The Writers of Summer:
Meta-Generic Commentary in Baseball Literature

by

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Thank you, Dad, for bringing me to my first spring training.

And thank you, Lily, for supporting me throughout.
As the ripples in the sand (in the Kyoto garden) organize and formalize the dust which is dust, so the diamonds and rituals of baseball create an elegant, trivial, enchanted grid on which our suffering, shapeless, sinful day leans for the momentary grace of order.

Donald Hall, “Baseball and the Meaning of Life”
INTRODUCTION

Four baseball diamonds radiate from a central viewing point. A couple hundred nameless ball players field chopped ground balls between the mound and first base over and over again. They jog around the infield, backing each other up, and hoping that if they make this play enough times, they’ll take another step towards their dream: the Major Leagues. Pirate City, as this training facility is called, is a quiet spot in western Bradenton, Florida. It’s overlooked by thousands of baseball fans in the area who attend spring training games at McKechnie field, a few miles away.

I find a crumpled list of Minor Leaguers on a dugout bench and identify a few players as they hit batting practice. The few other baseball fans around me stay fairly quiet. Exercise music plays quietly from central speakers. “It’s like watching rehearsal,” says my father. And it is. Only this rehearsal has none of the leads and all of the understudies. All the players here are young hopefuls, years away from a debut in the Major Leagues, if that debut ever comes. I’m struck by how close I feel to the people here. The players are all about my age, in their late teens and early twenties. They have never seen the limelight that casts such a distinctive light on professional athletes who’ve made it. The baseball fans around us sit in humble quiet, respecting the sounds of the bat hitting the ball, the coaches chirping and
joking with the players. It’s hard to even call these silent onlookers fans. They
don’t root or holler at a big swing, they aren’t here for that. They are here to
enjoy the comfort of baseball’s grass roots, to sink into it like a warm bath.

My father and I have made a pilgrimage to Florida. It’s mid March,
and, to much of America, the coming spring is still around a corner; baseball
will come eventually, but it hasn’t yet. But in Florida, baseball is in its peak
season. Fifteen Major League teams travel to the Sunshine State every
February, beginning their exhibition games in March and playing them until
the real season rolls around in early April. At spring training, baseball’s
community, its language and its literary value all shine. In the words of
William Zinsser, author of Spring Training: “Nowhere would that sense of
shared values—of baseball as a common American possession—be more
palpable than in a Florida spring training town” (7).

Many authors have utilized the symbolic power of spring training in
their work. For A. Bartlett Giamatti, once the commissioner of the league and
writer of several essays on baseball, the spring is a time of rebirth: “The game
begins in the spring, when everything else begins again” (7). For Roger
Angell, New Yorker writer and professional baseball romantic, the spring
season is a gentle time for the elderly Floridians to enjoy the novelty of
something beginning without the stress of high stakes athletics: “a sun-
warmed, sleepy exhibition celebrating the juvenescence of the year and the senescence of the fans” (6). For lovers of the game, spring brings the promise of fresh hope and summer days. It is the beginning of the long baseball season, which always seems to slip by. Though the language of baseball, of perfect games and walk-off homeruns, never disappears during the winter, the summer means the community can reassemble; more memories will be made and the fan-base that already shares memories of games past will be replenished with fresh stories of a new season.

Despite these recurring themes though, baseball has a peculiar ability to transcend and defy a singular categorization. It seems to force together topics which writers generally consider disparate. Baseball conflates familiar oppositions in literature: the individual and community, the past and the present, fantasy and reality. Perhaps this is due to baseball’s romanticized place in American culture, and these writers are simply channeling that heightened emotion, however quotidian, into modest profundity. Classic American baseball works, from *Casey at the Bat* to *Field of Dreams*, certainly take advantage of this pre-existing jumble of simple emotion. But even these works are inherently taking advantage of something else about baseball: it’s so essentially a piece of Americana that it has become a part of the culture, woven in, a note playing constantly in the background of any baseball fan’s
life. In the words of Giamatti, “baseball is 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” (90-91). Philosopher Jacques Barzun declares in his book, *God’s Country and Mine*, that “whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball, the rules and realities of the game” (159).

This intrinsic, in-the-bloodstream quality of baseball in America does more than make it familiar; it makes it transcend the individual, the present and reality, bending generic constraints all the while. Three books in particular exemplify these three aspects of baseball in literature: *Wait Till Next Year* by Doris Kearns Goodwin, *A Drive Into the Gap* by Kevin Guilfoile and *Shoeless Joe* by W. P. Kinsella. In this thesis, I will use these books to demonstrate the effect baseball has on genre, as well as how this effect is reflected on by the authors, whether directly or indirectly.

When Kearns Goodwin discusses her upbringing in Long Island, her passion for the Brooklyn Dodgers is inseparable from her private life. Baseball threads her community together and ties her to those around her. Kearns Goodwin shows baseball’s ability to unify a community, whether it’s Dodger fans in her town of Rockville Centre or baseball fans in general, all around the world. Baseball transcends the individual’s life narrative and
personal memory. The community shares the memory of Bobby Thompson’s infamous home run to sink the Dodgers’ hope for a pennant just as they share hope that next year, they will finally win the Series. Baseball shows Kearns Goodwin that, while her memoir might focus on her own experience as a child, it also represents the feeling of being a baseball fan in general. She speaks for the masses as her own identity becomes blurred with baseball’s larger community.

For Kevin Guilfoile, baseball’s stories transcend time. By retelling the stories his father used to tell him, Guilfoile brings them strikingly into the present. When the truth of these stories comes into question, Guilfoile plunges down the rabbit hole of tall tales and oral histories. The resulting collection of stories and memoir reflects on the past’s truth and its importance. Debate over a particular story’s validity only contributes to the sense of wonder in the story Guilfoile tells of diving into the rickety archives of midcentury baseball’s intricacies. The stories Guilfoile shares not only advance his larger investigations, they mingle the past with the author’s present as he writes and with the reader’s present as one reads. Ultimately, though, the stories are the only present to which we all subscribe—writer, storyteller and reader alike.
W. P. Kinsella, unrestrained by the logic of memoir, can make literal what Guilfoile’s stories can only seem to do: he can actually bring the past into the present. In *Shoeless Joe*, dead baseball players from a past era populate the narrative’s present. Yet, Kinsella is exploring an entirely different aspect of baseball literature than Guilfoile; *Shoeless Joe* delves into the high stakes of an individual’s faith in the magical world of baseball. Here, baseball operates as a bridge between total fantasy and quotidian reality, and Kinsella challenges his readers not to differentiate the two, but to understand them as intertwined. While the book is certainly fiction, Kinsella comments on what constitutes truth in literature. By incorporating fictionalizations of real figures, as well as fictional figures who insist on their own realness, Kinsella makes a meta-commentary on fiction as a genre, and the importance of finding truth in magic, as well as the other way around.
CHAPTER 1
The Community and the Individual

Many American readers know Doris Kearns Goodwin’s work as a historian. Her thick volumes populate shelves of history buffs and presidential scholars. These readers were thus surprised when she appeared as a talking head in Ken Burns’ documentary series, Baseball. “The reaction was startling,” Kearns Goodwin writes. “Almost everywhere, as I traveled the lecture circuit, I encountered people less anxious to hear my tales of Lyndon Johnson, the Kennedys, or the Roosevelts than they were to share memories of those wondrous days when baseball almost ruled the world” (10). Her memoir, Wait Till Next Year, was born from these conversations.

Wait Till Next Year was not meant to be a memoir. It was not meant to be the story of a young Kearns Goodwin, the budding historian. It was meant to be a story of young fandom, “peopled not by leaders of the nation, but by Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, Gil Hodges, Duke Snider, Pee Wee Reese, Sandy Amoros, and the infamous Bobby Thomson” (10). As she began writing though, Kearns Goodwin began to realize that baseball is not a distinct facet of her life, set apart categorically from everything else—it’s a thread that runs through her life, connecting her to those around her, creating a narrative that spreads beyond her own experience. “Thinking about the
Dodgers summoned recollections of my family, my neighborhood, my village, and the evolution of my own sensibilities” (10).

Kearns Goodwin is not the first writer to confront the suffusion of the personal in baseball texts. Other writers have been unable to differentiate the two, slipping from baseball narrative to personal memory, and the other way around, fluidly and inevitably. In the forward to his book *The Summer Game*, Roger Angell explores the biased perspective he inevitably brings to his baseball writing. Though he repeatedly covers some famous players, he slights other “equally admirable figures.” “It is unfair,” he writes, “but this book is the work of a part-time, nonprofessional baseball watcher. In most of these ten seasons, I was rarely able to attend as many as twenty-five games before the beginning of the World Series. … I was, in short, a fan” (ix). Fans of baseball who decide to write about the game cannot avoid writing something personal. Their experience with the game is intrinsically subjective, and instead of fighting this position, authors like Angell and Kearns Goodwin leverage their subjectivity, creating works that are memoirs by default rather than by design. While authors like Angell have touched on this phenomenon, and many more writers exhibit it from time to time, *Wait Till Next Year* encapsulates and meditates on it throughout. For fans, baseball permeates everyday life, and Kearns Goodwin explores her experience of this synthesis.
Wait Till Next Year definitely became a memoir, but it came to this genre by a circuitous route, when Kearns Goodwin realized that it was impossible to write a book exclusively about her relationship to baseball. Her own life as a fan was not only something that took place at the ballpark; it surrounded her entire experience. The life story of a fan cannot exist without the story of baseball reverberating in ordinary life. The result is a book that explores this aspect of fandom. *Wait Till Next Year* reveals the essence of the fan’s narrative, and that narrative cannot stop at baseball. She delineates completely the effect of considering one’s relationship to baseball, and in doing so she delineates the effect of baseball as a literary trope. Once it is referenced in any context, readers understand it as a reference to community, emotions of youth and summer days.

