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Writer Pat Jordan plays hardball with his subjects

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Book Editor

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Pat Jordan is Fort Lauderdale's secret "national treasure." At least that's what *Booklist*, the magazine of the American Library Association, calls him. Author of 13 books and more than a thousand magazine articles, Jordan lives quietly with wife Susie in a small Key West-style house, decorated with Haitian art, in Victoria Park.

"My wife calls me that all the time," Jordan says of the *Booklist* accolade. He adds, "I'm starting to be hip online now for some reason. I'm both a national treasure and a legend, and I don't get respect for either."

Joking aside, Jordan thinks of himself as "the last man standing, one of the last of the old-time freelance writers." No doubt, he's one of the best. Now 67, he's been anthologized alongside Ernest Hemingway, Mary McCarthy, Joan Didion, William Faulkner and E.B. White in *The Norton Reader*, a widely used college textbook. Yet he doesn't mingle with the South Florida literary community. His friends are his next-door neighbors, "a couple of little old ladies," guys he works out with at the gym, the vet who looks after his beloved dogs.

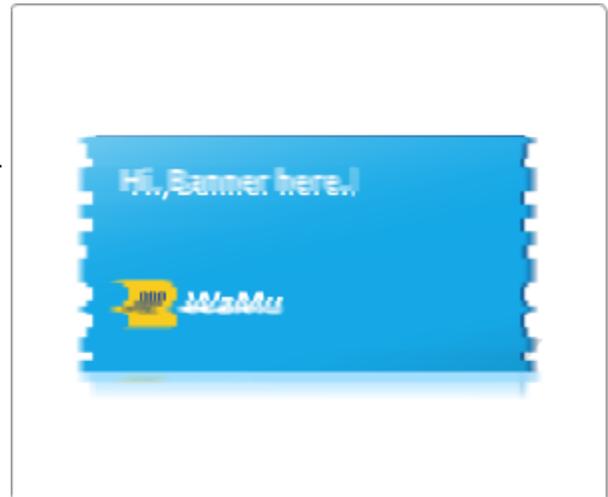
"I never had any dealings with any writers," Jordan says, settling back in the desk chair in his study, the only room in the house displaying memorabilia from his writing career or his days as a failed baseball pitcher. "I've always worked from home. I live a normal life. I don't want to go to the gym and have someone grab me and say, 'I didn't know you were a writer!' I have no interest in that."

What brings Jordan into the public light now is the publication of his most recent collection, *The Best Sports Writing of Pat Jordan* (Persea Books).

"I'll talk for a book," Jordan says. "To sell a book I'll do anything."

'All-American boy'

The son of Pasquale Giordano, who named his son "Pat Jordan" so he could "grow up to be an all-American boy," Jordan showed athletic promise as a boy in Fairfield, Conn. He signed a \$50,000 contract with the then-Milwaukee Braves, but washed out of baseball following a minor-league batting-practice scuffle with another "bonus baby," teammate Joe Torre. "We made up years later," Jordan says. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me."



That's because failure in baseball resulted, five years and several dead-end jobs later, in Jordan's writing career. While he writes with insight about stars — Wilt Chamberlain, Tom Seaver, Greg Louganis — Jordan seems to have an affinity for sport's losers.

"I'm drawn to losers because if you're a success at something, you generally don't want to think about it and screw it up," Jordan says. "If you're a failure, you ask 'why did I fail?' So I find losers more interesting than winners. They're more introspective. The first original thought I had was when I was driving home from Waycross, Ga., after the Braves released me."

Remarkable access

Jordan's specialty is the personality profile, and *The Best Sports Writing* is full of his precise, sometimes savage, assessments of the famous (Roger Clemens, pre-steroid scandal, comes off as "a 14-year-old boy with ADD") and the less widely known (the sad tale of Efren Reyes, a simple Filipino man with a genius for tournament pool).

