

The Great American Baseball Novel: How Literature Invented the National Pastime

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Bernard Malamud had achieved the hack's dream. "Back in the Thirties the baseball writers making the swing through the West with the major league teams occasionally wondered whether one of their number would ever produce a serious novel about baseball," Harry Sylvester, who himself had made that swing with the Dodgers, wrote in 1952. "That novel has finally been written." He credited Malamud's debut, *The Natural*, with elevating baseball from the dime-store bookrack to the summit of high literature. Baseball writers, including the former Dodgers beat man, had long believed that the American game, a game that reflected "the culture which elaborated it," deserved a great American novel (5).

But Malamud's debut constituted not a break with the dime fiction of "Lester Chadwick" (Howard Garis), Ring Lardner, and "Burt L. Standish" (Gilbert Patten) but, as Sylvester could not have missed, an affectionate satire of it. The novel's hero, a 34-year-old rookie chasing a derailed childhood dream in the big leagues, hits the cover off balls. He carries a near-magical bat made from the wood of a lightning-struck tree. A crooked club owner offers him a bribe to throw the decisive final game of the season. His cantankerous manager, confiding in the stiff-kneed rookie that he would give his "whole life" to win that game, asks him to do his "damndest" (218). Malamud might have written a more serious kind of baseball fiction, but he, a student of the game's cornball clichés, knew that literature didn't owe baseball a great novel. Baseball owed literature, from Walt Whitman to Lardner, for transforming it—with fantasies

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of American distinctiveness, union, innocence, and assimilation—into the national pastime.

Albert Spalding, the businessman, Chicago White Stockings (now Cubs) owner, and self-declared “father of baseball,” had recruited authors to the game in the 1880s, contributing an introduction to one of the first baseball novels and inviting Mark Twain to commemorate his ball club’s around-the-world tour. Spalding hailed the “literature of Base Ball” (449) as evidence that, as he claimed in his 1911 book *America’s National Game*, his sport stood as “the exponent of American Courage, Confidence, Combativeness; American Dash, Discipline, Determination; American Energy, Eagerness, Enthusiasm; American Pluck, Persistency, Performance; American Spirit, Sagacity, Success; American Vim, Vigor, Virility” (4). (An unrestrained fan of alliteration, the baseball magnate announced the book, in a wandering subtitle, as a historical account blended with his own reminiscences of the game’s “vicissitudes, its victories and its votaries.”) Though he never finished high school, signing with his hometown Forest City Club of Rockford, Illinois, at the age of fifteen, Spalding recognized the value of literature to the nationalizing of the game and the value of nationalizing the game to his bottom line. “We notice that the best newspapers, daily and weekly, in the country are discussing [baseball’s] merits,” he wrote in 1884. “It will not be long before the great National game will be the subject of lengthy and learned articles in the magazines and reviews, as cricket is in England.” Then associated with gambling and what Spalding described as the “scandalous conduct” of some teams, baseball, he thought, needed saving and a national literature of the game might do the trick, turning baseball, a diversion for children and gamblers, into the cricket of the US (“How” 2).

The founder of A. G. Spalding and Brothers, which standardized the modern baseball (and secured the exclusive rights to manufacture it for the National League), didn’t waste time. In 1885, he entered the book business, founding the American Sports Publishing Company, which issued his annual baseball guides and created the Library of American Sports (later Spalding’s Athletic Library), a catalog of more than three hundred titles marketed as “the greatest educational series on athletic and physical training that has ever been compiled.” The series, the editors boasted, “had the advice and counsel of Mr. A. G. Spalding in all of its undertakings, and particularly in all books devoted to the national game” (“Spalding’s Athletic Library”). Spalding enlisted Henry Chadwick, “the Dean of America’s corps of baseball writers” and the inventor of the box score, to edit his guides and sell his moral creed (Harris 575).¹ When Spalding and a band of all-stars returned from a six-month world tour later that decade, he celebrated their homecoming with a

dinner at the exclusive Manhattan restaurant Delmonico's, to which he invited statesmen, including Theodore Roosevelt, and authors, including Twain. The *New York Times* heralded the event as evidence that baseball, far from a game of mere muscle, stood as "an intellectual pursuit, which is indulged in only by gentlemen of the highest mental calibre, and by those whose minds have undergone a singularly-stringent training in the matter of intellectuality" ("Baseball" 5). That summer, when Twain delivered the manuscript of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), it included a scene in which his Yankee teaches Arthur's knights, clanking around in their chainmail, how to field and catch. The man William Faulkner later declared the father of American literature and the man Spalding deemed the father of baseball (himself) met on the diamond to anoint a national game (Faulkner 88).

Spalding took his own swing at baseball writing with *America's National Game*, a book, in his biographer's words, "as much A. G.'s autobiography as a history of baseball—a pastiche of personal reminiscences, narrative history, and pointed opinion" (Levine 116). The baseball booster had at first assigned the writing of the book to Chadwick, but, when his scribe died in 1908, Spalding undertook the task himself. He admitted in the foreword that he had not wished to enter "the realm of literary endeavor" but felt he must contribute to the literature that the game merited, "not the writing of a book, but of *books*; not even the making of a few volumes, but of a library" (ix). The book laid out his case for baseball as the most American of institutions, reciting the legend for which he remains best known and, among baseball historians, most maligned: that the Civil War hero Abner Doubleday, famous for having fired the first shot in defense of Fort Sumter and for leading some ten thousand Union soldiers in the Battle of Gettysburg, had sketched the first diagram of a baseball diamond in Cooperstown, New York, while a cadet at West Point.