The pivotal moment in the text comes when the young Kearns Goodwin first appreciates how much her sense of individual identity emerges from her sense of belonging to a group of fans. Once a year, the Dodgers hosted a “Rockville Centre Night” at their home stadium in Brooklyn, Ebbets Field. For this special night, the team sent buses to Kearns Goodwin’s hometown in Long Island to bring fans to the game:

On earlier trips to Ebbets Field, I had felt part of the invisible community of Dodger fans, linked by shared emotions and experience to thousands of strangers who, for a few hours, were not strangers at
all. But tonight was different. All around me, in the sections of the grandstands set aside for our town, were the familiar figures of my mundane daily life. It was as if my block, my school, my church had been snatched up and transported to a gigantic ocean liner for a trip to some fantastic land. I recognized all the people, of course, but they were not the same. The familiar setting of our lives, the context we shared, had changed and, in changing, had imparted a different dimension to my existence. The invisible barriers dividing the natural compartments of my life had been dissolved, leaving me a resident of a larger world. (133-134)

Just as she would later find baseball bleeding into her life as a historian, here her life as a young member of a network of local communities infiltrates her experience as a Dodger fan—and vice versa. These “invisible barriers” had felt real, but now the people around her share her experience; they are not separate from her at all. She sees that her personal connection to baseball and her personal connection to her community are not disparate features of her life, temporarily connected; they are permanently intertwined.

Conflation By Juxtaposition

Wait Till Next Year centers around the notion that baseball and social existence are not two distinguishable parts of life, but rather simultaneously active parts of the everyday. Kearns Goodwin says so explicitly, and she also weaves it into the language of the text itself. She creates a feeling of the
conflation of baseball and life through multiple syntactical and grammatical techniques from juxtaposition to pronoun uses.

One such technique Kearns Goodwin utilizes is to align baseball on the timeline of her life. Within a single sentence, Kearns Goodwin repeatedly orients the reader to think about baseball as it relates to her life. She does this in a long term sense: “[The Giants] quickly reeled off eleven consecutive victories, their longest winning streak since 1938, five years before I was born” (145). Here, Kearns Goodwin indicates that the Giants’ winning streak was significant to history, and more specifically to her own life. This method also works in a more immediate context: “During the break between classes, Duke Snider homered off Whitey Ford to put the Dodgers up 3-2, but by the time French class had begun, the Yankees had tied it again. … The sixth game began on Monday, while we sat in Mrs. Brown’s geography class” (205). In these moments, Kearns Goodwin keeps the reader updated on the occurrences in baseball but does so only in terms of her own day. The juxtaposition of the game-time information and the school day demonstrates the importance of baseball to her personal experience, as well as how her personal experience is part and parcel of her memory of the 1955 World Series. Baseball and school—baseball and life—do not just happen simultaneously; they are part of the same timeline.
The radio is at the center of the classroom scene, among many others in *Wait Till Next Year*, and Kearns Goodwin uses it to further this feeling of baseball flowing through everyday life. The radio does not interrupt the scene, it fills the day, suffusing memories with its sound. William Zinsser uses similar imagery in *Spring Training*: “I thought of all the summer evenings of my boyhood when I switched my Philco radio to WOR at seven o’clock—the family dinner had to wait—to get the ball scores from Stan Lomax” (6). As does Donald Hall in his essay “Fathers Playing Catch with Sons”: “The gentle and vivacious voice of Red Barber floated from the Studebaker radio during our Sunday afternoon drives along the shore of Long Island Sound. My mother and father and I wedded together in the close front seat, heard the sounds of baseball” (9). For Kearns Goodwin, Zinsser and Hall, just as baseball is woven into a fan’s experience, the radio voice is integrated into the memory of everyday life.

Baseball creates a shared experience and a shared passion for a community of fans. Its language permeates memories as radio broadcasts fill the daily routines with sounds from the ballpark. But baseball also becomes the language of a relationship. With her neighbor, Elaine, among others, Kearns Goodwin explores this language and its connection to friendship. Not only a technique in her prose, conflation by juxtaposition is also the pattern of
her personal relationships: “She was the only one who could tease me about Jackie Robinson as I could tease her about Billy Martin,” she writes. “When we talked about baseball, we were simultaneously talking about our shared friendship” (193). Baseball was so much a foundation of this friendship that to talk about baseball constituted the friendship itself. Using the language of baseball acknowledged a language they shared and cherished, reflecting the texture and origin of their relationship. Once again, the two cannot be separated.

This conflation, this simultaneity, also becomes an integral part of Kearns Goodwin’s identity. The shifting pronouns that she uses in *Wait Till Next Year* reveal how being a fan of baseball creates a sense of identity defined by community. As the scene in the classroom continues, Kearns Goodwin shifts from the pronoun “I” to “us”: “Then, to our amazement, she put a radio on the front desk and let us listen to the game” (208). Later, she writes: “We were going to win. At that moment, I knew we were going to win” (210). Finally, her father says to her on the phone, “we did it! What did I tell you, we did it!” (212). Kearns Goodwin goes on to say that this call was “one of tens of thousands made between 3:44 p.m. and 4:01 p.m.” By using first person plural pronouns, Kearns Goodwin signals her identification with a community. Philippe Lejeune, a theorist of autobiography, proposes:
“identity is a constant relation between the one and the many” (20). Kearns Goodwin’s shifting between singular and plural pronouns seems congruous with this interpretation. During these young, formative years, the baseball community that she had imbedded herself in was as much a part of her identity as her individualism was. Lejeune concurs: “no combination of personal pronouns could ‘fully express’ the person in a satisfactory manner” (32). Georges Gusdorf goes one step further than Lejeune in his essay “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography.” He asserts that not only is an individual’s identity dependent on the community, but that the community is affected by the individual: the individual, he says, “does not feel himself to exist outside of others, … but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community” (Olney 29). By tying herself so closely to the baseball of her childhood, Kearns Goodwin entangles herself with two communities: her surrounding Dodger fans, but also the baseball fans who read *Wait Till Next Year* and feel the effect of Kearns Goodwin as an individual member of the group.

In their work, Lejeune and Gusdorf tend towards extreme examples. Authors they examine might write in the second or third person entirely, referring to themselves by name as if they are not themselves the writer. Such works truly challenge the premise that they are autobiography and demand a
reconsideration of the self, the writer and identity. On its face, *Wait Till Next Year* does not do this. But Kearns Goodwin’s use of “we” does challenge preconceptions about autobiography, and it does so not because Kearns Goodwin endeavored to challenge genre from the outset, but because baseball demands a reconsideration of the isolated individual. Baseball makes an “I” into a “we,” and by identifying oneself as a part of the “we,” a writer inherently internalizes that community. This internalization expands the primary subject of the work beyond the singular experience of the self. In *Wait Till Next Year*, Kearns Goodwin discovers the intensity of baseball’s community as well as her own identification with it, and her writing reflects this.

*Baseball and War*

When we think about significant moments in history, we locate ourselves in those instants. We say, “I remember where I was that morning.” We give specifics. We talk about memories and images “frozen in time.” The goal of these conversations is to relate to those around us. We all share these large moments in history, and we all remember where we were and what we saw in those moments. These memories are like coordinates to a point in
history that we can tie ourselves to. By recalling them, we find links between our small private lives and the vastness of public events.

Baseball, as a public event, is more accessible to the community both because of the relative triviality of baseball as compared to something like war, and because of the insularity of a community surrounding a specific team. But the ability to record in historic data every event of a baseball game gives fans an even closer interaction with baseball’s presence in history, and this ties them closer to the community that shares that emotional and statistical past.

Baseball history is recorded in the newspaper the day after each game in the form of a digestible box score. Stats are catalogued, wins and losses updated, eventually a team will be World Series champions and some special players will be inducted into the Hall of Fame, their faces, cap included, cast into bronze plaques that line the Cooperstown hallway. But all of this grandiosity can be broken into single at-bats. “When I was six,” recalls Kearns Goodwin, “my father gave me a bright-red scorebook that opened my heart to the game of baseball” (13). With this gift on hand, she listened to Red Barber’s voice as it came through the radio, providing her the play-by-play of every Dodger game as it happened. She recorded each at-bat in this scorebook, and in so doing, she tied herself to the game.
While at a game at Ebbets Field, Kearns Goodwin is amazed by her proximity to the public event of Major League Baseball. Suddenly, the immense world that she usually witnesses only through her radio is right in front of her, overwhelmingly occupying all of her senses. She writes that she and her father were “so close to the playing field that [they] could hear what the ballplayers said to one another as they ran onto the field and could watch their individual gestures and mannerisms. … There, come to earth, were the heroes of my imagination” (48). By witnessing this public event, Kearns Goodwin is able to close the gap between it and her private experience.

In this way, baseball has a scale that sets it apart from large and impersonal historical moments. John Paul Eakin refers to the gap between private life and public events as a “disparity of scale.” Without episodic connections where public events and private life overlap, he says, we are left with “a nagging sense of history going on without [us]” (139). In his novel *In Our Time*, Ernest Hemingway artfully and unexpectedly collides public and private events. Eakin proposes that this collision occurs when Nick Adams, “whose coming-of-age we have been following in the five opening stories, suddenly surfaces in the italic space … as a combatant in the war in Italy” (141). For Nick Adams and for Hemingway, World War I is a global historical moment. But because the fighting takes place primarily in Western Europe,
the violence of the war is a historical moment that is hard to grasp for Americans at home.

