

**Interview with Albert A. Bell, Jr.**

***Author of Perfect Game, Imperfect Lives: A Memoir Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Don Larsen's Perfect Game***

Reader Views would like to welcome Albert A. Bell Jr., author of the new book "Perfect Game, Imperfect Lives: A Memoir Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Don Larsen's Perfect Game." Albert is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

**Juanita:** Albert, thanks for talking with us today. Would you please tell us about the story you tell in your new book "Perfect Game, Imperfect Lives"?

**Albert:** Thank you for the opportunity, Juanita. The story is my life as an 11-year-old in the summer of 1956, following my beloved New York Yankees and my hero, Mickey Mantle, while my family was preparing to move from upstate South Carolina to Cincinnati. My life had felt pretty close to perfect up to that point, and I couldn't understand why we had to be pulled away from the security of an extended family – grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins – to go off to this strange place that was so hard to spell. The world seemed imperfect at that time – the Cold War, the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, this new music called rock-and-roll – but the one thing that didn't seem to change was the Yankees.

**Juanita:** What inspired you to write your book?

**Albert:** I collect vintage baseball cards, from the 1950s. At some point in 2005 I was adding one to my collection and it struck me that the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Don Larsen's perfect game was coming up. I've always been intrigued by that game, so I wanted to write something about it. As I worked on the project, I realized that the most effective way to tell the story was through my eyes as a kid.

**Juanita:** What did baseball mean to you, as an 11-year old, at the time your memoir takes place?

**Albert:** Baseball was an obsession for me. Since I lived in the South, we could play it a good part of the year. I've always appreciated that there is no clock in baseball, so you don't have to get frantic at the end, trying to get in one more play or score one more time. Each side gets 27 outs, no matter how long it takes to record them. The ball itself is so much more satisfying to hold than a football or basketball. It fits the hand, and the seams allow you to grip it firmly. I played the outfield, like Mantle, and I loved running to catch a fly ball. I don't think there's a prettier play in sports than an outfielder running to the exact spot where he can catch a fly ball. To do that requires a combination

of physics and ballet. In addition to the game itself, I loved collecting baseball cards. The cards of the mid-1950s were works of art, the equivalent of the 1957 Chevy.

**Juanita:** How did you end up watching this historic game? And, give us a feeling of your experience as the game played out.

**Albert:** When I moved to Cincinnati, in September after school had started, I was “the new kid.” I was/am a shy person, so I didn’t fit in very easily. Another boy in my class was also new that year, so we found one another on the fringes of the “in-group.” This boy was from Brooklyn, an avid Dodgers’ fan. But at least he was a baseball fan. We lived in the same apartment complex and became close friends. On Monday, Oct. 8, we decided to leave school at lunch time and go to his apartment (because both of his parents worked) to watch the game. I wasn’t really aware of the “perfect game.” It had been over 30 years since anyone in the major leagues had pitched a perfect game, so people didn’t think about the possibility much. My friend was keeping score. About the sixth inning we realized the Dodgers had no hits. The announcers on TV were coy about what was happening, because no one was supposed to mention a no-hitter in progress, so as not to jinx it. My friend yelled at the TV, “Hey, Larsen! You’re pitching a no-hitter.” I just wanted the Yankees to win. They had lost to the Dodgers in the 1955 Series and had lost the first two games of the ’56 Series before coming back to win two. The fifth game was crucial. Everybody knew that. It was in Yankee Stadium, where the Dodgers didn’t do well. Games 6 and 7 would be back in Ebbetts Field, where the Yankees had a horrendous record. My focus was on Mantle. He hit a home run and made a spectacular catch, so I was delighted. But he also grounded out with a couple of runners on base.

**Juanita:** What was the mindset of the nation during in 1956?

**Albert:** The mid-1950s is often depicted as a kind of Golden Age. Eisenhower, a grandfatherly figure, was president. We had gotten through the Berlin Airlift and the Korean War. World War II was ten years behind us, the memory beginning to dim a bit. The economy was booming. Work was beginning on the interstate highway system. Ninety percent of Americans lived within range of at least two TV stations. Think “Ozzie and Harriet” and “Father Knows Best.” But if you go back and look at newspaper headlines from that decade, you see the constant anxiety about the Russians. Khrushchev had his finger on the button. Would he launch the bomb? (At least we knew how to duck-and-cover.) Racial tensions seemed to be heightened every day. There was a great deal of pressure to conform to an image of the perfect suburban family, but juvenile delinquency was also on the rise. Norman Mailer has called the ‘50s “the worst decade in the history of mankind.” It wasn’t *that* bad, but it was not an easy time in which to live.

**Juanita:** Who exactly was Don Larsen? Where did he come from, and what was his life like after his record-breaking perfect game?