But Spalding also cited American authors' devotion to baseball as evidence of the game's national standing, dedicating whole chapters to the "Poetic Literature of Base Ball" and the "Prose Literature of the Game." "If it is true," he observed, "that whenever the elements are favorable and wherever grounds are available the game is in progress, it is quite as true that wherever and whenever newspapers and periodicals are printed in America literature of the game is in process of making." And that included, Spalding stressed, in more and more "high-class magazines" (463). The baseball literature he canonized—"Casey at the Bat," a slew of a long-forgotten magazine stories, the writing of Will Irwin and other muckrakers who took a critical look at government but never at their favorite game—underscored Spalding's belief about who belonged in the game and in the

nation for which it, in his mind, stood. A committed social Darwinist, he insisted on the racial and gender segregation of the game, strove to associate it with the elite WASP classes, and liked to claim, as he did in his 1905 annual guide, that “base ball was the spark that brought in to action that natural, inborn Anglo-Saxon love of all kinds of athletic sports” and that “there is to-day no greater moral and uplifting force influencing the youth of the country” (“Origin” 27). Thanks to some elaborate marketing, *America’s National Game* achieved sales of almost one hundred thousand in the first six months, and the ever-striving, status-minded author delivered it into the hands of, among others, President William Howard Taft, the future king of Sweden Gustaf Adolf, and Pope Pius X. Spalding had a game and, in that game, an image of the nation to sell.

Baseball’s first magnate would not be the last to turn to literature to negotiate the meaning of the national game. The Renaissance literature scholar Bart Giamatti, who served as the seventh MLB commissioner in the late 1980s, asked in a book dedicated to the game, “Is not baseball a form of writing? Is that not why so many writers love baseball?” (82–83). For Giamatti, it constituted “part of America’s plot, part of America’s mysterious, underlying design—the plot in which we all conspire and collude, the plot of the story of our national life” (83). He situated baseball within the romantic tradition as a search for home, for the restoration of a lost Edenic balance. Another commissioner, Ford Frick, who led the league from 1951 to 1965, had a first career teaching high school English and a second covering baseball for the *New York American* and acting as one of Babe Ruth’s ghostwriters. When he died, Frick left behind an unfinished novel titled *Big Leaguer* that lamented how business interests had tainted the beautiful game of his childhood.²

While Frick helmed MLB through another golden age, Leslie Fiedler introduced his famous thesis that “the dream of an escape from culture and a renewal of youth” (xxxiii) defined most if not all of American letters, a dream that, he wrote, “makes our literature (and life!) so charmingly and infuriatingly ‘boyish’” (xxi). The romantic mode that Giamatti observed in baseball Fiedler found in American literature. For Giamatti, that cemented baseball’s standing as the national game. For Fiedler, it indicted the nation, or at least the nation’s white men of letters, as immature, forever lighting out for the territories in flight from guilt and obligation. For others, like Amiri Baraka, the convergence of baseball and literature revealed the violent exclusions and normative (and also often violent) inclusions of the nation. In his *Autobiography* (1983), Baraka remembers following MLB teams, including Jackie Robinson’s Dodgers, “just to keep up with being in America” while watching the Newark

Eagles of the National Negro League as a chance to celebrate Black life “at its most unencumbered,” not filtered through white fantasies of innocence and overcoming (35). (He describes Robinson as a “synthetic colored guy” assembled in a lab to reassure white fans of the virtue of their game [36].)

Most scholars and critics don't consider baseball fiction serious fare. Fiedler himself remarked that while most American authors devoted their entire careers to a single childlike obsession, some chose a varied, rich obsession and achieved canonical status (Herman Melville on seafaring) while others, like Lardner, “whose essential subject was baseball,” didn't and suffered for it (521). F. Scott Fitzgerald, a close friend of Lardner's, also bemoaned that the baseball writer, a “magnificent” talent, had “moved in the company of a few dozen illiterates playing a boy's game,” leaving him with a cake that “however deeply Ring might cut into it” had “the diameter of [Cubs first baseman and manager] Frank Chance's diamond” (“Ring” 254).³ When Philip Roth wrote his baseball novel, he titled it, tongue in cheek, *The Great American Novel* (1973) and chose as his narrator an old baseball writer with ambitions to write the GAN. Roth's narrator recalls fishing with Ernest Hemingway off the Florida coast in 1936 and Hemingway asking him, “Isn't that what you sportswriters think, Frederico? That some day you're going to get off into a little cabin somewhere and write the G.A.N.?” (26). Frederico is not his name. Hemingway is mocking him and the idea that a baseball writer could ever author the great American novel, that baseball could, as some thought, furnish the material for that novel. Roth satirizes the idea of the national game and of the great national novel, but he confessed elsewhere, in words Giamatti could have written, that “baseball, with its lore and legends, its cultural power, its seasonal associations, its native authenticity” formed “the literature of my boyhood” (“My” 35).

Most historians trace the game's national status not to the novel but the newspaper, crediting early sportswriters with convincing readers that “baseball and democracy were inseparable” (Crepeau 26), with inventing “the baseball experience” (Tygiel 34), and with leaving behind a “body of writing [that] can be used to enter the lived experience of organized baseball” in their time (Goldstein 9).⁴ But the venues for which Chadwick and others wrote often combined news from the race track, ring, and field with fiction and theater. The *Spirit of the Times* billed itself as “A Chronicle of the Turf, Field Sports, Literature, and the Stage.” The editors of the *New York Clipper* announced it as an “American Sporting and Theatrical Journal.” If Chadwick and other sportswriters gave readers the language of baseball nationalism, then novelists, including Noah Brooks, William Everett, and Mary P. Wells Smith, churning

out popular baseball fiction in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, let them imagine themselves in that nation, as belonging to the white, masculine world of baseball America. Spalding, who hired Chadwick and encouraged Brooks and other novelists, knew that the best kind of advertising disguised itself, that it read not like an ad but a good story.