By collapsing the global event and private experience, effectively closing the gap in the disparity of scale, Hemingway shows the reader how a character who they’ve come to know as an individual engages with an event that many readers have difficulty comprehending. Fredric Jameson, in his essay “Periodizing the 60s,” similarly considers the exceptional experiences of individuals on the backdrop of the turbulence of the 1960s. He claims that “veterans of the decade, who have seen so many things change dramatically from year to year, think more historically than their predecessors” (178). This understanding of the individual’s perception of the historical moment is slightly different than the one Eakin proposes, replacing specific catalyst events that collapse the private and the public with a period of time that brings those living through it closer to that time in history, but the same conclusion can be made: a heightened intimacy with a shared history, whether it is the 1960s, war, or baseball, creates a heightened awareness of the role of the present in a developing history.

Hemingway’s work shows the collapsing of the public and the private in a fictional life, though the global event of WWI is quite real. While this has an effect of informing the reader, Hemingway is not writing himself into
history. Autobiography, unlike fiction, allows the writer to insist on the
author’s own historical relevance. “Autobiography not only records an
imaginative coming-to-terms with history,” writes Eakin, “it functions itself
as the instrument of this negotiation” (144).

Perhaps Kearns Goodwin, as a historian, is interested in writing herself
into history. Not only showing others that she was alive and perceptive
during important events of the 20th century, but exploring her own identity as
it was shaped by history. But she relates to history in additional ways,
autobiography aside, and she explains them in Wait Till Next Year. Writing
her memoir ties her to history the way Eakin proclaims, but she also explores
how baseball, like autobiography, is itself a way of navigating the gap
between public and private life. From keeping box scores to attending games,
following baseball is an act of personally engaging with and asserting one’s
presence in history as it passes.

There is a similarity between both baseball’s and autobiography’s
ability to tie the individual to history. Accordingly, Kearns Goodwin credits
baseball with her early interest in narrative: “These nightly recountings of the
Dodgers’ progress provided my first lessons in the narrative art,” she writes
(15). She is not the first writer to connect the fan experience with writing.
Marianne Moore’s poem, appropriately titled “baseball and writing,” is just
one such example. Some authors contend, however, that seeing baseball as a metaphor for anything, writing included, is ridiculous: “I have [no] patience with the idea of baseball as a metaphor,” writes Zinsser. “Baseball is baseball” (8).

So, what relationship can baseball have to Eakin’s theory of autobiography? Albert E. Stone offers an alternative. In his essay, “Modern American Autobiography” he writes: “At its inception, personal history represents a historically conditioned transaction between a surviving witness or participant and available records of the past” (96). Closely following baseball, as Kearns Goodwin does when she records the box score, is an act of creating the “record of the past” that Stone refers to. In doing so by hand, and doubly recording this action in an autobiography, Kearns Goodwin ties herself inseparably to this recording. The red scorebook in which she kept the play-by-play of Dodger games is a historical document that is stamped with her identity. Creating it was an intimate and personal experience. This act bridges the gap between public event and private life by making her personal history synonymous with available records of the past.

Fans of a specific team have a wealth of knowledge, and this makes their experience of following the team more vibrant. As such a fan, Kearns Goodwin is close to the history and culture of the Dodgers, and this
familiarity allows baseball, while it does not have the gravity of war, to close the disparity of scale. The day-to-day ups-and-downs of the Dodgers bled into Kearns Goodwin’s everyday interaction with her parents and town. “On earlier trips to Ebbets Field, I had felt part of the invisible community of Dodger fans,” she says, “linked by shared emotions and experience to thousands of strangers who, for a few hours, were not strangers at all” (133).

In these moments, she experiences a collision of private life and public event in which the two become indistinguishable.

Indeed, following baseball the way Kearns Goodwin does, by recording each at bat in a notebook, is already an act of tying oneself to a history. The baseball narrative, though, unlike more otherworldly, awe-inspiring narratives—such as life at war—is an accessible story that the author does not just tell the reader, but shares with them. Baseball ties followers of the game together with a common life narrative. Whether or not fellow baseball fans actually went to Ebbets Field the way Kearns Goodwin did, baseball’s community shares a narrative of going to games, and Kearns Goodwin taps into this. By writing about baseball, she appeals to a community that understands and relates to her own experience. This shared experience of baseball is another way that Kearns Goodwin, and fans of the
game in general, connect themselves to a community that collectively remembers the game’s history.

*Baseball’s Moments*

A baseball scorecard is designed to allow viewers and listeners to keep track of each at bat. A double is recorded with a line from home plate to first and around to second. A ground ball to the shortstop and thrown to the first baseman is written as 6-3. A spectacular catch might be marked with an outline, a strikeout looking with a backwards K. Each at bat, each resulting play, is a moment, and these moments make up the memory that baseball fans share. A reference to a play recalls a heap of nostalgia and situational emotion.

For Kearns Goodwin, remembering her time as a Dodger fan is a practice of recalling these moments. She describes the instant that the Dodgers finally won the World Series in 1955: “After the count reached two and two, Howard fouled off one fast ball after another, then sent a routine ground ball to Reese at shortstop, who threw to Hodges at first for the third and final out.” Kearns Goodwin’s memory of this play is locked in her mind, and she relays that feeling with her vivid prose. Preceding that moment, though, are all of the associations that come back to her alongside the
recollection of the final out. “I sat cross-legged on the floor, my back leaning against my mother’s knees as she sat on the edge of her chair. She edged forward as the first batter, Bill Skowron, hit a one-hopper to the mound” (210).

In this paragraph, Kearns Goodwin shows how recalling a vivid moment of baseball is important to her experience as a fan, but also how these vivid moments contain elements of private life. After the Dodgers’ World Series win, Kearns Goodwin becomes reflective: “I would recall the laughter of my father, the merry vitality of the crowd, and the Dodger players who returned our adoration with a devotion of their own. My life had been held fast to a web of familiar people—my family, my block, my church, my team, my town, my country” (215). *Wait Till Next Year*, though it covers several years of Kearns Goodwin’s life as a fan, is at its core an exploration of baseball as a medium for personal memory. Remembering the ecstasy that surrounded the 1955 World Series does not just remind her of fandom and pride for the team, it reminds her of community and family.

A reference to baseball, as Kearns Goodwin exemplifies, brings with it a torrent of pride and nostalgia for the game, but also memories of childhood and the American community. Richard Peterson, in his book, *Extra Innings*, claims that baseball writers, even the most cynical, still utilize “baseball’s
capacity to restore the most deeply felt emotions of our youth and evoke the most profound dream of the human spirit” (21). But the trope of a baseball reference is so powerful that it is also used by writers who are not focused on baseball at all. In Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms, the narrator, Frederic Henry, is in an Italian hospital during WWI. While there, he declares: “the baseball news was all I could read and I did not have the slightest interest in it” (145). With this brief reference, Hemingway uses the power of the baseball to depict how Henry longs for the calm of Americana, the innocence of childhood, and the humanity and community of baseball’s everyday update. In his short story, “Bullet in the Brain,” Tobias Wolff’s character, Anders, is shot in the head during a bank robbery, sending him whirling into a momentary flashback: “This is what he remembered. Heat. A baseball field. Yellow grass, the whirr of insects, himself leaning against a tree as the boys of the neighborhood gather for a pickup game” (205). The effect is similar here. Anders remembers the endlessness of summer days playing baseball. Wolff’s reference to baseball, slightly longer than Hemingway’s, shows its own intention as Wolff continues. “For now Anders can still make time,” he writes. “Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball, time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt” (206). Wolff elongates this moment for literary effect,
as the reader knows that time outside of Anders’ brain is passing much more quickly than time within it. But by doing this, Wolff, as Kearns Goodwin does in *Wait Till Next Year*, outlines the nostalgia for timelessness that a baseball reference brings to writing.
CHAPTER 2
The Past and the Present

For Kearns Goodwin, recalling her childhood may have introduced its own difficulties. Remembering the quotations she attributes to her parents at different points may have been a very challenging case of recollection or, more likely, it could have been an approximated or assumed memory. When novelist Sheila Heti first learned from Karl Knausgaard that he had “made up” certain details in his mammoth autobiography My Struggle, she was tremendously disheartened. She writes in an essay for the London Review of Books that she “was unable to pick up his books for another year” (36). The essay concludes, though, with Heti’s realization that she should not have been so disappointed. “Of course Knausgaard couldn’t have remembered his mother washing potatoes in the sink,” she says, “although he would have known in general that she did—the potatoes have to be washed” (36).

In Knausgaard’s work, the act of recollecting takes center stage; every ounce of detail seems to have been included for thousands of pages. For Kearns Goodwin, memory itself is a minor feature. In a different way altogether from Knausgaard, Kevin Guilfoile places memory at the center of his book, A Drive Into the Gap. Guilfoile works outside the confines of autobiography, in a mélange of genre combining biography, legend,
journalism and mythology. To describe the book as a whole, the word *story*
comes to mind, and Guilfoile functions as a storyteller who leaves no
tangential stone unturned. Guilfoile takes on this role, in part, because the
story he wants to tell the reader is made up of stories, both others’ and his
own. As storyteller, Guilfoile explores the memory, the truth and the
implications woven into the tales he tells.

A story, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is: “An oral or
written narrative account of events that occurred or are believed to have
occurred in the past; a narrative account accepted as true by virtue of great
age or long tradition.” When Babe Ruth pointed to center field during the
1932 World Series and then hit the next pitch over the center field wall,
audiences assumed they had just seen Ruth call his shot. This is the accepted
truth; it is both an old narrative and it has become a part of the tradition of
baseball. Yet, historians will never know for certain what Ruth was really
doing when he raised his finger before that home run. According to Cubs
pitcher, Charlie Root, who faced Ruth that day, Ruth wasn’t calling his shot at
all: “Sure, Babe gestured to me. … Maybe I had a smug grin on my face after
he took the second strike. Babe stepped out of the box again, pointed his
finger in my direction and yelled, ‘You still need one more, kid’” (Coffin 33).
Others claim that Ruth was sarcastically wiping his eye for the jeering fans.

