

# The Great American Baseball Novel

English 20523: Sports and American Literature | Spring 2021

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## Course Overview

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“Baseball,” Philip Roth wrote in 1973, “with its lore and legends, its cultural power, its seasonal associations, its native authenticity, its simple rules and transparent strategies, its longeurs and thrills, its spaciousness, its suspensefulness, its peculiarly hypnotic tedium, its heroics, its nuances, its ‘characters,’ its language, and its mythic sense of itself, was the literature of my boyhood.” Baseball had, he believed, made him a novelist. Gish Jen remembered, in a 2020 interview, how her immigrant parents had “performed being American by going to ballgames” and raised her with a “visceral understanding that baseball was America.” Baseball had, they believed, made them American.

Roth, tongue in cheek, titled his baseball novel *The Great American Novel*. Jen titled hers *The Resisters*.

This course investigates the great American game through the great American novel. What does baseball, as the national pastime, tell us about the United States? What did it mean in 1846, when Walt Whitman, then a young editor at the *Brooklyn Eagle*, observed neighborhood kids engaged in a “certain game of ball”? And what does it mean now? How has it acted as a mechanism of exclusion and inclusion, empire building and independence? What has attracted novelists to it like no other sport? This course reads the nation—with its lore and legends, its characters, its language, and its mythic sense of self—through the baseball novels of Roth, Percival Everett, Gloria Naylor, Chad Harbach, and Jen.

## Required Texts

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Everett, Percival. *Suder*. 1983. Louisiana State UP, 1999.  
Harbach, Chad. *The Art of Fielding*. 2011. Back Bay, 2012.  
Jen, Gish. *The Resisters*. Knopf, 2020.  
Roth, Philip. *The Great American Novel*. 1973. Vintage, 1995.

## Readings on Course Website

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Branch, Taylor. “The Shame of College Sports.” *Atlantic*, Oct. 2011, 81–110.  
Buell, Lawrence. Introduction. *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, Harvard UP, 2014, pp. 1–19.

- Burgos, Adrian, Jr. "Baseball Should Follow the Flag: Incorporating Nonwhite Others in the Age of Empire." *Playing America's Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line*, U of California P, 2007, pp. 71–87.
- Cassuto, Leonard. "Baseball and the Business of American Innocence." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3 Apr. 2011, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Baseballthe-Business-of/126932/>.
- Findeisen, Christopher. "Injuries of Class: Mass Education and the American Campus Novel." *PMLA*, vol. 130, no. 2, 2015, pp. 284–98.
- Fleetwood, Nicole R. "The Black Athlete: Racial Precarity and the American Sports Icon." *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*, Rutgers UP, 2015, pp. 81–110.
- Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Glory." *Southern Review*, vol. 28, 1992, pp. 32–33.
- Nathanson, Mitchell. "A Game of Their Own." *A People's History of Baseball*, U of Illinois P, 2012, pp. 1–27.
- Naylor, Gloria. "Maestro, If You Please . . ." *Bailey's Café*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992, pp. 1–28.
- Peterson, Richard. "The Word of Baseball: Creating a Narrative." *Extra Innings: Writing on Baseball*, U of Illinois P, 2001, pp. 15–26.
- Phin (Ernest Thayer). "Casey at the Bat: A Ballad of the Republic Sung in the Year 1888." *Daily Examiner*, 3 June 1888.
- Roth, Philip. "My Baseball Years." *New York Times*, 2 Apr. 1973.

## Assignments and Grading

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### Assignments:

Reading Quizzes	15%
Participation and Preparedness	15%
Presentation	20%
Midterm Paper	25%
Final Exam	25%

### Grading Scale:

A	93–100%	C	73–76%
A-	90–92%	C-	70–72%
B+	87–89%	D+	67–69%
B	83–86%	D	63–66%
B-	80–82%	D-	60–62%
C+	77–79%	F	0–59%

## Reading Schedule and Deadlines

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Date	Readings	Deadlines
<b>Week 1</b>	<b>A Literary Sport</b>	
Monday, January 11	Syllabus Thayer, “Casey at the Bat” Komunyakaa, “Glory”	
Wednesday, January 13	Peterson, “The Word of Baseball”	Presentation assigned
<b>Week 2</b>	<b>The Great American Pastime</b>	
Monday, January 18	No class (Martin Luther King Day)	
Wednesday, January 20	Nathanson, “A Game of Their Own” Roth, “My Baseball Years”	
<b>Week 3</b>		
Monday, January 25	Roth, <i>The Great American Novel</i> (prologue, “Home Sweet Home”)	
Wednesday, January 27	Roth, <i>The Great American Novel</i> (“The Visitors’ Line-Up,” “In the Wilderness”)	
<b>Week 4</b>		
Monday, February 1	Roth, <i>The Great American Novel</i> (“Every Inch a Man,” “The Temptation of Roland Agni”)	Midterm paper assigned
Wednesday, February 3	Roth, <i>The Great American Novel</i> (The Temptation of Roland Agni ( <i>continued</i> ),” “The Return of Gil Gamesh,” epilogue)	Midterm paper proposal due Saturday, February 6 at 5 p.m.
<b>Week 5</b>		
Monday, February 8	Conferences	
Wednesday, February 10	Conferences	
<b>Week 6</b>	<b>Color Lines</b>	
Monday, February 15	Burgos, “Baseball Should Follow the Flag”	
Wednesday, February 17	Fleetwood, “The Black Athlete”	
<b>Week 7</b>		
Monday, February 22	Naylor, “Maestro, If You Please ...”	
Wednesday, February 24	Everett, <i>Suder</i> (chapters 1–8)	Midterm paper due Friday, February 26 at 5 p.m.
<b>Week 8</b>		

Monday, March 1	Everett, <i>Suder</i> (chapters 9–16)	
Wednesday, March 3	Everett, <i>Suder</i> (chapters 17–24)	
<b>Week 9</b>		
Monday, March 8	No class (spring break)	
Wednesday, March 10	No class (spring break)	
<b>Week 10</b>	<b>Baseball-topias</b>	
Monday, March 15	Buell, Introduction to <i>The Dream of the Great American Novel</i> Cassuto, “Baseball and the Business of American Innocence”	
Wednesday, March 17	Jen, <i>The Resisters</i> (part 1)	
<b>Week 11</b>		
Monday, March 22	Jen, <i>The Resisters</i> (part 2)	
Wednesday, March 24	Jen, <i>The Resisters</i> (part 3)	
<b>Week 12</b>		
Monday, March 29	Jen, <i>The Resisters</i> (part 4)	
Wednesday, March 31	The great American baseball movie (TBD; class vote)	
<b>Week 13</b>	<b>Sports U</b>	
Monday, April 5	Findeisen, “Injuries of Class”	
Wednesday, April 7	Branch, “The Shame of College Sports”	
<b>Week 14</b>		
Monday, April 12	Harbach, <i>The Art of Fielding</i> (chapters 1–11)	
Wednesday, April 14	Harbach, <i>The Art of Fielding</i> (chapters 12–28)	
<b>Week 15</b>		
Monday, April 19	Harbach, <i>The Art of Fielding</i> (chapters 29–44)	
Wednesday, April 21	Harbach, <i>The Art of Fielding</i> (chapters 45–66)	
<b>Week 16</b>		
Monday, April 26	Harbach, <i>The Art of Fielding</i> (chapters 67–82) SPOTs	

Wednesday, April 28	Final review	Final exam assigned Final exam due Sunday, May 2 at 5 p.m.
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