From 1846, when the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club lost their first game under a consolidated set of rules, transforming the “New York game” into “base ball,” and Walt Whitman, then a roving editor with the *Brooklyn Eagle*, observed neighborhood kids engaged in “a certain game of ball,” to the rise of television and football in Malamud’s time, literature elevated baseball from another bat-and-ball game to a national institution, a distorted mirror through which the nation identified itself (“Brooklyn Young Men” 2). Commissioners and novelists have described baseball as a form of writing and as the literature of their childhoods because the game first achieved national status through writing and literature. From the future-facing Young America movement of Whitman to the backward-looking Cold War nostalgia of Malamud, American authors turned to baseball to determine the health of the nation, encouraging their readers to invest in the health of the game. First came the great American baseball novel, then the national pastime.

1. The Hurrah Game

Chadwick, an immigrant born in Exeter, England, who caught the baseball bug while covering cricket for the *New York Times* in the 1850s, believed in the national game. “This invigorating exercise and manly pastime,” he wrote of baseball in the 1860 *Beadle’s Dime Base Ball Player*, the first annual guide, “may now be justly termed the American Game of Ball.” Although it derived, in Chadwick’s telling, from the British children’s game of rounders, it had been “so modified and improved of late years in this country, as almost to deprive it of any of its original features beyond the mere groundwork of the game” (5). No one gave much thought to Chadwick’s account of baseball’s origins until 1888, when Monte Ward, an infielder for the New York Giants and a union organizer, countered it in *Base-ball: How to Become a Player*, which included “An Inquiry into the Origin of Base-ball, with a Brief Sketch of Its History.” Ward, a Columbia man, thought it high time that someone defended the American game from Chadwick, whom he did not name but referred to as “an Englishman-born” (11). He declared baseball “a fruit of the inventive genius of the American boy” (21), insisting that, “developed by American brains, it was fitted to us,

and we took to it with all the enthusiasm peculiar to our nature” (25). Ward, an able researcher, sometimes to the detriment of his own argument, acknowledged that a friend of the Prince of Wales had documented a game called “base ball” as far back as the 1740s and that Jane Austen had mentioned it in her first novel, *Northanger Abbey* (“It was not very wonderful that Catherine, who had by nature nothing heroic about her, should prefer cricket, base ball, riding on horseback, and running about the country at the age of fourteen, to books” [7]). The Giants infielder insisted that the baseball of Austen’s England did not resemble that of his US. It couldn’t be the American game because Austen described women and girls taking their turns at bat. “Base-ball in its mildest form,” he wrote, “is essentially a robust game, and it would require an elastic imagination to conceive of little girls possessed of physical powers such as its play demands” (20). The line from *Northanger Abbey*, though not the earliest reference to baseball he found, bothered Ward the most because British literature exercised a national claim on the game and Austen’s Catherine Morland a gendered claim on what he considered the manliest of American institutions.

Ward struggled to distinguish American from British baseball because, as historian David Block shows, no game, including rounders, contributed more to the formation of the national game than the almost identical “base ball” of Georgian England (143). If, as Benedict Anderson once suggested, national consciousness arose as a sense of calendrical coincidence, with the newsstand and the novel setting the national clock and giving significance to the word “meanwhile,” then baseball—the ritual of it, the box score, the dime novels with their formulaic structure of a season culminating in the big game—consolidated that national consciousness (24). Americans set their clocks and calendars to baseball. The nationalist Ward didn’t want to think that they had borrowed that time from a British game and a British novel. Baseball needed American literature to make it an American game.

Ward and other nationalist baseball men didn’t have to look far. Walt Whitman, the most American of American authors, wrote often of the game, from his mid-twenties, before round-ball, town-ball, one-old-cat, and other regional variations had coalesced into the game we know as baseball, until the end of his life. A Whitman scholar later described him as “one of our first baseball writers” (Folsom 38). The man who once scribbled in his notebook “Comrades! I am the bard of Democracy” received a boost from the Young Americans, a band of nationalist intellectuals who, as Whitman made a living as a wandering newsman, called for a distinct literature of the US (“Manuscript Notebook” 91). John L. O’Sullivan launched that movement in 1837, when, in the first issue

of his *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, he lamented that American literature stood as a “diluted and tardy second edition of English thought” and insisted that “it is only by its literature that one nation can utter itself and make itself known to the rest of the world” (15). In 1847, contributors to the *Democratic Review* continued to condemn American writing as “overmastered by the literature of England” (“Nationality” 266) and assert that “if there is anything peculiar in our institutions and conditions, we would have some native bard to sing [it]” (271). That native bard arrived, the Young Americans thought, in 1855, when the editors welcomed the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* with a review from Whitman himself, who, never humble, declared his an “athletic and defiant literature,” heralding a time in which “we shall cease shamming and be what we really are” (“Walt Whitman” 205). (He also contributed unsigned reviews of *Leaves* to the *Brooklyn Daily Times* and the *American Phrenological Journal*; Whitman had a lot of kind things to say about Whitman.) A friend of O’Sullivan’s, the poet shared the movement’s faith in literature and in himself. He believed, as he later wrote in *Democratic Vistas*, that “some two or three really original poets” could “give more compaction and moral identity” to the US than “all its Constitutions, legislative and judicial ties” (9). The *Democratic Review*, as if having fulfilled O’Sullivan’s mandate, folded in the late 1850s. It had, with Whitman, nationalized American literature, freeing it from Austen. It left it to Whitman to nationalize baseball, freeing it from rounders.