Still others, of course, maintain that Ruth was calling his shot.

Tristram Coffin refers to this story as the “indicator home run” and, primarily due to Root’s testimony, says that Ruth calling his shot with that raised finger is purely a legend. “But what chance does reality have?” he asks. Even the umpire that day, George Magerkurth, said that Ruth’s “indicator home run” was his favorite moment of the Series. “There can be no other explanation for the raised finger,” says Coffin. “Thus glory makes her transit of earth, else man would have no past” (34). Stories in baseball constitute the game’s past in a way that statistics do not, and in some ways, their elements of fiction make them all the more stable and fascinating. Guilfoile cannot settle on a single truth in regards to the stories of Roberto Clemente’s 3000th hit bat the way Coffin can with Ruth’s called shot. But that is exactly what makes him so obsessed with finding the answer.

_A Drive Into the Gap_ tells the story of Guilfoile’s own attempt to uncover the truth behind Roberto Clemente’s famous bat. Kevin Guilfoile is the son of Bill Guilfoile, who worked in the Pittsburgh Pirates’ media office when Roberto Clemente played right field for the team. After the game on September 30th, 1972, Clemente handed him the bat that he had used to hit his landmark 3000th hit, and Guilfoile promptly sent it to the Hall of Fame, where
it was displayed for years with a small plaque. Years later, though, other claims emerged from people who said they owned or knew about the real Clemente bat. As soon as doubt entered the situation, what had once been fact to Kevin Guilfoile quickly became one of many stories about the bat Clemente used to get his 3000th hit.

Among the stories of his investigation of archives and individuals’ accounts of the hit, Guilfoile discusses his father’s decline into Alzheimer’s and his own upbringing in proximity to baseball. Some of Guilfoile’s chapters are as brief as a single paragraph, and few of them continue from where the previous one left off. The result is a collage of genres that includes journal entries, the story of a journalist and tales of youth and legend.

Throughout *A Drive Into the Gap*, Guilfoile uses a casual, conversational tone. Some sentences are as short as a few words. He peppers his stories with colloquialisms such as “pal” and idiomatic phrases such as “believe it or not,” creating a distinctive, oral storyteller’s voice. He doesn’t only describe visiting the Roberto Clemente museum in Pittsburgh, he goes so far as to recount the smell of grapes from the winery in the basement of the building (53).

The macro story of *A Drive Into the Gap* is Guilfoile’s meditation on truth and history. It is concerned with the allusiveness of truth and the allure
of legend. The micro stories that make it up, however, are more like the Babe Ruth legend of the “indicator home run.” Each is built on a moment of truth—Clemente’s hit—but they diverge from there. They exist based on word of mouth and the way that memories are created when knowledge is uncertain.

**Origin Stories**

Stephen Jay Gould was an evolutionary biologist and paleontologist who had a love for baseball. In his essay “Creation Myths of Cooperstown,” he explores the idea that “we are powerfully drawn to the subject of beginnings” (193). Yet, as Gould shows us using examples from humankind to baseball, a single point of origin is rarely reality. “We yearn to know about origins,” says Gould, “and we readily construct myths when we do not have data (or we suppress data in favor of legend when a truth strikes us as too commonplace)” (193). In the case of Roberto Clemente’s bat, we can’t say whether or not the truth is “too commonplace” as we don’t know what the truth is, but certainly there has been a construction of myths due to the uncertainty of the past, even one so recent as the autumn of 1972.

Guilfoile seems to agree with Gould’s notion that the simplicity and accessibility of a fiction is what makes it so appealing: “On some level, most
novelists write fiction to create order out of chaos. When you shape a fictional story, you can tie every loose end, fit the round pegs comfortably in circular holes. In a novel the author can create a world that makes sense” (32). To go back through time and say that one thing or another happened is the endless frustration of a historian or biographer or, in Guilfoile’s case, a writer simply looking for the truth. Other writers in these genres have echoed his concern.

In his intensive work of biography, *Footsteps*, Richard Holmes attempts to follow the lives of those he writes about, travelling where they travelled and trying to experience what they experienced. But he explains that the literal past remains unattainable: “You stood at the end of the broken bridge and looked across carefully, objectively, into the unattainable past on the other side.” Instead, Holmes needs to find other ways of reaching to the other side of this bridge, “other sorts of skills and crafts and sensible magic” (Holmes 27). Lisa Cohen, in her triple biography *All We Know*, also writes of the alluring nature of finding the truth of the past. Her effort to write about three forgotten lives demonstrates to her “the seductiveness of the facts and the necessity of fictions” (138).

Gould, as an evolutionary biologist, focused on the desire for “origin stories,” not just truth about the past, and, in fact, the broken bridges are not exactly the same in his consideration. While we are tempted to single out
individuals in history, such as Abner Doubleday, the man credited with inventing baseball single handedly, Gould argues that there is a truth, just not the delineated one of legend. Instead, Gould says that baseball—like human beings and other things many people like to place a point of origin on—evolved (199). Guilfoile’s idolization of fiction writing, the ability to “tie every loose end,” is not a fear of not knowing, but a realistic worry that the truth is too complicated, too extensive and too much of a continuum to boil down into a single fact.

Guilfoile goes on to talk about the other side of the coin, the non-fiction side:

The non-fiction writer often does the opposite. He starts with the assumption that the true story he wants to tell conforms to a logical narrative. Instead he discovers that there are always motivations that are incomprehensible. That people act irrationally. That memories are imperfect. The non-fiction writer uncovers the chaos hidden beneath the orderly surface. (132)

Guilfoile is concerned with the impossible-to-untangle entropy of non-fiction because the story that he is attempting to uncover is not one of origin, but of people. Though he is not pursuing the continuum of truth that Gould argues for in place of origin stories, Guilfoile faces the same physiological barrier that Gould points out: a simple story of a person inventing baseball in an
alley is more manageable and easier to grasp than the ever expanding web of
the truth.

In the end, Gould and Guilfoile share a conclusion: what we accept as
true is far less interesting than what is complicated. Gould acknowledges the
arguments in favor of the preference for origin stories and then dismisses
them:

Yes, we may need heroes and shrines, but is there not grandeur
in the sweep of continuity? Shall we revel in a story for all humanity
that may include the sacred ball courts of the Aztecs, and perhaps, for
all we know, a group of *Homo erectus* hitting rocks or skulls with a stick
or femur? Or shall we halt beside the mythical Abner Doubleday,
standing behind the tailor’s shop in Cooperstown, and say “behold the
man”—thereby violating truth and, perhaps even worse, extinguishing
both thought and wonder. (204)

This is Gould’s conclusion. The great unknown, the sweep of history and its
innumerable parts, all interconnected and parallel, offers a void of
understanding into which we can wonder, and a scale at which we can awe.
A single man, or a single object, does no justice to the grandiosity of the
moving parts that surround it. Guilfoile’s conclusion echoes Gould’s in its
praise for the complexity, but also turns it slightly on its head. “The bat isn’t
the valuable thing,” he says. “It’s just a bat like every other. It’s the *story* that’s
valuable. And it was Clemente himself who attached the story of his 3000th hit
to that Louisville Slugger in the Hall of Fame” (64). It is somewhat perplexing
that after a book about Guilfoile’s journey, his interactions with fans and historians and friends of friends of those deceased, he attaches value to a single story of the bat, even if it isn’t the certain truth.

But Guilfoile’s own story does not end here, and while it happens more gradually and less conclusively, the final chapter of Guilfoile’s book is where he aligns himself most closely with Gould. In the end, we realize that Guilfoile’s investigation into the past was as much about the bat as it was about connecting to his father’s history and experience. Sitting with his parents in the last few pages of the book, Guilfoile is shown a picture of his mother and father when they were young and still dating:

They’re standing with my grandmother in front of Yankee Stadium, where just a few years later Dad will go to work each day. I think of all the stuff that happened between that picture and now that he can no longer remember. I think about how smart he was to write so much of it down. To leave a trail we can always use to find him. (69)

Guilfoile leaves us thinking about the story of his father, where it began and where it seems to be coming to an end. He is thinking about the beautiful and intricate continuum of his father’s life and all the lives with which it intersected.

Because of the trials of archival excess and flawed or limited memories, Guilfoile fails to achieve narrativity in the story of Roberto Clemente’s bat.

According to Hayden White, this failure means that Guilfoile’s form of
historiography is a “chronicle”. White defines this category of historiography as one that “often seems to wish to tell a story, aspires to narrativity, but typically fails to achieve it” (9). Had Guilfoile been able to simply discover the true story of that moment in history when Clemente got his hit, Guilfoile’s own narrative would not have been as salient. But, as it happened, Guilfoile’s narrative was the history he wanted to tell, and, according to White, this brings the readers attention away from history and to the writer’s present: “[a chronicle] starts out to tell a story but breaks off in medias res, in the chronicler’s own present; it leaves things unresolved or, rather, leaves them unresolved in a story-like way” (9).

*Bringing the Past into the Present*

Baseball’s continual existence is not dependent on history or literature. Richard Orodenker writes in his book, *The Writers’ Game*: “baseball would continue to be passed down through the generations in an ersatz oral tradition and through the ritual of going to ball games” (21). Ritual and tradition both exist in the present. They are activities that, by their very definition, require a continuation of the past in the present. Orodenker likens this passing on of baseball—“the game and its lore”—to the act of teaching, particularly a father teaching a son (21).
The trope of father and son having a catch, used in baseball writing and films to no end, is one form of father to son education, but storytelling is another. The tradition of sharing the stories from generations past is both part of the lore of baseball and the source of the lore’s everlasting quality. Guilfoile experiences this sharing when he reads his father’s private writing. He continually refers to and quotes the stories that his father used to tell. For Holmes, the past is alive in the present not by his retracing the steps of his subjects, but in the objects touched by their hands: “above all the actual trace of handwriting on original letters or journals,” he writes. “Anything a hand has touched is for some reason peculiarly charged with personality” (67). Guilfoile echoes this point, both with his appreciation for his father’s journals, and in regards to memorabilia: “Objects have stories, too,” he writes. “Like a pair of baseball bats, for instance, that each passed through Roberto Clemente’s hands before they passed through my father’s. … These objects never forget, but they never tell their stories either” (8).

