

The Great American Baseball Novel

English 20523: Sports and American Literature | Spring 2021

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Course Overview

“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 fiction of Bernard Malamud, Gloria Naylor, August Wilson, Jen, Don DeLillo, and Chad Harbach.

Required Texts

Harbach, Chad. *The Art of Fielding*. 2011. Back Bay, 2012.

Jen, Gish. *The Resisters*. Knopf, 2020.

Malamud, Bernard. *The Natural*. 1952. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003.

Wilson, August. *Fences*. Plume, 1986.

Readings on Course Website

Branch, Taylor. “The Shame of College Sports.” *Atlantic*, Oct. 2011, pp. 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/>.
- DeLillo, Don. "Pafko at the Wall." *Harper's*, Oct. 1992, pp. 35–70.
- . "The Power of History." *New York Times Magazine*, 7 Sept, 1997, pp. 60–63.
- 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.
- Menand, Louis. "The Big Heine." *New Yorker*, 1 June 2020, pp. 54–59.
- 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.
- 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

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

Date	Readings	Deadlines
Week 1	A Literary Sport	
Monday, January 18	No class (Martin Luther King Day)	
Wednesday, January 20	Syllabus Thayer, "Casey at the Bat" Komunyakaa, "Glory"	
Week 2	The Great American Pastime	
Monday, January 25	Cassuto, "Baseball and the Business of American Innocence" Menand, "The Big Heine"	Presentation assigned
Wednesday, January 27	Nathanson, "A Game of Their Own" Roth, "My Baseball Years"	
Week 3		
Monday, February 1	Malamud, <i>The Natural</i> ("Pre-game," chapter 1)	
Wednesday, February 3	Malamud, <i>The Natural</i> (chapters 2–4)	
Week 4		
Monday, February 8	Malamud, <i>The Natural</i> (chapters 5–7)	Midterm paper assigned
Wednesday, February 10	Malamud, <i>The Natural</i> (chapters 8–10)	Midterm paper proposal due Saturday, February 13 at 5 p.m.
Week 5		
Monday, February 15	Conferences	
Wednesday, February 17	Conferences	
Week 6	Fences	
Monday, February 22	Burgos, "Baseball Should Follow the Flag"	
Wednesday, February 24	Fleetwood, "The Black Athlete"	
Week 7		
Monday, March 1	Naylor, "Maestro, If You Please ..."	
Wednesday, March 3	Wilson, <i>Fences</i> (act 1)	Midterm paper due Friday, March 5 at 5 p.m.
Week 8		
Monday, March 8	Wilson, <i>Fences</i> (act 2)	
Wednesday, March 10	No class (spring refresh)	
Week 9	Baseball-topias	
Monday, March 15	Buell, Introduction to <i>The Dream of the Great American Novel</i>	

Wednesday, March 17	Jen, <i>The Resisters</i> (part 1)	
Week 10		
Monday, March 22	Jen, <i>The Resisters</i> (part 2)	
Wednesday, March 24	Jen, <i>The Resisters</i> (part 3)	
Week 11		
Monday, March 29	Jen, <i>The Resisters</i> (part 4)	
Wednesday, March 31	The great American baseball movie (TBD; class vote)	
Week 12		
Monday, April 5	DeLillo, "Pafko at the Wall"	
Wednesday, April 7	DeLillo, "The Power of History"	
Week 13	Sports U	
Monday, April 12	Branch, "The Shame of College Sports"	
Wednesday, April 14	Harbach, <i>The Art of Fielding</i> (chapters 1–16)	
Week 14		
Monday, April 19	Harbach, <i>The Art of Fielding</i> (chapters 17–35)	
Wednesday, April 21	Harbach, <i>The Art of Fielding</i> (chapters 36–60)	
Week 15		
Monday, April 26	Harbach, <i>The Art of Fielding</i> (chapters 61–82) SPOTs	
Wednesday, April 28	Final review	Final exam assigned Final exam due Sunday, May 2 at 5 p.m.