“I am the teacher of athletes,” Whitman writes in *Leaves of Grass*, and he meant it (52). An advocate of fresh air and exercise as foundations of good health and democratic living, Whitman first mentioned baseball in 1846, describing in the *Brooklyn Eagle* how he had witnessed “several parties of youngsters playing ‘base’” that summer and recommending that others follow their lead. “The body and mind would both be benefited by it,” he wrote. “The game of ball is glorious” (“Brooklyn Young Men” 2). In the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he imagined his transcendent “I” “upon the race-course, or enjoying pic-nics or jigs or a good game of base-ball” (36). When a graduate student at the University of Houston unearthed Whitman’s 1858 wellness manifesto *Manly Health and Training* in 2015, it further revealed his devotion to the game as a fount of democratic sentiment and rough-and-tumble manliness. “The game of Base-Ball, now very generally practiced, is one of the very best of out-door exercises” (17 Oct. 1858 6), he wrote under the name Mose Velsor in the *New York Atlas*, advising that American men discard their “fashionable boots” and instead make “the shoe now specially worn by the base-ball players” their regular footwear (28 Nov. 1858 2). Whitman identified American literature

and baseball as the two institutions that could imagine his dreamed-of nation—a nation of unbound, athletic white men grabbing land and then living off it—into being. Ed Folsom, the author of an exhaustive account of Whitman’s baseball fandom, describes his writing as “precisely the poetry of the crowd” (45), looking not to the men on the field but the onlookers, the new leisure classes, forming a sense of self and belonging through them, an observation echoed in Noah Cohan’s consideration of Robert Coover’s and Don DeLillo’s later “baseball-mediated mode of identity formation” (19). But Whitman’s baseball writing, from antebellum America to the rise and fall of Reconstruction, envisioned a certain kind of crowd, limiting who could see themselves on the diamond and in the stands before Spalding, Ward, and the other white men of baseball dedicated themselves to cleansing the game’s American roots.

Whitman never lost his fondness for the game, discussing it often with his friend Horace Traubel, who transcribed nine volumes worth of their conversations, at his final home in Camden. “Baseball is our game: the American game: I connect it with our national character,” he told Traubel in 1888 and, reciting his formula for democratic health, added, “Sports take people out of doors, get them filled with oxygen.” He considered the game a “blessing to the race” (Traubel, *With* 2: 330). When he learned of Spalding and the all-stars’ world tour, he told Traubel that he wished he could talk with them, ask them about their travels and their games. His friend described baseball as “the hurrah game of the republic,” and Whitman, agreeing, said, “That’s beautiful: the hurrah game! well—it’s our game: that’s the chief fact in connection with it: America’s game: has the snap, go, fling, of the American atmosphere” (Traubel, *With* 4: 508). At least that’s the conversation Traubel transcribed that night, as he did after all of his chats with Whitman. Baseball nationalists, from Susan Sarandon’s character in *Bull Durham* to the documentarian Ken Burns, have been citing it and other Whitman baseball gems ever since, enlisting the American bard to burnish the game’s national status. A tireless salesman of his own verse, Whitman knew what Spalding later discovered: selling an outlandish idea—oneself as the national poet, a game as the national pastime—called for boosterism and imagination, the *Democratic Review* and *Leaves of Grass*, Chadwick and the novels of Brooks, Everett, and Smith. Baseball nationalism needed the hard sell of sportswriters and the soft touch of literature.

Baseball nationalism needed the hard sell of sportswriters and the soft touch of literature.

Not all American men of letters cared to reclaim baseball from Austen. When James Fenimore Cooper returned from Paris in the mid-1830s, he committed himself to remodeling Otsego Hall, the manor house his father had built overlooking Lake Otsego in the village he had founded and named after himself, Cooperstown. While

transforming his childhood home into a Gothic Revival mansion with battlements and towers, the novelist found himself embroiled in a fight over Three Mile Point, a riverside grove that the Cooper estate owned but that locals had long used for fishing and swimming. Cooper ran a notice barring villagers from the grove, and the town fired back, voting to block the closure and condemning him as “odious” (qtd. in Franklin 198). The novelist revisited the altercation in his 1838 novel *Home as Found*, in which two cousins return from abroad to remodel an inherited estate in central New York State and face immediate resistance from what one calls “the all-powerful, omnipotent, overruling, law-making, law-breaking public” (228). The cousins also find their estate overrun with a “party of apprentice-boys” (174) who turn their lawn into a ballfield and can’t understand, as one remarks, why “folks built a house just in that spot for; it has spoilt the very best play-ground in the village” (176–77). After the cousin’s estate manager talks their ringleader, a “notorious street brawler” (176), into moving their game from the lawn to the street to flout the village trustees’ ban on baseball, the narrator concludes, “The bait took; for what apprentice—American apprentice, in particular—can resist an opportunity of showing how much he considers himself superior to the law?” (178). Cooper, like Whitman, believed that baseball said something about American life, but, unlike the bard, he didn’t like what it said. For the novelist raised in the future home of the Baseball Hall of Fame (where Abner Doubleday did not invent the game), baseball revealed how the nation had, in his absence, grown crude, entitled, and convinced that “a custom of a twelve months’ existence is deemed sacred” (175). Neither Spalding nor Ward mentioned that other Cooperstown game.

The baseball men got what they wanted in 1925. British literature surrendered the game. In the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Virginia Woolf determined to sort out what distinguished American literature from other national traditions. Her answer: baseball. “In America there is baseball instead of society; instead of the old landscape which has moved men to emotion for endless summers and springs,” she wrote, alluding to England and English literature, “a new land, its tin cans, its prairies, its cornfields flung disorderly about like a mosaic of incongruous pieces waiting order at the artist’s hand; while the people are equally diversified into fragments of many nationalities.” And a bat-and-ball game, a game “not played in England,” Woolf concluded, furnished that order, uniting the diverse fragments of the nation. After first considering the fiction of Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis, she landed on Ring Lardner’s baseball stories as the height of Americanness in literature. With baseball, Woolf thought, he had “solved one of the most difficult problems of the American writer; it has given him a clue, a

center, a meeting place for the divers activities of people whom a vast continent isolates, whom no tradition controls.” While other American authors struck her as derivative or obsessed with “showing off” (5) their newness, Lardner had found in baseball an unselfconscious art, American without thinking about it, too absorbed in “the middle of an exciting game” (2) to care what that meant. Chadwick long dead and rounders forgotten, Woolf, the author of the then-new *Mrs. Dalloway*, lauded baseball fiction as the culmination of a liberated American literature.