One such story in Bill Guilfoile’s notes describes an officemate from his days working with the Yankees, Jackie Farrell: “The first week I was with the club, Jackie told me a story, which, at one time or another, I’m sure he shared with every Yankee employee.” The story goes on to tell of Jackie’s earlier career as a wrestling promoter. He was paid a visit by a neighbor who was
hoping he would set up his son with some singing gigs. Jackie turned him down, saying, “If he were a wrestler I might be interested, but singers are a dime-a-dozen.” The big claim of the story is that the young boy would grow up to be Frank Sinatra. Later, when Sinatra was on a set at Yankee Stadium, a nervous Jackie is responsible for introducing a slew of Yankee employees to Sinatra, having claimed to know him. When he finally makes three sheepish attempts to call out to the Hollywood star, Sinatra sees him and responds with a bear hug and the words: “My god, it’s Jackie Farrell!” (3-5). By retelling the story over and over, Jackie Farrell kept a piece of history, however fictional, in the present ears of those surrounding him. And by writing the story down, Bill Guilfoile ensured that it would remain forever in the present on a slip of paper, “peculiarly charged with personality,” as Holmes would say. The sequence of events was just an occurrence, an opportunity missed, a funny happenstance, but when it was told and shared, it became a story, an object existing not in the past, but in the now.

In baseball stories, as seen in the legend of Babe Ruth’s called shot, truth is not the central subject, and it is exactly this that separates these myths from the fact-based genre of history. The ever-changing, ever-lasting quality of lore makes it continuously of the present, and in this way it brings the past—albeit a somewhat fictitious one—forward in time.
Stories have this effect—bringing the past into the present—because they are told and passed down. When they are written or told changes their meaning; they shift over time. While they tell about the past, the telling itself is inseparable from the present moment. By changing over time and being the product of the storyteller’s present mind, a story exists in the moment and brings the past back to life, both through the imagination of the listener and the reenactment by the teller.

Guilfoile tells many of his stories in the present tense. “We don’t see it on the film” (57), and “I’m watching the Schmitt movie again” (65). This technique, using the present tense to tell a narrative of the past, is known as the historical present, and it is often used to make stories seem more vivid. Its effect heightens the conflation of past and present that stories already employ. “Past events ‘come alive’ with the [historical present] because it is formally identical to the tense used to mark situations as cotemporal with the speaker’s now,” writes Suzanne Fleischman, author of *Tense and Narrativity* (75). While the effect is used in writing, it is especially common as a technique in oral storytelling. Guilfoile uses a colloquial voice which gives his writing an oral, conversational feel, and thus the historical present has an even greater effect.
Fleischman references the French linguist Marie-Louise Ollier’s view that the historical present is “a device for introducing the ‘present of the living speaker’ into the past story-world (and thereby ostensibly collapsing the distance between the two)” (78). This is the effect of Guilfoile’s work: collapsing the past and the present in a single, experiential story. It is the temporal space in which Guilfoile’s father is forced to live as he suffers with Alzheimer’s. And it is an experience that Guilfoile himself has as he researches Clemente’s bat: “Looking at this film is like staring into a crystal ball,” he writes. “We shouldn’t be able to watch this scene from so long ago, yet we do” (61).

The other stories that Guilfoile visits, aside from his father’s, are those of people who surrounded Roberto Clemente’s famous last hit. A key for Guilfoile is the story that Tony Bartirome tells his father—the story that first casts doubt that the bat that Clemente gave to Bill Guilfoile is the real one. Because Bartirome and Bill Guilfoile had a history of pulling practical jokes, Guilfoile writes up a statement for Bartirome to sign, giving his word that the story was true:

This Adirondack, Roberto Clemente model, is the bat he used to achieve his 3,000th hit in 1972. He had a preference for this Adirondack bat, but since he was under contract with Louisville Slugger, he asked me to scrape off the black ring on the bat handle, which is the
identifying characteristic of the Adirondack bat. I did so with a scalpel and he used this bat for his 3,000th (and final) hit. (31)

This story expands as Kevin Guilfoile pursues it further and, years later, asks Bartirome to tell it to him personally. He expects a qualified story, “I think. Or I’m pretty sure. What it looked like to me.” That, or a confession that the story was all a practical joke, a long con, the type that Bill Guilfoile was most fond of. “Instead his story was absolutely convincing” (40). This retelling, like the retelling of Jackie Farrell’s story about Frank Sinatra, brings a past, fact or fiction, into the present as a story. It’s a story that conflicts with the other stories Guilfoile has been told and pushes his present day self further into the past, hunting for more stories about that at-bat in September, 1972.

This flattening of time, the past rushing into the present in the form of a story, is paralleled by Bill Guilfoile’s experience suffering with Alzheimer’s. “Time is that thing that keeps everything from happening all at once,” Guilfoile says, citing both the French philosopher and Nobelist Henri Bergson and The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants; the quote’s origin is unimportant to Guilfoile. The words help him understand what goes on in his father’s head, where time no longer functions as a linear, organized force. “To my dad, I am five years old and also a novelist. I am forty three years old and also an undergrad at the University of Notre Dame.” He goes on, listing off the
contradictions of time with which his father lives. “He lives in the unrelenting present,” says Guilfoile (6).

Guilfoile wonders at the effects of such a disease, not just on the person suffering from Alzheimer’s, but also on the stories. “What happens to memories when they’re collapsed inside time like this?” he wonders. “They don’t exactly disappear, they just become impossible to unpack. … The structure of any story, after all, is that this happened and then that happened and he can’t make sense of any sequence” (7). Guilfoile introduces and describes his father’s Alzheimer’s artfully and effectively. The parallels between his father’s incomprehension and his own are subtle, but, once inspected, they imply a philosophical question: what does it mean to make sense of something? A story may be structured sequentially, the same way a baseball game is one inning after another, each with three outs in the top half and three in the bottom. It is ordered and progresses linearly, but Guilfoile quickly discovers how little sense stories seem to make when they inevitably conflict with one another. When he finally becomes exasperated with the search and gives into the beauty of the convoluted, Guilfoile calls his friend Ted, a family friend who used to curate the Hall of Fame. He quickly learns that his own research story is not unique: “Every bat in the Hall of Fame has a
story like this,” Ted says. “Do you know how many Boston cops claim Ted Williams gave him the bat from his 500th home run?” (63).

Stories like the one that Guilfoile tells about Clemente’s bat have not reached the same level of grandiosity as baseball legends like that of Babe Ruth’s called shot, but they reside in a similar space generically: somewhere that blends fiction into truth and vice versa. Even legends, according to Coffin, take place “this side of myths,” or as he also calls it, in “the touchable past” (7). Stories are inseparable from the present because they tell of a time and place that remains touchable. Unlike history, myths no longer exist when they cease to be told in the present.

*The Hall of Great Baseball Players*

Though Kearns Goodwin tells great baseball stories in *Wait Till Next Year*, her primary way of bringing the past into the present is an immediate, experiential one based on statistics. Listening to the Dodger game via Red Barber’s voice was a daily duty for her during the baseball seasons of her youth. When her father came home from work he would ask about the game. “And even before the daily question was completed I had eagerly launched into my narrative of every play, and almost every pitch, of that afternoon’s contest.” Through this reenactment, Kearns Goodwin brings a very real and
recorded history into the present, sharing it with her father with excitement (Kearns Goodwin 15).

Kinsella, too, uses statistical baseball history in the present. Throughout Shoeless Joe, the narrator, Ray Kinsella, consults a book called the Baseball Encyclopedia. In the book are the names and statistics of every player to make a Major League appearance. The book is of particular significance because it excludes Eddie Scissons, the friend of Kinsella’s who claims to have played for the Cubs from 1908 to 1910 but is later revealed to be lying. After Scissons death, though, Kinsella has a feeling that if he were to revisit the Baseball Encyclopedia, he would find Scissons there, along with his three seasons as a relief pitcher for the Cubs (Kinsella 237). This is a conflation of the past into the present complicated slightly by its fantastical elements. But Kinsella changes the present by eventually allowing Ray to imagine Eddie Scissons’ entry in the Baseball Encyclopedia, thus inserting him into Major League Baseball history.

For Guilfoile, the only real statistical feature is the 3,000th hit, and though it is an event retold, it is not a story that is brought into the present the way that Kearns Goodwin’s reenactments bring forward the stats and events of the day. What the 3,000th hit does symbolize, though, is a ticket to baseball’s divinity class: The Hall of Fame. Clemente, of course, was an
exceptional and famous player for many reasons. He was known for his great character—he died in a plane crash en route to Nicaragua to provide earthquake aid; “he gave until the day that giving literally killed him,” writes Guilfoile (66). He was also a fantastic player, owning a .317 career batting average, 12 All-Star game appearances, 12 Gold Gloves and an MVP award in 1966 (“Roberto Clemente Statistics and History“ Baseball-Reference.com). All of that, and he was just the 11th player to reach 3,000 career hits, stopping emphatically at that landmark number. His election to the Hall of Fame was certain. In fact, the Hall of Fame made a special exception to the standard five-year waiting period, electing Clemente on March 30th 1973, just three months after his death (“Roberto Clemente“ Baseballhall.org).

