

'Art of Fielding' a slick Melvillian start for rookie Harbach

By Nic Halverson

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Baseball is not a melee sport, suggests Chad Harbach in his excellent debut novel, "The Art of Fielding." Unlike football, basketball and hockey — where jaw-clenched hustle and savagery is enough — baseball is different. The game lends itself to long stretches of idle time, where an untethered mind is free to flirt with daydreams. Why else do young T-ballers pluck dandelions out in right field?

Author: Chad Harbach

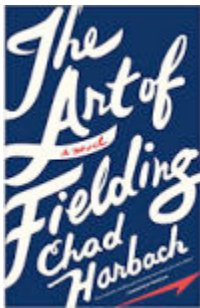


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Genre: Fiction

Publisher: Little, Brown & Co.

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Website: nplusonemag.com/authors/harbach-chad

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Novels are not melee sports either. Today, gorging oneself on quick-hit blog posts and listacles — lists disguised

as articles — counts as reading. Perhaps this is why baseball and literature elicit so many wrinkled brows: It's so boring, too slow.

Finishing a novel, watching all nine innings or lacing up your cleats and stepping onto the diamond are all acts of supreme stoicism. Harbach gets that and deftly makes the argument that undertaking these meditations in self-restraint are not only worth it but essential. The reward for doing so? A chance to bear witness to beauty, a front-row seat to enlightenment.

"You loved it," Harbach writes of baseball, "because you considered it an art: an apparently pointless affair, undertaken by people with a special aptitude, which sidestepped attempts to paraphrase its value yet somehow seemed to communicate something true or even crucial about the Human Condition. The Human Condition being, basically, that we're alive and have access to beauty, can even erratically create it, but will someday be dead and will not."

Metaphysical drifts like these threaten to dissuade the casual spectator ... and often do. After all, who wants to ruminate about truth and beauty while sitting around watching the game? But for Harbach, it's a risk worth taking, for baseball "in its quiet way" is "an extravagantly harrowing game," even "Homeric."

For those eye-rollers who consider this an exaggeration, consider this: What's more epic than isolation? It's easy to thrash about — to blitz, body-check and full-court press your way to complete domination of the opponent. What's difficult is when the opponent is yourself and the game is not on the field but inside your head.

"You stood around and waited and tried to still your mind," Harbach writes of fielding. "When your moment came, you had to be ready, because if you" messed up, "everyone would know whose fault it was. What other sport not only kept a stat as cruel as the error but posted it on the scoreboard for everyone to see?"

Herein lies the fulcrum of "The Art of Fielding," with Alexander Pope's quote, "to err is human; to forgive, divine" screaming off the pages like a line drive off an aluminum bat.

The book chronicles the exploits of the Westish College Harpooners, a fictional Division III baseball team whose campus sits on the Wisconsin shores of Lake Michigan. The university's mascot pays homage to Herman Melville, whose long-ago lecture at the school serves as the coat rack to which the university now hangs its hat. Harbach does little to mask his reverence for "Moby-Dick," for the playful Melvillian references are far and wide throughout the book, as are references to other cosmic literary all-stars. Whitman, Emerson and T.S. Eliot all get at-bats.

The lowly Harpooners' fate seems on the rise with the arrival of shortstop phenom Henry Skrimshander, an Ishmaelian recruit who possesses an innate ability to flawlessly field his position. He's discovered by the "huge, mythic and grave" team captain, Mike Schwartz, while playing Legion summer ball in Illinois.

Between games of a doubleheader, as Henry takes infield grounders, Schwartz is so moved by the ease of the performance that he's moved to quote Robert Lowell: "Expressionless, expresses God."

"He didn't seem to move faster than any other decent shortstop," Schwartz says about Henry, "yet he arrived instantly, impeccably, as if he had some foreknowledge of where the ball was headed. Or as if time slowed down for him alone."

Henry credits learning his craft from studying his idol, Aparicio Rodriguez — fictional St. Louis Cardinals shortstop and bodhisattva author of “The Art of Fielding,” a sort of Zen manual for the middle infielder. Its pages are filled with sage advice: The shortstop is a source of stillness at the center of the defense. He projects this stillness, and his teammates respond. Also, there are three stages: Thoughtless being, thought, return to thoughtless being.

As his star and team are ascending, Henry incurs a crippling Knoblauchian slump, fraught with throwing errors. Caught between thought and trying to return to the immaculate shortstop he once was, Henry is psychologically tossed about, much like a young mariner aboard the Pequod.

Floating around Henry are a buoyant cast of characters all chasing their own white whale: Westish College President Guert Affenlight’s lascivious pursuit of Henry’s “gay mulatto roommate” (no doubt a reference to Queequeg), Affenlight’s daughter Pella’s cerebral quest for identity and Schwartz’s vain attempt to spear himself acceptance letters from elite law schools.

“Moby-Dick seeks thee not,” Melville writes. “It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!”

The surviving characters who understand this return to shore, and they do so by abandoning their monomaniacal obsessions. Those who don’t are dragged down to a watery grave.

But you don’t need to be a comparative-lit grad student to appreciate “The Art of Fielding.” Like a fastball detonating into a catcher’s mitt, its locker-room braggadocio, fire-and-brimstone pep talks and play-by-play action have real pop. Harbach was once himself a middle infielder, and it shows. He understands the game’s periphery, arguably baseball’s most alluring virtue: the feel of a broken-in glove tacky with mink oil, infield chatter between pitches and the dog-pile celebrations at home plate. For those of us who relinquished our dreams of going pro long ago, it’s the periphery of the game that still lingers, like a curveball left hanging over the middle of the plate.

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