The historian G. Edward White once observed that a “remarkable synergy” between baseball and the ambitions of the Progressive movement installed it as the national game (8). But long before then, nationalist authors and critics ensured that reforming the US would have to include looking after the hurrah game.

2. Base Ball: A Novel

Roth turned the great American baseball novel into a farce. “Frederico, do you know the son of a bitch who is going to write the Great American Novel?” Hemingway asks the old baseball writer who narrates Roth’s 1976 novel. “No, Hem. Who?” “You” (25). But a first generation of baseball novelists took it as an article of faith. Noah Brooks, William Everett, and Mary P. Wells Smith believed that baseball revealed the nation and that the novel could show readers how the game indexed national life, how the grand claims of sportswriters manifested in their own communities. The first baseball novels sold well, but few scholars have revisited them because none stand out. One after another imagines the game as a civil war, then as a reunion.

Spalding, ever the salesman, took that fiction and turned it into historical fact. Baseball, he wrote in *America’s National Game*, “received its baptism in bloody days of our Nation’s direst danger. It had its early evolution when soldiers, North and South, were striving to forget their foes by cultivating, through this grand game, fraternal friendships with comrades in arms” (92). The game had, he thought, facilitated reconciliation, acting as a “sedative against the natural exuberance of victors” for the North and a “panacea for the pangs of humiliation” for the defeated South (93). Spalding borrowed the idea of baseball as a salve for a divided nation from Brooks, a Lincoln confidant and biographer who authored two of the earliest baseball novels. The White Stockings owner contributed an introduction to Brooks’s 1884 novel *Our Base Ball Club*, in which an Illinois town’s northside and southside clubs set aside their differences to together defeat a “famous

Chicago nine" (84). Spalding thought that more novelists should do as Brooks had, that because the "nomenclature" of the game formed a kind of common national language, baseball stories could unite "various sections of the republic" that had once been at war with one another (Introduction to *Our* v). Having stood by White Stockings manager Cap Anson that season as Anson fought to banish Moses Fleetwood Walker, the last Black National League player until Jackie Robinson, from the game, Spalding had certain sections of the republic in mind. He thought baseball could model a transregional, cross-class reunion of white men, the sport's own Reconstruction-reversing compromise. The game, "as now played, has become an art," he wrote soon after Brooks led a first wave of baseball fiction, "and it is now a field sport calling for more manly qualifications, mental as well as physical, than any field game known to the Anglo-Saxon race" (Introduction to *How* 5). Wedding race and nationalism to the game, American literature had, Spalding thought, transformed baseball into art.

Brooks's first baseball novel, *The Fairport Nine*, an 1880 children's serial, tells a tale not of white reunion but of racial reconciliation. A baseball team from the north end of a small Maine town, the Fairport Nine, vies with the team from the south end, the White Bears. Most of the northenders come from middle-class families, most of the southenders from families of fishermen and longshoremen, "rough" folks, the narrator tells us, "with small respect for law, order, or the rights of others" (23). The teams meet on the grounds of Fort George, a former British stronghold, and the northenders organize a militia, a "martial Nine," under their team's name (94). Billy Hetherington, a white centerfielder, leads the nine along with his best friend Sam Black, a Black leftfielder whom his teammates call "Blackie," a nickname that, the narrator insists, "carried with it no idea of contempt" (8). Rumors that one of Billy's ancestors, a notorious slave trader, had abducted Sam's father from the Congo swirl around town, but that talk dies down with "news that there was to be a grand final game between the two Nines" (173). The Fairport Nine wins that grand final game, of course, and the novel ends with Billy and Sam walking arm in arm, celebrating. Brooks later revealed that he had based the fictional team on his and his childhood friends' own militia, the Hancock Cadets, but never mentioned a Black teammate or cadet (Brooks, "Lesson" 340–41). It seems that the Lincoln biographer invented Billy and Sam out of whole cloth as a lesson in using baseball as an instrument of strategic forgetting after civil war. The *New York Times* gave Brooks a glowing review, remarking that, in reading of Sam Black, "many of us must recollect some colored lad, who, when we were young, despite his black skin, was our friend and comrade" (Review 3). Baseball united white and

Black neighbors as teammates and comrades. Or at least it allowed a white novelist and his readers to believe that it did.

Brooks left Sam Black behind in his second novel and earned Spalding's endorsement. *Our Base Ball Club* identifies the game as a unifier not of different races but of different classes of white men. Soldiers returning to their small northern Illinois town after the Civil War organize two baseball clubs, the Catalpa Nine on the north side of Stone River and the Dean County Nine on the south side. (Brooks based the town on Dixon, Illinois, on the Rock River, not far from Spalding's home town.) In an echo of the class structure of Brooks's fictional Maine town, "a chasm as wide as Stone River" divides the north side from the south, with "students in the Seminary, young fellows in the law and county offices of the town, and sons of gentlemen of leisure" living north of the river and millhands and lumbermen with "brawn and muscle" living south of it. The northsiders call the southsiders "stalwarts." The southsiders call the northsiders "aristocrats" (12). The town divided, neither team can contend with baseball clubs from larger towns and cities. Some local men gather and, determining that a successful team needed "muscle and training"—the muscle will come from the mill, the training from the law office—agree to assemble a unified club, a "first-rate base ball nine" (40). The town rallies behind the team, coming together as it hadn't since the war to cheer on "the soldiers of this new campaign" (55). The consolidated team defeats the best club from Chicago, and the working-class star third baseman marries a judge's daughter and enters the law himself. Brooks's second baseball novel, like the first, uses baseball to consider the bonds formed through war but now with white male bondedness forming the backbone of the game and a nation discarding Reconstruction for segregation and what the historian David Blight identifies as the durable "combination of white supremacist and reconciliationist memories" after 1877 (387). The white working man can make it, can get the girl and the office, if he agrees to take the field for the white aristocrats and not with Sam Black. The segregation of the game in the 1880s taught readers and fans to segregate their memories of the Civil War, to choose white brotherhood over racial reconciliation. When the baseball nationalist Ward formed the union-run Players' League, it folded after one season because, as W. E. B. Du Bois later remarked of the wider labor movement after Reconstruction, it chose the "psychological wage" of whiteness over the material wage of a cross-racial class coalition that might have broken the owners' hold on the sport (700).