Today, there is a debate among those who elect baseball’s elite to immortality in the Hall: should a player be elected based on fame or based on accomplishment and value to his team? In some ways, this is a debate between an old school and a new school, a group that wants baseball to remain mythical and pastoral and another that wants it to be statistical, more true to its urban beginnings. It is a debate that questions what stories we should tell.

Criticism of the accepted myths about Babe Ruth is particularly potent and, in his writing about the Ruth biopic, The Babe, Stephen Gould criticizes
the films misrepresentation of Ruth. “Ruth is depicted as a home run machine from the start,” writes Gould. “If we were not shown one quick shot of Ruth on the mound, we would never know that he was exclusively a pitcher during his first four seasons with Boston, with a maximum of four homers in 1915” (197). If we were electing Babe Ruth to the Hall of Fame now, he would again be a no-doubter, but would we elect him because he was worth 183.6 wins in his career, the most of any player, and 15.2 wins above the second most (“Career Leaders & Records” Baseball-Reference.com)? Or would it be because of his called shot and his storybook name?

In baseball today, we are deciding whose stories are told and why. Is a clutch solo home run in the bottom of the 9th inning worth more to a story than a three-run home run in the 2nd inning? One is a certain headline the next day while the other is just a statistic, but statisticians would say that the three run home run was objectively worth more independent of the constraints of circumstance.

Perhaps the answer to the debate can be found in the fallacy at the heart of the Hall of Fame itself: baseball was not invented in Cooperstown. It was not invented anywhere. But the sport, tradition and history have chosen to embrace Abner Doubleday as the sport’s all-American, singular inventor,
and Cooperstown has displayed the bronze plaques of the game’s greats ever since.
CHAPTER 3

Fantasy and Reality

“Baseball can raise the dead, open the eyes of the blind, and provide salvation for those that are chosen by it or converted to it” (47). These words from Timothy C. Lord in his essay “Hegel, Marx, and Shoeless Joe,” function as part of his argument that, in W. P. Kinsella’s novel Shoeless Joe, baseball is a metaphor for religion. Religion does play a significant role in Kinsella’s work, but Kinsella uses baseball to comment on something else as well: the novel. A novelist, too, raises the dead, allows those who could not see to see; a lover of novels, like a follower of baseball, shares an almost quasi-religious obsession with a narrative, fictional or otherwise.

Kinsella’s novel is not typical fiction. For starters, the main character, Ray Kinsella, shares the author’s last name. Furthermore, Kinsella draws on reality to fill in his fantastical story, bringing in real historical figures such as J. D. Salinger to act alongside less famous, but still real characters such as “Moonlight” Graham, who played one inning in one game for the New York Giants in 1905. All the while these and other characters travel in time, populating the present, playing baseball on a homemade field in an Iowan’s cornfield, invisible to all those who don’t believe.
Kinsella’s collage of reality and fiction, realism and fantasy, even his conflation of author and narrator, carry *Shoeless Joe* into the genre of metafiction. Indeed, while the widely seen film adaptation of *Shoeless Joe, Field of Dreams*, includes some of the magical elements of W. P. Kinsella’s novel, the novel operates at a much more complex depth of thought, existing beyond the simpler fantasy that the movie indulges and within the more cerebral realm of metafiction. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). *Shoeless Joe* does exactly that, though perhaps not to the same extent as classic metafiction writers like Barth, Coover, or Borges. Kinsella weaves the metafictional aspects of his work fluidly into the magic of time travel and into the quotidian realism of a story of an Iowa farmer who is going bankrupt.

While the genre of fiction employed by Kinsella allows for the fantastic elements of *Shoeless Joe* to remain conventional, his use of the past in the present goes beyond fantasy and participates in the major themes of the book: nostalgia and timelessness. For instance, when Shoeless Joe first walks onto Ray’s left field, he fields pop flies and line drives hit by an invisible batter. Ray turns on the floodlights and walks out to the field to meet him, yelling
down from the left field bleachers: “How does it play?” “The ball bounces true,” replies Shoeless Joe. Ray replies, saying “I’ve hit a thousand line drives and as many grounders. It’s true as a felt-top table.” These are the first words that Ray and Shoeless Joe exchange, and the word “true” immediately becomes a refrain. “‘It is,’ says Shoeless Joe. ‘It is true’” (13).

The quality of the field is indeed a source of pride for Ray, but the repetition of the word “true” reinforces the magical realism of the scene. The reader is meant to interpret this scene as real and true, despite the rupture in time. The baseball field serves two roles in the novel: it is an opportunity for magic and a promise of continuity. It is the timelessness of a baseball field that allows Ray and Shoeless Joe to meet at a place they both recognize. A baseball field, to Kinsella and Shoeless Joe, is something constant and unchanging; it is timeless.

Just as Guilfoile’s book of historical stories manages to examine the process and practice of storytelling itself, Kinsella’s novel comments on its own genre. At the baseball game in Fenway, Ray and Salinger discuss the influence that Salinger’s writing has had on Ray:

“But I didn’t ask you to do it,” says Salinger. “I didn’t ask for you to feel the way you do. You’re influenced by an illusion. Writers are magicians. They write down words, and, if they’re good, you believe that what they write is real, just as you believe a good magician
has pulled the coins out of your ear, or made his assistant disappear.”

As author and magician, Kinsella deploys a convincing illusion in *Shoeless Joe*: bringing the historical truth into an emphatically quotidian present. Kinsella brings together Shoeless Joe Jackson, back from the dead, and traditional corn farming in Iowa, a lifestyle pressured to its breaking point by the technologically advanced, monopolized farm industry. A novelist achieves the same effect with a story. As Salinger says, the reader believes in a realness in the written words of a novel, and that is the novelist’s magic. The reader experiences a combination of their own quotidian act of reading and the magic of falling into an alternative world of the novel. *Shoeless Joe*, as a novel itself, engages in a metafictional meditation on the novel genre, and Salinger, as a novelist character, brings this meditation to the surface.

Kinsella’s novel begins when a heavenly voice sends his protagonist, Ray Kinsella, a cryptic message: “If you build it, he will come.” Knowing instinctively what the voice means, Ray builds a baseball field in his Iowa cornfield and waits several years until “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, the legendary and long since dead Chicago White Sox player, wanders onto the outfield grass. Over time, the rest of the 1919 team comes as well, and Kinsella and his
immediate family enjoy watching their games on the field. Then another message comes from the voice: “Ease his pain.”

Again, Ray knows what the voice means. He drives to Vermont to kidnap the novelist J. D. Salinger and bring him to a game at Fenway Stadium in Boston. Nonplussed, Salinger comes along, and at the game the two receive another message, this time accompanied by a message on the Fenway scoreboard. The voice says “go the distance,” while the scoreboard flashes the unusual career statistics of one Archibald “Moonlight” Graham. Eventually, Salinger confesses that he, too, heard the message and saw the scoreboard, though no one else in the stadium did. At the behest of the voice, the pair drive to “Moonlight” Graham’s home town of Chisholm, Minnesota.

Both the real and the fictional “Moonlight” Graham died in 1965, but Ray and Salinger ask around the town and are told stories of the generous town doctor, Doc Graham, whose baseball career never amounted to much. During a late night walk, Ray runs into a man who he quickly realizes is Doc Graham and they begin chatting. Ray suddenly registers that he has woken up in 1955. Later, back in the present, Ray and Salinger return to Iowa, picking up a young hitchhiker along the way who says his name is Archie Graham.
The young “Moonlight” Graham plays baseball with the White Sox on Ray’s field and Ray’s twin brother, Richard, arrives to reconnect. Richard can’t see the ballplayers at first, but his girlfriend, Gypsy, can. The farm continues to fall into the hands of Ray’s brother in law, who wants to buy the land and open a large, corporate farm covering most of the county. Eddie Scissons, a friend of Ray’s who originally sold him the farm, passes away after giving a prophetic speech on “the word of baseball.” Finally, with a dramatic monologue about people coming from all over the country to see baseball being played in an Iowan cornfield, Salinger convinces Ray at the eleventh hour to keep the baseball field despite the financial pressure to sell the farm.

The Past in the Present, Literally

The Midwestern United States is known as flyover country. It is recognized for its vast flatness and endless cornfields. Iowa is a classic example of the modern American pastoral, and Kinsella chooses it because of this reputation and reality. Only divine intervention could inspire someone to interrupt the monotony of the Iowan cornfields.

“If you build it, he will come” (Kinsella 1). These words from the ballpark announcer in the sky outline the most fantastic element of Shoeless
Joe. The baseball field he builds brings the banned players of the Chicago White Sox 1919 scandal back to life. Unlike Guilfoile’s storytelling, which also brings the past into the present, Kinsella does so by populating his novel’s world with living, breathing, baseball-playing men who have been dead for years.

In storytelling like Guilfoile’s, the past comes into the present through the artistry of the storyteller. The past tense story is as-if-alive to the listener or reader in the present moment. It casts an image of the past the way a projector displays old reality on the wall. For Kinsella, the past erupts into the present in a more holistic, tangible way—at least for the characters within the novel. To the reader, a novel written in the past tense exists inherently in the rear view mirror, but still within a specific moment in time, progressing chronologically. Kinsella interrupts this convention, bringing together multiple points from the novel’s timeline, collapsing the novel’s present and past.

Setting is central to Kinsella’s use of time travel in Shoeless Joe. The magical does not directly interrupt the quotidian. It takes the introduction of a new setting, the baseball field, which breaks the monotonous Iowan landscape. Ray’s baseball field becomes the conduit for the past to magically
interrupt the novel’s present. As a result, the field itself becomes its own facet of the fantastic, contrasting strikingly with the surrounding cornfield.