**Albert:** Don Larsen was born in Michigan City, IN, and grew up in San Diego. After military service during the Korean War (he only got as far as Hawaii), he joined the St. Louis Browns, who became the Baltimore Orioles in 1954. Larsen’s record was 3-21 that year, but two of the games he won were against the Yankees. In 1955 he was traded to the Yankees. That year he was 9-2; in 1956

his record was 11-5. But he wasn't a star. His name was even misspelled on the Yankees' team card in '56. Casey Stengel said Larsen could be one of the top pitchers in the game if he would put his mind to it. Larsen himself, in his book *The Perfect Yankee*, admits he never had the self-discipline to achieve the greatness which he might have had with his athletic ability. (He was a good enough hitter that he was sometimes used as a pinch-hitter; he hit 14 home runs in his career.) After the perfect game, Larsen fell back to the level of mediocrity he had occupied for most of his career. He won 10 games in 1957, but never reached double figures again. He was traded several times and did return to Yankee Stadium as a member of the San Francisco Giants in 1962, winning a game in relief in the World Series. He finished his career in 1967 with an 81-91 record.

**Juanita:** Why were baseball and the World Series such important aspects of American culture in the 1950s?

**Albert:** Because there weren't any other professional sports worth paying attention to at that time. The NFL wouldn't really attract national attention until that historic Giants-Colts playoff game in 1958. The NBA in 1956 was still playing in Fort Wayne and Syracuse. Bill Russell was drafted by the Celtics that spring, and Wilt Chamberlain was in college, but their impact on the game would not be felt for several more years. Football and basketball both started their seasons when baseball was over and finished up before the next baseball season began. *Sports Illustrated* said, in 1956, that "not even sex will ever replace baseball." Since there were no extended playoffs in football and nobody paid any attention to basketball or hockey, the World Series was THE championship. They played it in early October, when the weather was perfect, and the games were in the afternoon, not at 9 or 10 at night, as they are now.

**Juanita:** You chose to not write solely about Don Larsen, and the New York Yankees' perfect game, but instead, you captured a moment in time, through the eyes of an 11-year-old boy. Would you tell us about your creative storytelling, and why you decided to write in this way?

**Albert:** This is the first book I've ever done that was at all autobiographical. I began it thinking I would just write about the men who played in the game. And heaven knows their lives off the field were imperfect enough. I also saw how I could work in some social history of the time. Then, one night at my writers' group, I read a bit where I had introduced myself as the viewpoint character. They told me the book was starting to come alive. I came to realize the story was as much about me as it was about Larsen and the Yankees. I have written a number of novels, and I've always enjoyed books that were plot-driven rather than character-focused. The difference this time was that the events I described actually happened. At some points I have added a touch or two to make the point clearer, but all I've done is reflect on my life. I hope the reader can identify with the character.

**Juanita:** What did Don Larsen's and the New York Yankees' perfect game do to the hearts and minds of Americans?

**Albert:** People sat back in amazement. Few could remember the last perfect game (in 1922), and this was the first – and still only – perfect game under the pressure of the World Series. Larsen became an instant celebrity. One TV booking agent got into the Yankees' dressing room that afternoon and Larsen was on TV within a day or two. But the reaction faded rather quickly. Tensions

were high in the Middle East (Egypt seized the Suez Canal a short time later) and the Soviet Union was getting ready to send troops into Hungary to crush a popular revolt there. I think the effect has been more long-term. There have been 15 other perfect games since the modern era of baseball began in 1903, but still not another in the World Series, or in any kind of post-season play. All you can do is shake your head and wonder how a non-entity like Larsen could accomplish this.

**Juanita:** 1956 was obviously a very important time in your life Albert. How do the experiences of this historical event still influence you?

**Albert:** 1956 was a turning point in my life. When we moved to Cincinnati I dropped a nickname I had come to despise. (My writers' group made me reveal it in the book, but you'll have to buy a copy to find out.) Being the new kid in sixth grade reinforced my basic shyness, and then we moved again the next year. But, as Santiago says to the boy in *The Old Man and the Sea*, "Have faith in the Yankees, my son." The Yankees of that era seemed to me a symbol of steady accomplishment. They won almost all the time, and they could even pull off a perfect game. My understanding of it has been tarnished somewhat by what I've since learned about the personal lives of some of the players, but I still look to them and to that era as a model of success.

**Juanita:** Albert, who would enjoy reading "Perfect Game, Imperfect Lives"? Who is your reading audience?

**Albert:** Anyone who remembers the 1950s will enjoy it. Anyone who loves baseball will want to read it, I think. Kids who've heard about Mantle and the Yankees of that era should enjoy it, and I think they will be amused to see how little growing up has actually changed in fifty years. One reader said it was "a book that women will buy for their husbands and then read themselves." I hope that proves true.

**Juanita:** What do you want readers to ultimately understand by reading your book "Perfect Game, Imperfect Lives"?

**Albert:** I hope they will gain an appreciation of some universal themes, not only in the game of baseball, but in the struggles we all face as we grow up and live our lives, striving to make them the best they can be, but always faced with the realization that nothing is perfect.

**Juanita:** Thanks for taking time to talk with us today Albert. We hope much success for you and your new book "Perfect Game, Imperfect Lives"? How can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

**Albert:** People can sample my work at <http://www.albertbell.com>. There are chapters from this book and all of my others posted there, as well as links for ordering.