Brooks's second baseball novel signaled a transition in how organized baseball conceived of itself. The first clubs arose, as baseball historian Mitchell Nathanson writes, from a status-minded rising

middle class that sought to create a “more gentlemanly version of the game” unwelcoming to white workers and immigrants (9). That class-conscious gentleman’s game comes through in Brook’s 1880 serial and in the two baseball novels of educator and future congressman William Everett, the son of Edward Everett, the famed orator. Everett’s first, the 1868 novel *Changing Base; or What Edward Rice Learnt at School*, associates baseball with Victorian self-restraint and honor. The baseball team of a New England school modeled after Boston Latin takes on a local club of “town roughs” (189) and defeats it, demonstrating that the game values their “Harvard discipline” and “Harvard tone of feeling” over sheer strength (141). When the other team’s first baseman crushes the sliding hero Ned Rice, his classmates declare the infielder an “infernal blackguard” and “vile brute” (166) and a distinguished local man, a fictional Edward Everett, tells the working-class club that they will not be allowed back on the field until they can “conduct the game like men,—I don’t say gentlemen,—and not blackguards” (167–68). Everett’s second baseball novel, the 1870 *Double Play; or, How Joe Hardy Chose His Friends*, tells the same tale all over again, with an “honorably known” (26) school club teaching a “hard, tough-looking lot” (68) from a neighboring town a lesson in honest dealing. Everett and other baseball men of the time, believing they had to save the game from a string of gambling scandals, determined to harden the game’s class boundaries. It belonged to Ned Rice and other Victorian gentlemen-to-be who won with character and grace.

The gentlemanliness of Everett’s novels waned as gender norms shifted and baseball refashioned itself as a game of brains and brawn that, as it instituted a color line, welcomed all white men. Long misattributed to John Trowbridge, Mary P. Wells Smith’s 1877 baseball-romance novel *The Great Match, and Other Matches* celebrates a different kind of manliness than *Changing Base* or *Double Play*.⁵ When two neighboring New England villages, the industrial Milltown and the aristocratic Dornfield, face off on the ballfield, the villagers find themselves united in their love of the game and against the snobbish Mr. Grandhurst, who, after living abroad, insists on referring to baseball as rounders and dismisses it as a lesser form of cricket. The hero of the great match, Dick Softy, transforms himself over the course of the novel from a thin, unathletic medical student inclined to “read novels in a hammock” and “go to matches in slippers” (48) into a muscled catcher harboring a “pugnacious instinct” (148). He lifts and runs and rides a local farmer’s wild stallion, determining that “it is necessary for the moral health to engage occasionally in some dangerous pleasure” (150). Dick embodies an emerging white masculine ideal that the gender historian Gail Bederman describes as a balance between a receding

Victorian manliness and a rising virile “masculinity,” a new term that, she suggests, arose out of a concern that white men had grown decadent as Black men beat them in the boxing ring and other athletic venues (18). Baseball transforms Dick, the future doctor, the Victorian man, into a fighter. “The nation that never goes to war,” he thinks to himself amid his training, “becomes a third-rate power” (151).

Although the rare female-authored baseball novel of the time, *The Great Match* does not challenge the belief that, as Spalding later wrote, “Base Ball is too strenuous for womankind” (*America’s National Game* 11). Dick’s ultimate match, Molly Milton, chafes at her exclusion from the game (“if I were a man,” she tells Dick, “I would play until all my fingers were as crooked as an eagle’s claw”) but then settles into her role as audience to Dick’s heroics (48). The first baseball novels, including Smith’s, find in baseball a venue for a reunion of white men after civil war, a reunion constructed against Britishness and Blackness and with white women watching from the stands.

The whiteness of baseball literature endured. Emily Rutter, a historian of the genre, acknowledges that the Black game remained all but absent from baseball fiction until the 1970s, when a few white novelists like William Brashler, the author of *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings*, turned to the erstwhile Black leagues for material. Novels that did address the color line, lacking the endorsement of Spalding and the baseball establishment, didn’t sell. Bliss Perry, a critic and future editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, discovered this with his 1895 novel *The Plated City*. The star third baseman of a Connecticut club, Tom Beaulieu, a Black man, gets traded to another league, where, facing a hardening anti-Black code in organized baseball, he identifies as Latino and assumes the name Mendoza, revealing how, as historian Adrian Burgos writes, the owners and managers of that time used Latinos to “test the limits of racial tolerance and to locate the exclusionary point along the color line” (12). Beaulieu/Mendoza gets outed as Black after a game at the Polo Grounds in Manhattan, and that, we learn, seals his fate: “One thing would be evident to everybody; there would be no occasion for any discussion of the color line in connection with players of the National League. That point had been settled, years before” (228). Spalding, the great booster of baseball literature and a founder of the National League, had been among the men who settled it. Tom gets released, and no team will sign him, ending his baseball career. Although it had a distinguished house, Charles Scribner’s Sons, behind it, *The Plated City* couldn’t find an audience. Novels that celebrated white brotherhood on the diamond had built baseball into the national pastime, and no one, neither the new baseball

magnates nor their white customers, wanted to hear about Tom Beaulieu, Moses Fleetwood Walker, and the other men against whom they had claimed the game as their own. The next novel to tackle anti-Blackness in the game—Murrell Edmunds’s *Behold, Thy Brother*—wouldn’t arrive until 1950.⁶