Shoeless Joe acknowledges the timelessness of the baseball field with his discussion of the lights that Ray installed. He complains that the light makes it “harder to see the ball.” “What happened to the sun?” he asks (16). Shoeless Joe sees this new-age baseball field as otherworldly, like an earth with no sun. By noting this, he points out his own alienated status, as he is from another time. In this scene, Kinsella establishes the truth of Shoeless Joe’s presence, displays its fantastic elements, and lays a foundation for the baseball field as a timeless entity that, though it may change with the addition of lights, always carries elements of the past and fantasy.

On the one hand, Kinsella’s collision of disparate themes asks the reader to “suspend disbelief,” just as all fiction does according to Donald E. Morse. In his essay “W. R. [sic] Kinsella’s Postmodern, Metafictional Fantasy Shoeless Joe,” Morse writes: “because the novel is fantasy it also demands the reader’s cooperation in sustaining that disbelief” (310). On the other hand, Kinsella demands more of his readers than a suspension of disbelief; he demands that the reader question the disparity itself. The two disparate elements collide so fantastically that Kinsella destabilizes the assumption that they are as different as they seem. Standing in the outfield during his first
appearance, Shoeless Joe says to Ray “This must be heaven.” “No. It’s Iowa,”
replies Ray, later amending this correction, saying softly to himself “I think
you’re right, Joe” (19). Kinsella depicts this cornfield in Iowa as
simultaneously heaven and earth, and the past and the present. The reader is
forced to reconcile these polar discrepancies, but Kinsella’s insistence on
realness and “truth” suggests a conflation and not an incongruity. All of this
simultaneity of opposites creates a place of timelessness. It insists on earth
being heaven, the past truly existing in the present. The baseball field is all of
these things at once.

The Twins’ stadium, too, has the power to transcend time, at least
when it is unlit and only occupied by trespassing fans. When Ray, Salinger
and Graham are exploring the field late at night, Ray wishes they had a radio
to listen to the games still being played on the West Coast, but they would
have to keep it quiet “so as not to disturb the ghosts of this park,” he warns.
Ray goes on to allude to the stadium’s power to transcend spatial separation
as well: “Or better still, we could sneak in here while the Twins are on a road
trip, and listen to the games, pretending they were home games and that the
players and crowds were here” (162). From the homemade field in Iowa, to
Fenway park where Ray and Salinger both receive a message from the
announcer in the sky, to the Minnesota Twins’ home stadium, it becomes
clear that Kinsella sees the baseball field as a place where temporal and spatial laws are suspended—at least for those with the imagination and belief in baseball’s power.

_Fictionalizing the Famous_

Not only does Kinsella bring to the present real people from the past, he brings into fiction real people from the present. As Umberto Eco writes, “no fictional world could be totally autonomous” (qtd. in Waugh 101), but Kinsella takes this concept to an intentional extreme, fictionalizing famous individuals such as J.D. Salinger. Waugh describes a subcategory of metafiction that offers historical particulars within an “overtly fictional” world: “They offer not ‘general matches’ (as realism) but historically determinate particulars” (105).

While Shoeless Joe and Salinger certainly represent “historically determinate particulars” within Kinsella’s novel, Kinsella provides a spectrum of characters from the prominent and real to the fictional who claim not to be. Within the novel, however, characters along this spectrum are given equal weight; they are all made real in the world of the novel, even if only some of them ever existed in the real world.
In fact, the real world characters who appear in the novel actually serve as evidence of the novel’s fantasy, not its realism, which is portrayed in the quotidian aspects of the plot and setting. Though J.D. Salinger does not travel in time the way the others do, and does not demonstrate the novel’s fantasy as explicitly, Salinger too exists in the story only due to the influence of an occult world or larger force. It is the voice in the sky that tells Ray to seek out Salinger in the first place, and their connection is only solidified when they both witness another supernatural sign at Fenway Park.

Through Ray, the novel’s fictional narrator, these fantastically real characters gain an element of more recognizable realism. It is Ray who allows the reader to connect themselves to these unlikely characters. Readers can easily read themselves into the perspective of Ray, comparing their own reading of Salinger to Ray’s and remembering the character of Richard Kinsella—Ray’s brother in *Shoeless Joe*, but also the name of the digression-prone boy in *Catcher in the Rye*. A reader can even look up Archibald “Moonlight” Graham and see that his statistics match those cited in the novel. But Kinsella complicates this realist approach, and makes it clear that he is discussing not just a tall tale of the past in the present, but questioning what it means to be a part of history.
This becomes immediately evident with Kinsella’s inclusion of Graham, a baseball player who surely would not be remembered if not for Kinsella’s inclusion of his character. By delving into the stories of Graham’s adult life as a doctor, Kinsella considers how a person is remembered by those in a community, be it Graham’s community in Chisholm, Minnesota, or Shoeless Joe’s community of the baseball world. Kinsella also includes Eddie Scissons, a character who slips further down the spectrum of notoriety, past Graham and into the fictional and non-famous. Waugh writes that in metafictional works that include “real people,” “history, although ultimately a material reality (a presence), is shown to exist always within ‘textual’ boundaries. History, to this extent, is also ‘fictional’, also a set of ‘alternative worlds’” (106). In Shoeless Joe, Kinsella contemplates this question of genre, considering the novel’s own ability to affect historical perception.

From Shoeless Joe, J.D. Salinger and Moonlight Graham to Eddie Scissons, Kinsella shows his consideration of historical prominence both within and beyond fiction. Shoeless Joe and Salinger are significant figures; they have names that most readers would recognize outside of the novel. Moonlight Graham, on the other hand, is equally real, particularly to the people of Chisholm, Minnesota where Moonlight Graham really did go on to be a local doctor. Yet, Graham is largely forgotten by history due to his
conspicuously insignificant baseball career. It’s safe to say that Graham is remembered more as a character in *Shoeless Joe* and *Field of Dreams* than as a real person. Eddie Scissons is not “real” in the way the other characters are. He is on the far end of the spectrum from Shoeless Joe and Salinger; he only claims to be famous in the novel’s—as well as reality’s—world of historic baseball. Even in the novel, Scissons was not part of baseball; a real reader could not look him up in the *Baseball Encyclopedia* just as Ray cannot find him in the sport’s definitive record book.

Scissons later regains his pride before his death by giving an impassioned speech about “the word of baseball,” and Ray becomes convinced that Scissons could now be found in the *Baseball Encyclopedia*, despite his purely fictional—even within the novel—career (237). This forces the consideration of what has the power to change what past; is Kinsella suggesting that Scissons’ speech may have the power to change the annuls of baseball within the novel, or can the novel change the annuls of baseball memory in the “real” world of the reader?

“The reality of fiction is primarily verbal,” writes Waugh, “the imaginary world generated by the words of a novel is not less real than, but an alternative to, the everyday world” (112). This is similar to, but not exactly the same as Kinsella’s meta-discussion of the novel in *Shoeless Joe*. Kinsella
suggests that the world of the novel—the worlds of fiction and fantasy in general—has reverberations in reality that go beyond the symbolic. The world of the novel and the everyday world are not alternative equivalents that run parallel, but intertwined worlds, each affecting the other.

_A New American Ghost Story_

Like the strikingly ordinary setting of rural Iowa, “Moonlight” Graham represents the glaring combination of the absolutely prosaic and the magically extraordinary, again challenging the reader to distinguish the two. Archibald “Moonlight” Graham, like “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, was a real, professional baseball player, though a conspicuously less storied one; Graham played only a single inning in his career and never got to bat. Nonetheless, Kinsella chooses to bring him into the present. Though he died before the novel takes place, Kinsella brings Graham to life, first as an older doctor in Chisholm, Minnesota, and later as a young, spritely ballplayer, hoping to start his professional career.

These reincarnations of Archibald Graham, as well as those of the other named ballplayers, are not exactly ghostly. They come back to life with a physical presence; Doc Graham walks the streets of a time-changed Chisholm alongside Ray Kinsella, Moonlight Graham hitchhikes and comes
along for the ride, even Shoeless Joe and the White Sox are distinguished from their faceless ball-playing brethren: “When Joe’s team is at bat, the left fielder below me is transparent, as if he were made of vapor. He performs mechanically but seems not to have facial features” (14). Unlike Shoeless Joe, who seems as real as the temporally stable characters, these players are classically ghostly. Despite this, they serve to differentiate, not align, Shoeless Joe and the gothic genre, providing an extreme example of ghostliness that contrasts the novel’s central figures.

While Shoeless Joe clearly borrows from the gothic tradition, and Kinsella’s characters represent ghostlike reincarnations, they are distinctly unhorrific. For instance, Karen, Ray Kinsella’s young daughter, is able to see Shoeless Joe and does so gleefully. However, as with traditional gothic narratives, characters who claim to be experiencing supernatural intervention are surrounded by characters who are skeptical of the source of this intervention: is it within the character’s psyche, or is it real? “Presumption of an actual realm of the occult is qualified by a prevailing skepticism woven into the text or implied through narrative frames,” writes G. R. Thompson in his essay “The Apparition of This World” (92). Most importantly, Ray’s wife’s family, a strictly religious group, scoff at Ray, Annie and Karen’s belief.
In traditional gothic stories, the reader, too, is prompted to take a skeptical perspective, and the story gets all the more terrifying as we read on, finding more and more that the ghost or demon is purely a psychological creation. The fear is then derived not from the demons themselves, but from the human mind that would create such conviction in a falsity. “The ghostliness of the tale is not of an occult, other world,” writes Thompson, “but of this world, as shaped by the narrator’s imagination playing over the everyday world” (94).

