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*Still Throwing Heat: Strikeouts, the Streets, and a Second  
Chance* by J. R. Richard and Lew Freedman (review)

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**J. R. Richard and Lew Freedman. *Still Throwing Heat: Strikeouts, the Streets, and a Second Chance*. Chicago: Triumph Books, 2015. 241 pp. Cloth, \$25.95.**

*Ron Briley*

On July 30, 1980, James Rodney Richard, the ace of the Houston Astros pitching staff at age thirty, collapsed on the floor of the Houston Astrodome during a light workout. Only a few weeks earlier, Richard started the All-Star Game for the National League. During the second half of the season in which the Astros were in the heat of a pennant race, however, the six-foot, eight-inch pitcher with a blazing fastball began to complain of fatigue and numbness in his pitching arm. The immediate response by some in the Houston organization was that their young star, and somewhat of a loner, was malingering; perhaps upset that free agent Nolan Ryan was receiving more attention. After a hospital visit, Richard was diagnosed with a blood clot, but the doctors did not perceive the situation as overly serious, and the pitcher was allowed to continue with workouts while on the disabled list. Then Richard suffered a life-threatening stroke which ended his baseball career. Distressed from the lingering effects of the stroke and depression, Richard experienced divorce, financial losses, and unemployment that finally left him homeless, living under a bridge near the Astrodome where he used to pitch. *Throwing Heat* is the story of Richard's descent into homelessness and his eventual redemption.

Curious about how Richard was able to survive this ordeal and maintain such a positive attitude, sportswriter Lew Freedman contacted the former pitcher and offered to tell his story. The result of this collaboration is a biography told primarily in Richard's own words, supplemented by numerous newspaper clippings from Richard's file at the National Baseball Hall of Fame Research Library in Cooperstown as well as interviews with Richard's former teammates Enos Cabell, Jose Cruz, Larry Dierker, and Johnny Edwards. Nolan Ryan provided an introduction, and Freedman conducted additional conversations with Hall of Fame pitcher Ferguson Jenkins, who became a good friend with Richard as he made his way out of homelessness; Ralph Garr of the Atlanta Braves, who also grew up in Richard's hometown of Ruston, Louisiana; Robert Smith, who was Richard's high school coach; Buddy Davis, a white Louisiana sportswriter who followed Richard's career; and Lula, Richard's third wife. In many ways, *Still Throwing Heat* is a conventional sports biography with the first part of the book focusing upon the rise of Richard from rags to riches, but the far more interesting story concerns Richard's stroke and descent into homelessness before attaining redemption. Richard is a religious man and considerable time and attention is devoted to praising

God for blessing Richard and allowing him to survive his ordeal. While teammate and friend Enos Cabell suggested that race may have played a role in the failure of Houston management to take more seriously the complaints of Richard before his stroke, Richard never directly confronts the issue of race—an oversight that a more critical biography with an emphasis upon historical and cultural context might address.

Richard was born March 7, 1950, in Vienna, Louisiana, but grew up in nearby Ruston, where he was an outstanding high school athlete in football, basketball, and baseball. The family was poor, and his strict father ran a saw mill. Religion was a focal point for the family, and Richard also enjoyed hunting and fishing when he was not playing organized sport. Although he grew up when the Civil Rights Movement was challenging Southern segregation, Richard maintained, “Racism did not really show itself to me. It was not an issue I heard discussed at my house. It was not an issue in my neighborhood. It was not an issue at my school as a student even if we were all African Americans and the other school was all white” (44).

Although he had college scholarship offers in football and basketball, Richard signed with the Astros who made him their number one draft pick in 1969. Pitching minor league ball in Florida and Virginia, Richard again downplayed racial issues, insisting that for the first time he was mingling with white people. Richards proclaimed, “I enjoyed everybody I was around. We seemed to enjoy each other’s company. I make friends pretty easily. I got along with everybody. My philosophy is just that you treat me well, and I will treat you how I would like to be treated” (49). Yet while Richard was pitching well at Oklahoma City in the summer of 1971, Ken Forsch, a white player, was promoted to the parent club rather than Richard. Richard insists that he could not understand this decision. This is the first of many times when Richard intimates that Houston management may have let racial considerations influence personnel decisions, but he refuses to actually make an allegation of racism.

He was brought to the Major Leagues in September 1971, but Richard bounced back and forth between the Astros and their minor league affiliates until he joined the Houston rotation in 1975. Although he acknowledges that he had some problems with his control and displayed some immaturity with a motorcycle accident, Richard wonders why it took the Astros so long to place him in the rotation, and he expresses some concern with how Houston authorities and the ball club handled the apparent suicide of his black teammate Don Wilson.