3. A Connecticut Yankee on King Arthur’s Diamond

Once baseball had established a color line, with an assist from the novel, it carried that line overseas. In 1888, Albert Spalding launched his around-the-world tour, heading west from Chicago to Des Moines, Omaha, and San Francisco and then on to Melbourne, Cairo, and Rome, staging exhibition games in one destination after another for the enthralled, bemused, and indifferent. The White Stockings owner arranged an elaborate welcome-home dinner for himself and his all-stars at Delmonico’s in Lower Manhattan, where a full orchestra announced their arrival in the chandeliered ballroom with a rendition of “Yankee Doodle.” The restaurant arranged the tables to resemble a ballfield—a railroad executive on the mound, a judge at catcher, Mark Twain in the infield—and the waitstaff served the meal in nine “innings.” “Six months ago,” one local official stated, “these young men went abroad to fight, not like gladiators covered with armor, but covered with their American manhood, and they have come back covered with laurels” (qtd. in Palmer 445). A vaudeville actor transformed “Paul Revere’s Ride” into “Spalding’s Ride” (“To Spalding, who, freighted with ardor sublime, / Played our national game in every clime” [qtd. in Palmer 449]).⁷ Spalding had created a guest list designed to sell his creed: executives and statesmen declaring baseball the national pastime, novelists and actors inviting the audience to imagine that baseball nation.

Twain, a future member of the American Anti-Imperialist League and author of the satirical “To the Person Sitting in Darkness,” delivered the most memorable remarks of the night. Introduced as a native of the Sandwich Islands, he reflected on his time in Hawai‘i in the mid-1860s, sharing his amazement that the all-star club had brought baseball to the islands. (It hadn’t; baseball was not new to Hawai‘i, and Spalding had to cancel the scheduled exhibition game due to the strict blue laws that Western missionaries had introduced in the Pacific.) “These boys have played baseball *there!*—baseball, which,” Twain told the audience, “is the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive, and push, and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century!” (“Grand Tour” 244). He described the men as contributors to “the great science of geography” (246), having “plowed a new

equator round the globe stealing bases on their bellies!” (247). Twain, no fan of the industrial revolution or the graft and materialism it bred, did not see that raging, tearing, and booming as a blessing, but that’s not how his words went over at Delmonico’s. The baseball men loved the image of themselves as the vanguard of a world-consuming Americanism. The white union of Brooks and Smith had mutated into the white dominion of Twain’s base-stealing globetrotters.

Twain finished *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* that summer, and it also identifies baseball as the face of industrialism and globalization. His Yankee sustains a blow to the head that thrusts him backward in time to Arthurian Britain, where, using his engineering knowledge as an arms manufacturer, he dedicates himself to modernizing the medieval world, introducing railroads, factories, modern communication technologies, and Enlightenment ideals. The Yankee’s reform of medieval Britain culminates in his introduction of baseball, with two teams of former knights facing off in their armor—the final touch, in the Yankee’s mind, of modern culture. “When a man was running, and threw himself on his stomach to slide to his base, it was like an iron-clad coming into port,” he observes in his written account of his time travels (519). The Yankee believes that the teams’ first official game, in a nod to Spalding’s tour, “would certainly draw fifty thousand people; and for solid fun would be worth going around the world to see” (520). But that game never comes, and his modern reforms end in disaster with a civil war that kills tens of thousands. Foreshadowing Twain’s later arguments against American land-grabbing in the Pacific, his Yankee’s gift of American knowhow turns out to be a self-serving curse. Twain, a fan of his local Hartford Dark Blues in the mid-1870s and an investor in a minor league Hartford club of the 1880s (like most of his investments, it failed), studied the game’s vernacular and wove it into the Yankee’s language and industrial ambitions. “Step to the bat, it’s your innings,” he challenges Merlin (89). “Game’s called,” he tells the woman who later becomes his wife (176). Although some scholars suggest that Twain hesitated to criticize baseball, the American game, because that would have amounted to “railing against himself,” the humorist did suggest how the game had taken on new meaning, often from the literature about it, as the US walked back Reconstruction and seized land in the Pacific and the Caribbean (Burton 11).

Other novelists also imagined American ascendance through stories of ballplayers abroad. In 1897, Frank Norris wrote “This Animal of a Buldy Jones,” a story, which first ran in the *San Francisco Wave*, about an American art student in Paris who once starred for his college baseball team. The narrator, another student,

shares his astonishment that the big American could be an artist and an athlete, that he could draw and fight. “Now think of that! Here was this man, ‘This Animal of a Buldy Jones,’ a Beaux Arts man, one of the best colour and line men on our side [of the studio],” he remarks, “and yet the one thing he was proud of, the one thing he cared to be admired for, the one thing he loved to talk about, was the fact that he had pitched for the Yale ’varsity baseball nine” (201). When a Frenchman, whom the narrator describes as “a filthy little beast—a thorough-paced, blown-in-the-bottle blackguard,” challenges the American to a duel, “This Animal” invites him to face off not with guns but baseballs in a contest of national masculinities (202). The Frenchman delivers the ball overhand like a cricket bowler, missing wide over the American’s shoulder. The American, with arms “strung with tendons like particularly well-seasoned rubber” (207), throws an “in-curve” (209), striking the stunned Frenchman in the chin and knocking him unconscious. Norris did not share Twain’s reluctance to offer American culture as a model for other nations. The better artist and athlete, his big American reveals the small Frenchman as an untalented, arrogant blackguard, a man left clinging to memories of better times in the life of his nation, still bowling while the rest of the world learns the curveball. Brooks and Smith and then Twain and Norris established generic conventions for the literature of the national game—the cross-class reunion of white men, the masculine makeover of the Victorian man, the ousting of a decadent Old World—that reemerged in the adolescent fiction of the 1910s and 1920s that, as baseball historian Harold Seymour observes, “constituted part of the tribal rites of passage from puberty to adulthood for countless boys of the pre–World War II era” (38). That tribal rite taught them that baseball embodied the nation and that the nation stood for white union, manliness, and entitlement to a widening domain.