Ray questions his own imagination in just this way. After picking up the hitchhiking Archie Graham, Ray thinks, “could this all be in my imagination?” (162). This moment of questioning stops when Ray shares a glance with Salinger, and his uncertainty is seemingly abated. Later, Salinger brings up the possibility of delusion: “you could be accused of being possessed,” he says to Ray. “Is there a baseball devil?” (162). Ray does not shrug off this possibility, asking “anything taken too seriously becomes a devil. Do I take baseball too seriously?” But he decides to turn away from the consideration, pondering the impossibility of anyone exorcising the game of baseball from him; it is too engrained. Even the thought of this exorcism reminds him of baseball players and old memories of watching games with his father in Montana (162).
Despite the similarities, the narrative in *Shoeless Joe* takes the opposite trajectory of the gothic novel. Over the course of the book, Ray’s conviction that the ballplayers are real remains constant, and more and more characters join him in this conviction, until the story ends with a prophecy from Salinger that the whole baseball community, country or world would come to see the reincarnations: “People will decide to holiday in the Midwest for reasons they can’t fathom or express” (251).

**Author as Narrator**

“But the words on the page have no connection to the person who wrote them,” says Salinger to Ray, “Writers live other peoples’ lives for them. I don’t write autobiography. I’m a quiet man who wrote stories that people believe” (82). Despite this seemingly explicit claim that the writer is not the character, it is hard to differentiate Ray Kinsella from his author, W.P. Kinsella. Kinsella has denied this: “Ray Kinsella is not named for me,” he said in an interview with John Geddes for Maclean’s. “He’s named for a character in one of Salinger’s stories. It’s an uncollected story called ‘A Young Girl in 1941 with No Waist at All.’” Yet, it is clear that Kinsella did not pick this lesser-known Salinger character at random. The story itself is referenced in *Shoeless Joe*: “I was a character in one of your stories. ‘A Young Girl in 1941
with No Waist At All,’’ says Ray to Salinger, but the subject of the story remains insignificant to Kinsella’s novel. Kinsella could have picked any number of uncollected Salinger stories to draw character names from, but doubtlessly, when he read this particular one, the name stood out to him.

Even Ray alludes to the intense coincidence of Salinger’s use of the name: “How did he decide to use such an unusual and obscure name? Did he know someone by that name? Did he pick it out of the phone book or just make it up?” (37).

This unfamiliar Salinger story is a phenomenon similar to Moonlight Graham. The reader is encouraged to go look up the reference, and finds it to be accurate. Ray, too, is engaged in this research when he finds Salinger’s story: “I discover this in a stale-smelling copy of the May 1947 issue of Mademoiselle from the Bound Periodical Room at the University of Iowa Library” (37). Though he might deny it when interviewed, Kinsella teases his reader with the verisimilitude linking himself and his character, not only by their names, but also by their action and research. Kinsella’s inclusion of the culturally obscure but real prompts a consideration of the author, who must have done active research to discover these bits of fact.

Characters in fiction occupy a strange space between real and unreal. On the one hand, “fictional characters do not exist,” writes Waugh, but on the
other hand, we can talk about them, “we know who they are” (92). F. Scott Fitzgerald’s famous character, Jay Gatsby does not exist as a real person, but we can discuss him. He belongs to our cultural language as a specific referent. Because literary fiction is nothing beyond its words, the name Gatsby and the character Gatsby are inseparable. In Shoeless Joe, Kinsella plays with this line.

Salinger, Graham, Joe Jackson and the rest all have real referents that are made specific by the author, but Ray is less specific. In some ways, Ray is more akin to traditional fictional characters: a person one can refer to outside of the novel, but one who does not exist beyond the name that the author has given. Yet Ray’s realness is deeply complicated by his last name and his further semi-realness as a character in Salinger’s real world story. Waugh points out that, “names are used to display the arbitrary control of the writer” (94). A name can conjure something from the reader’s reality or be used as a description; they can be as transparent or opaque as the author intends.

Waugh proposes that “in all fiction, names can describe as they refer.” What metafiction does, though, is remind the reader that “what is referred to has been created … through a ‘naming’ process” (94). Kinsella does just this with Ray. Whether or not Ray is meant to be read as the same as the author, Kinsella has intentionally chosen to name his character Ray Kinsella, reminding the reader of a gap between fiction and reality while
simultaneously injecting uncertainty into the gap between author and narrator.

When Ray himself fails to get an explanation from Salinger on why he chose to name his character “Ray Kinsella,” he insists that there must have been a reason: “There aren’t many of us around—Kinsellas, that is. … Surely you knew someone by that name.” But Salinger only downplays the coincidence: “Why should I be thrilled to meet someone with a name I once used in a story? I write fiction” (62). By including such dialogue, Kinsella seems to embrace the confusion of named fictional characters just as he does with magic and reality, not settling on realness or fakeness, but on a hazy balance of coincidence and interconnectedness.

*High Stakes*

On the final page of *Shoeless Joe*, the early refrain of “true” returns. This time, the words come from Ray and his brother, Richard, and are directed at their father, the catcher. Richard has just managed to see the players for the first time as he stands face to face with his reincarnated father, rubbing his eyes, which Ray says he’s been having trouble with. “‘It’s true,’ says Richard, air exploding from his lungs. ‘It is true,” I reply” (255).
As the three Kinsellas walk across the “vast emerald lake of the
outfield,” Ray wonders about all of the things he wants to talk to his father
about: “We’ll hardly realize that we’re talking of love, and family, and life,
and beauty, and friendship, and sharing…” (255). These are the stakes of
belief for Kinsella. If Richard hadn’t believed in the magic that brought his
father back, he would not have been able to reunite with him. Baseball, on its
own, does not mean love and family, but belief in baseball, the way Ray
believes, and the way Eddie Scissons believes, brings out the magic. For Ray,
this belief was tested as he came closer and closer to losing the farm, but he
stayed firm and finally was able to find what the novel suggests he was
looking for the whole time: not baseball’s past, but his own in the form of his
father.

In this final scene, Kinsella lets the reader decide whether or not to
believe alongside the Kinsellas in the outfield. While Ray and his brother each
compliment the way their father catches a game, and each sees the catcher
talking with other players, Kinsella never gives the catcher a piece of the
dialogue. By doing this, Kinsella conspicuously leaves unanswered the
question the reader has: is this real? Despite the discussion between Ray and
Richard about the moment’s truth, the reader never gets evidence of the
catcher’s existence beyond the scene’s context. The reader is therefore given
two options: to believe in the magic of the scene that has brought the two
twins back together with their father, or to see the scene as fantastic or even
delusional, entirely separate from any reality, and thus miss out on the
deeply human conversation between a father and his sons.
Baseball is perfect—or so its reputation contends. This widely believed notion is largely credited to the sports history and tradition. The field itself is often used as evidence of the baseball’s flawlessness. As Red Smith was fond of saying, “ninety feet between bases is perhaps as close as man has ever come to perfection” (Rucker 17). Now, a new question is being pondered in the baseball world: “if baseball were different, how would it be different?” For instance, what if the distance from home plate to first base was changed. Most likely, moving first base one foot, two feet, even ten feet closer or farther from home plate would change the game, but not that much. Major League Baseball’s Official Historian, John Thorn, agrees: “certainly the base-paths could be ninety-three feet; the pitching distance could be sixty-seven feet” (Lindberg). There would still be close plays, just on different types of ground balls. Games would continue to be close, even if they were higher or lower scoring. Baseball would be different, but not worse. Orodenker refers to the deification of baseball’s perfection as “the myth of the best game.” It holds, he says, “that if baseball is only a game, at least it is better than the others” (23).

The aura of baseball lies in this perception of the game. Part of the myth is the sport’s timelessness: “Just as baseball has no clock, it knows no season, no time,” writes Orodenker (20). Baseball is seen as unique among
sports in that the old greats hold records and statistics that still translate to
the modern game. There is a belief that today’s Yankees would still lose to the
teams of the 1940’s. The game has changed, though. From lights at Wrigley
Field to the PED era of home run hitting dopers, to math-minded general
managers, baseball has slowly evolved. But the myth of the best game means
many fans resist these changes. “Let it be,” advises Donald Hall. “Players age,
and baseball changes, as veterans slide off by way of jets to Japan instead of
buses to Spokane. Baseball changes and we wish it never to change. Yet we
know that inside the ball, be it horsehide or cowhide, the universe remains
unaltered” (51).

Baseball itself changes, but the way we perceive it does not. Its status
as a deity of Americana has not changed, even while new players come and
old players go. Kinsella’s Salinger articulates it well:

I don’t have to tell you that the one constant through all the
years has been baseball. America has been erased like a blackboard,
only to be rebuilt and then erased again. But baseball has marked time
while America has rolled by like a procession of steamrollers. It is the
same game that Moonlight Graham played in 1905. It is a living part of
history, like calico dresses, stone crockery, and threshing crews eating
at outdoor tables. It continually reminds us of what once was, like an
Indian-head penny in a handful of new coins. (253)

He notes that baseball is “living history.” It is changing constantly—new
players, new stories, new seasons—but to fans, it’s stayed the same for
generations. “If you and grandpa—you and great grandpa—saw the game together in the bleachers in the McKinley era,” says Thorn, “it would be very much the game you saw today” (Lindberg). For fans, baseball holds more meaning than just an ordinary game. It is not merely a sport to pass the time during summer days of youth; fandom is a part of life from childhood to retirement because baseball, while it goes through incremental change, never loses its identity. Though the bases could be separated by a different distance, ninety feet has been the agreed upon mark for more than 150 years. This makes very little difference to the players, but fans benefit from the timelessness of consistency; their cornfield ballparks and their Wrigley Fields have, for generations, been identical constellations of bases.

Kearns Goodwin, Guilfoile and Kinsella channel the transcendence of baseball as only a spectator can see it. They don’t look at baseball as it’s seen from field level; they aren’t interested in the feeling of pitching a perfect game or committing a game losing error. The three authors explore the emotions of following these moments from the outside. They consider the profundity of being a member of baseball’s common class. The aura of baseball—its power to connect the individual to community, to bring the past into the present, to introduce magic to reality—exists because of how we see the game, not how we play it.
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