 1966, the year the Baltimore Orioles won the World Series.

I started out in Baltimore with an original mother and father. But then, my mother died and I was “traded” you might say, to another team, a man and his wife who were distantly related. Still, I was lucky. In an in-family adoption like mine, you eventually get to know the circumstances that caused it and at least a little something about your original parents. And sometimes you get to stay in the same city in which you were born.

So, we lived in Baltimore through my 6<sup>th</sup> grade year, when we moved to rural Pennsylvania. The cows were nice, but I missed certain things about the city (and this was before it got its designation as “Charm City”), not the least of which was going to baseball games at Memorial Stadium with my Pop, my name for the father I now lived with. I also missed the crack of the ball on the cement-paved alley during handball games behind the Baltimore rowhouse of my adopted parents. I played relentlessly—if not skillfully—because I liked the suspense of the ball’s trajectory as it came flying at me (but, because of my lack of talent, not a great amount of suspense). I liked the running around to bases when I miraculously hit the ball and the “keep going” shouts from the other girls I played with as I looked back to judge whether I could make it to third base on my rather weak hit. I could have played all night on the promise that the next hit would be the one that gave me permission to run home (a permission unavailable to me in real life, perhaps).

When my Pop and I first started going to the games, I was still too young to understand the fine points of the game, but I learned. I knew, in my family, that when someone asked “How ‘bout

## How 'Bout Them O's? by Mary McAllister

them O's?" (a question you were likely to hear all over Baltimore), it was not a "How-are-you-fine" question. It was an invitation to delve deep into the merits of, first and foremost, the manager, who was Hank Bauer in 1966. And then, to dissect the latest news regarding Frank Robinson's performance or Andy Etchebarren's catching, and go on from there.

I studied all the players and their stats as diligently as I studied for tests at school. And I was mostly ready for the "exam" when we'd go to a game. As a girl, I couldn't aspire to a career in major league baseball, but I could for sure be an expert in the knowledge of the game. Back then, I couldn't even aspire to be a bat-girl (not the super hero kind, either). That position didn't even exist until the early 2000s, although Gwen Goldman had written to the Yankees asking for such a position in 1961. It took only 70 years to finally realize her dream.

The excitement as Pop and I bought the tickets and headed in a stream of people into the stadium was almost unbearable. We'd find our seats and I didn't even care if I got snacks, although the smell of peanuts invaded the air behind the seats until the moment we entered the stadium proper.

The sun seemed to provide just the right yellow to showcase the ultra-green grass, manicured to perfection with bright white lines and bases arranged at precise distances.

I waited patiently for the game to begin and watched, rapt, as each player was introduced. My Pop would lean down and tell me something about each one until I felt like I knew them as well as I did all my many uncles. We'd drive home after the game, tired but talking nonstop, and by the time I got home, I was ready to play some kind of ball out back in the alley.

Stuck in Pennsylvania, I really missed all that. Miraculously, it seemed to me, when it was time for me to attend high school, my parents decided to send me to school back in Baltimore where I

would stay with an aunt and uncle (that was the twice-removed place). But, I loved being back in Baltimore, where I could take the city bus to a game if I wanted. On weekends, though, another aunt and uncle team (that was the thrice-removed place) would take me out to dinner, which seriously interfered with my freedom to go off to the stadium on a Sunday afternoon.

That aunt and uncle team were an aberration in the family, as baseball was not only not the main topic of conversation, it wasn't even a thought. But, they could see how much I liked it and in that summer of 1966, the Orioles were doing really well. I was delirious when they won the Pennant but the possibility that they could go on to the World Series—against the Dodgers, no less—well, it was a long shot, for sure, and I knew it. But, there they were, ready for their first World Series, and I was determined to be part of it. I had to watch every game and Jim and Dolly (the aunt and uncle) agreed to let me watch instead of going out to dinner. I also desperately wanted to call my Pop, as I was a little homesick and wanting to talk to him about whatever happened in the game. However, the phone calls would have been long-distance back then, and quite expensive. And yet, permission was granted (a sign from God about the importance of baseball) by both parties—as long as I reversed the charges and didn't call after every play.

“You really like this game, huh?” my aunt asked.

“Oh, yes, It's everything,” I said with all the drama of a 15-year-old girl.

“Surely, not everything.” She looked at me with a look that told me I shouldn't think like that.

“It's in your blood, I suppose,” she said.

How 'Bout Them O's? by Mary McAllister

“Well,” she said, when she saw my confusion, “your father [she meant the original] was picked up by a major league team when he was young. By all accounts, he was a really good ballplayer. Isn’t that right, Jim?”

This was news to me, but, like I said, in an in-family adoption, you eventually hear it all.

“He played semi-pro with Joe DiMaggio out in San Francisco,” Jim added.

“Joe Di Maggio, really?”

“I think so, but I’m not sure.”

This was quite a development, but as stunning as this new information was, the game on TV was about to begin. I would deal with all intrusions later (and I would confirm the truth of this much later when my sister showed me a condolence letter from Joe DiMaggio to our father upon the death of our mother. My father’s career in baseball was short-lived, though, as it seemed neither his talent or his temperament were suited to the discipline required).

Game 4 was about to start and the Orioles were up three games. The tension was unbelievable. You could feel it coming through the TV set.

“Remember, these two pitchers weren’t that great in the first game,” said my Pop on the phone.

“I know, but really, Dave McNally is younger than Drysdale, right?”

“We’ll see if that matters,” he said.

Hang up.

Call again.

Bottom of the fourth. I’d kept myself from calling until then.

How 'Bout Them O's? by Mary McAllister

“A home run, a home run. Did you see that? It was Frank” I yelled as if I were trying to reach Pennsylvania with my voice alone with no need for the phone receiver. There had been no other hits.

Hang up.

Call again.

As Boog Powell got up to bat, the stadium vibrated with one voice, “Boog, Boog.” But, he didn’t score.

Disappointment. Anticipation.

Ninth inning.

Call again.

McNally wound up and threw toward Johnson on the Dodgers—a fly out.

For a moment, everything went quiet as it took the realization that they won to sink in. And then, the crowd erupted into happiness, tears and laughter and hugging all around.

“Oh, God, they won. They won.” I screamed. I jumped up and down.

“Yeah, they sure did. And they made history doing it,” said my Pop.

“I can’t believe it,” I said. I didn’t much care about the stats or history at that moment. (But, they *had* made history. They’d swept the Dodgers in four games, the Dodgers, who were shut out for 33 consecutive innings, and they gave Baltimore a place in the game-at-large that they still have today.)

“Believe it,” Pop said.

“The World Series, the *World* Series.”

“Yes, honey, but we’d better get off the phone now.”

“OK, bye. See you soon, Pop.”

The idea of a series that determined the best something in the world was a thing that appealed to a girl who needed something larger than her circumstances right then.

The Orioles would go on to win two more World Series, in 1970 and in 1983. I would follow them through it all but not with as much excitement as I had in 1966, when baseball provided me with a kind of identity—I was a girl who loved baseball—and a lasting connection with my new family.

For all the ensuing years, not always intentionally, I have seemed to slide toward people who also liked baseball. In college, my history professor introduced me to the writing of Roger Angell in the *New Yorker*. There, I found someone who was a true student of the game and who could articulate the ineffable feeling of a perfect pitch or a generous swing, and who would understand how even a young girl could feel surrounded by the “web of baseball.”