From Whitman to Norris, American literature imbued baseball with national meaning. Baseball historians have often remarked that, though the game emerged from cities as the industrial revolution took hold, most fans associate it with rural life and agrarianism, a dissonance to which we owe nationalist authors committed to creating an American literature and anointing a national game. “Civilization,” Chauncey Depew, the railroad executive and future senator, said at Delmonico’s, “is marked, and has been in all ages, by an interest in the manly arts” (qtd. in Palmer 446). With great literature, he believed, came great athletics. Once that had meant English literature and boxing, and now it meant American literature and baseball. With Mark Twain and Albert Spalding looking on, Cornelius Vanderbilt’s right-hand man and a millionaire in his own right must have felt that he stood at a moment of cultural

transition—from British to American letters, from boxing, cricket, and rounders to baseball. For Depew, Spalding, and other nationalists of the time, baseball signified an ascendent white, masculine American “civilization” because the nation’s men of letters—Whitman, a Lincoln biographer, Twain, Norris—said it did. Club owners and sportswriters declared their game America’s game. Poets and novelists let Americans, at least some Americans, imagine it as their own.

The arrival in 1952 of Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural* marked not, as the *Times* declared, a break, a “first,” but the culmination of a literature that had taught readers to see the nation in the game. Writing in Malamud’s wake, Coover, Roth, and DeLillo turned baseball fiction into high art. But the novel lost ground to film and television while the sport itself, though still growing, lost market share to football and then to basketball. The declining status of baseball in the US stemmed as much from a change in media as it did from the rise of football and basketball, which better accommodated television in form (rectangular fields and courts) and schedule (game clocks and commercial timeouts). The historian Jacques Barzun, who declared in 1954 that baseball “fitly expresses the power of the nation’s mind and body” (160), considered football more movie than game—“an emergency happening at a distance” (162). More Americans, it turned out, to Barzun’s dismay, wanted to watch the movie.

Why did baseball decline? Some blame the long at-bats, frequent pitching changes, and commercial interruptions that have made nine-inning games sometimes run to four or more hours. Some attribute it to the lukewarm coverage of MLB’s Dominican and Venezuelan stars or to the sport’s failure to attract and retain Black players and fans.⁸ Others blame football or the game’s Victorian “unwritten rules” or the constant hum of scandal, from gambling and steroids to sign stealing and ball doctoring, or the declinist narrative itself. But baseball, having entered national consciousness through print, through the boosterism of the sportswriter and the imagination of the novelist, has also struggled in the television and internet ages because it first sold itself as the national pastime with the national media of another time.⁹

Baseball novels got better after Malamud, but fewer people read them. Baseball players got bigger, faster, and stronger, but fewer people thought their performances said something about the US. Literature invented the national pastime. Then it set it in the past.

Notes

1. “Base Ball is the one sport open to all, without any barriers of expense,” Chadwick once wrote—disingenuous words that the man who cut his checks cited whenever he could (qtd. in Spalding, *America’s National Game* 472).
2. On Frick’s baseball novel, see John Carvalho and John Lofflin, “Ford Frick’s *Big Leaguer*: A Commissioner Takes a Swing at Baseball Fiction,” *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2017, pp. 38–57.
3. Baseball does surface as a device in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*—the idea that Gatsby’s gambler friend bribed members of the White Sox to throw the World Series leaves Nick “staggered”—suggesting a difference, at least for Fitzgerald, between a baseball novel and a novel that addresses baseball en route to a meditation on wealth, class, and American self-making (88).
4. Newspapers in struggling cities and towns engaged in baseball boosterism, as the historian Mitchell Nathanson notes, in “an act of self-preservation” (14). Their hometowns needed the business.
5. On the misattribution of *The Great Match*, see Geri Strecker, “‘And the Public Has Been Left to Guess the Secret’: Questioning the Authorship of *The Great Match*, and *Other Matches*,” *Nine*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2010, pp. 11–37.
6. For a detailed account of baseball fiction in American literature and the long absence of Black baseball from that fiction after 1895, see Noel Schraufnagel, *The Baseball Novel: A History and Annotated Bibliography of Adult Fiction* (2008), p. 37.
7. For more on Spalding’s world tour, see Robert Elias, *The Empire Strikes Out: How Baseball Sold U.S. Foreign Policy and Promoted the American Way Abroad* (2010), pp. 21–27; Mark Lamster, *Spalding’s World Tour: The Epic Adventure That Took Baseball Around the Globe—and Made It America’s Game* (2006); and Thomas W. Zeiler, *Ambassadors in Pinstripes: The Spalding World Baseball Tour and the Birth of the American Empire* (2006).
8. For more on the whiteness of baseball now, see Jay Caspian Kang, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Baseball,” *New York Times Magazine*, 6 Apr. 2016, web; and Gene Seymour, “Baseball’s Race Problem,” *Nation*, 20 Oct. 2020, web.
9. Novelists have found a new kind of national meaning in the sport’s decline. Chad Harbach’s 2011 novel *The Art of Fielding* and Gish Jen’s 2020 novel *The Resisters* imagine the game as almost artifactual. The unearthing of a forgotten Melville lecture sets Harbach’s novel in motion, and the star infielder reads his baseball idol’s book, also titled *The Art of Fielding*, as a scholar would *Moby-Dick* (he studies “the opaque parts,” dreaming of the day he might “crack them open and suck out their hidden wisdom” [17]). Jen constructs a future of heightened social stratification and suffocating surveillance in which baseball has been banned for failing to accommodate market demands for more efficient labor and consumer behavior. Characters resigned to that future’s lower class—a “coppertoned” class long ago barred from Spalding and Anson’s National League—borrow a form of resistance (the resisters of the title) from “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (7). Baseball stands not for but against that US.

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