Nevertheless, there are no direct accusations of racism, and from 1976 to 1980 Richard was the ace of the Houston staff, winning twenty games in 1976 and striking out over 300 batters in 1978 and 1979. Still he expressed some

doubts regarding Houston management, complaining, “There were times I was frustrated with the Astros because I didn’t feel I should have been sent to the minors. There were times I thought I could have been used more. And there were times that I thought the front office could have worked harder to make us a better team” (127). But there is no direct playing of the race card, and Richard declined to make race an issue in the handling of his blood clot and ensuing stroke. However, he did settle a law suit against the doctors who failed to recognize the warning signs for a stroke. Following his stroke, Richard tried to make a comeback with the Astros, and he was added to the roster in September 1981, but Richard, to his great disappointment, never appeared in a game. Richard continued to pitch in the minor leagues for Houston until his release in 1984.

Without baseball, Richard’s life deteriorated. He suffered memory loss and weakness on his left side following the stroke, and, exhibiting signs of depression, Richard was eating poorly and gaining weight. The memory loss and depression made it difficult for him to hold a job, and Richard also lost money on a number of ill-advised investments. His wife, and mother of his five children, divorced him, and the settlement drained his finances. The reasons for the failure of the marriage are not really discussed by Richard, although he briefly mentions a second marriage that ended when he caught his wife stealing from him. With these financial reversals, Richard found himself on the street and living under a bridge. Richard does an excellent job of describing homelessness as days of blur when one is concentrating simply on surviving.

Richard credits God with getting him out from under the bridge and on the road to recovery. He also acknowledges the financial assistance of Major League Baseball’s emergency assistance fund for players who have fallen on hard times, and his third marriage provided him with a partner who shared his religious convictions. When he is not fishing, Richard now devotes his time to preaching, speaking to youth groups, and working on behalf of the homeless.

Richard has also renewed his relationship with the Astros, and he hopes that the team will retire his number. He despairs of the decreasing number of young blacks playing baseball, but he insists that he has made his peace with the Astros. Richard asserts, “Maybe I was angry at the very beginning that the stroke had happened, but I wasn’t angry at the Astros. I wasn’t mad at the Astros. I was disappointed. God helped me to come to terms with how things were. At some point you have to accept the fact that things happen and you have to go on with your life. You can’t sit around and be mad at something for 20 years” (167). Enos Cabell, however, argued that he believed race played a role in the way that the Astros handled Richard’s health situation.

However, Freedman seems to agree with Richard that race was not a consideration, writing, “After his initial blush of anger and his suggestion of racism, Cabell backed off his earlier statements and made some more thoughtful comments that cut across skin color lines” (143). Allegations of discrimination are often difficult to prove, but Richard and Freedman appear to give the Astros more than the benefit of the doubt. The least the club could do is retire Richard’s number fifty uniform number.



**Theo Schell-Lambert. *The Heart of the Order*. New York: Little A, 2015. 242 pp. Paper, \$10.99.**

*Robert A. Moss*

Blake “Xandy” Alexander of Duluth, Minnesota, is the left fielder of the Carolina Birds of the NL South. A career .273 hitter in his late twenties, he bats sixth, “just outside the heart of the order” (16). He was a 24th round selection, has seven years of MLB service, makes \$1.8 million per year, and has recently torn the cruciate ligament in his knee chasing a fly ball in Cincinnati. Schell-Lambert’s novel describes Xandy’s months-long rehab at a facility in East Palm Beach, where his “pain remained at a level that other people were comfortable with” (68). Living in a home borrowed from the brother of the Birds’ Assistant GM, Xandy spends mornings in rehab and afternoons writing about life, baseball, and season-ending injury, for “the passingly curious, the casual fan,” who “knows just enough to realize all [he’s] missing” (9).

*Heart* is a series of riffs and aperçus on baseball and an olio of related subjects, including bats, rain delays, players’ cars, packing for travel, little league, Fenway, and, not least, Xandy’s comely therapist, Jenn. Some of the riffs are line drives to the gap, but, inevitably, others are bouncers to short. Examples of the former include Xandy’s characterization of baseball as “a masterpiece of distances and spacings, a 99.9% functional math proof” (30). Or, “Sprain a toe one year, then take a pitch to the wrist the next, and suddenly you’re injury-prone” (45). Particularly amusing is his observation that Gaylord Perry “rode his salivary glands to the Hall of Fame . . .” (105).

Oddly, among this cornucopia of witty observations, there is no mention of steroids or performance-enhancing drug usage among Xandy’s teammates, a strange omission from such an acute observer.