His subjects give him remarkable access to their lives, even their private thoughts, as in "Trouble in Paradise," a 1980 article dissecting the marriage of baseball star Steve Garvey and his talk-show host wife, Cyndy. Jordan caught the couple in their early 30s, when the strain of Garvey's all-consuming commitment to baseball, his failure to mature, began to wear on an increasingly dissatisfied Cyndy, who opened up to Jordan with perhaps ill-advised candor. He lays out the facts with complex structural strategies more often seen in fiction. The result is a harsh but nuanced portrait. The Garveys sued Jordan and *Inside Sport* magazine for \$11.2 million.

"You don't want to get sued," Jordan says. "I got everything right. I had the quotes and everything, and I got sued. Which confused me."

After the Garveys enjoyed a spate of favorable press, they quietly dropped the suit. A divorce followed in 1985, with Cyndy by then calling Steve "a sociopath."

"Sometimes you write something in a story that's going to hurt someone's feelings," Jordan says. "I always want to get the person exactly as they are. If you're a good guy, I'm the safest guy in the world to talk to. If you're not a good guy, lock the door and don't let me in. But a good person, as you reveal them, you reveal a wart or two, and it crushes them."

Not all sports

Readers coming to Jordan for the first time through the new collection might get the idea he's a sports writer. But he's written for publications ranging from *Sports Illustrated* to *Playboy*, *Esquire* to *The New York Times Magazine*. He even wrote a column for *New York Woman*. For eight years he covered actors for *GQ*. He's written about coal miners in western Virginia, white supremacists in Michigan. He's pilloried Burt Reynolds for not being serious about his talent, and produced sympathetic profiles of porn stars Traci Lords (smart) and Marilyn Chambers (sweet).

"Nah, I don't care if they think I'm a sports writer," Jordan says. "I'll take any readers I can get. I've got three novels, nobody's read them."

Perhaps most notoriously — though not in the new collection — Jordan has written about the estranged relationship between wife Susie and her daughter, actress Meg Ryan. Mother and daughter fell out, according to Jordan, over Ryan's marriage to actor Dennis Quaid. When Susie tried to warn her daughter

about Quaid's cocaine habit, Meg broke all contact, and began airing her grievances with her mother in the press — even though, Jordan says, Quaid went into treatment within a few weeks. After two years, Jordan tired of seeing his wife come home from the grocery store, crying over what she'd seen in the supermarket tabloids.

"My cardinal rule with my wife is, treat her right and I don't even care if you like me," Jordan says. "[Mess] with my wife, and I become Meg Ryan's mom's pitbull."

Jordan's piece told the story from his and Susie's point of view. Ryan, he says, immediately stopped talking publicly about her mother. The two have had no contact since 1989.

"But if Meg Ryan called up today and said, 'Mom, I'm sorry, I want to see you,' I'd be picking her up from the airport," Jordan says.

Susan Ryan Jordan, who married Pat in 1984, is an author, too. Her book, *The Immune Spirit: A Story of Love, Loss and Healing* (HCI, 2001), details her battle with breast cancer.

"When women hear you've been a survivor for 30 years, it gives them hope," she says.

Susie doesn't discuss Meg in public. "It's an old story she'd prefer to let lie," Jordan says. "Read Chapter 24 of *The Immune Spirit*. That clarifies what happened between [Meg] and Susie."

Not a big sports fan

At this stage of his life and career, Jordan is no fan of sports, except University of Miami football. "I live and die with the Hurricanes," he says. "Lately, I've been dying." Going to a game — any game — is "torture," though on TV he will watch the occasional promising pitcher, or the San Antonio Spurs who "play a style of basketball I like." Pro football, he says, "bores me." He reads only newspapers and magazines, no books, and seems to revel in being a political conservative in "a sea of liberals" in South Florida.

He also has a reputation among sports aficionados as a master of profane language, but he's selective about using it.

"I don't talk about writing in an obscene way," Jordan says. "What we're talking about here I value a lot. I can use the right fork once in a while. But get me talking about how [pitcher] Jeff Weaver is a wimp because he can't finish a game, and I'll switch into the jock mode, too. With my friends, you can't believe how bawdy I can be."

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