A Lardner Tradition: Baseball as Metaphor in American Fiction and Film

by

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The first reference in American fiction to baseball occurs in James Fenimore Cooper's *Home as Found* (1833), a partially autobiographical novel about the return of a New England family from Europe to the culturally inferior shores of Lake Otsego. The reference is not complimentary to those who play the game. In Chapter 11, a group of unruly apprentice boys "amuse themselves with a game of ball, on the lawn directly in front of the house." The game involves pitching and hitting a ball and running bases. The head of the family doesn't approve of such raucous activity on his property, so he sends a friend to convince the boys that they should play instead, illegally, in the street. The boys, eager to exhibit their superiority to the law, comply.

Subsequent baseball fiction of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century continually reinforces this image of ballplayers as rowdy, profane, and uneducated. Indeed, as late as 1909, Ellis Abbott's father originally objected to her marriage with Ring Lardner because his daughter might have to associate with the Chicago *Tribune* sports reporter's baseball friends. . It is noteworthy that Eliot Asinof's *Eight Men Out* (1963), a non-fiction account of the 1919 "Black Sox" scandal, points out that Shoeless Joe Jackson and many of his colleagues were easily duped, underpaid people on and off the diamond, who could scarcely read or write.

Paradoxically, some early baseball fiction, in the manner of Horatio Alger, also dramatizes its uneducated protagonists as heroes on the diamond. The protagonist of Zane Gray's novel *The Shortstop* (1909) is typical, as he rises above the axiom that "ballplayers are good-for-nothing loafers, rowdies" to court a young woman from Findlay College and ultimately reach the major leagues. Consistently, though, the genre confines itself to "light" fiction that concentrates on failure and success on the literal ball field.

However, in 1914, when the *Saturday Evening Post* began to publish Ring Lardner's "busher stories" (which would be grouped together two years later as the

epistolary novel *You Know Me Al*), Lardner dramatically expanded the scope of baseball fiction by depicting his protagonist, Jack Keefe, as a, naïve, semi-literate, easily exploited lowbrow whose on-field shenanigans were obvious microcosms of his glaring shortcomings as a human being floundering in the larger predatory world (Gale 332-33). This metaphor effectively illuminated the larger world that Sophie Marceau describes in her reflective novel *Telling Lies* (1996): "Everyone is playing a game, the ones who watch and the ones who want to be watched, outside and inside, in the street and on the stage" (76).

Later writers who employ and significantly expand this tradition of the baseball diamond as a metaphor for the "game" of life include Bernard Malamud in *The Natural*, Mark Harris in *Bang the Drum Slowly*, Robert Coover in *The Universal Baseball Association*, William Kinsella in *Shoeless Joe*, and Mark Winegardner in *The Veracruz Blues*. To these novels we must add the films *The Natural*, *Bang the Drum Slowly*, *Field of Dreams*, and *Bull Durham*. All these works are highly original, though they are heavily indebted to Lardner. No one writes in a vacuum, T.S. Eliot has reminded us, and the sequential contributors to this tradition are prime examples.

In *You Know Me Al*, Lardner's protagonist, Jack Keefe, is an egoistic, imperceptive young White Sox pitcher who will never rise above mediocrity, because of his unwillingness to learn. Though he has much natural ability, he stubbornly refuses to complement it with knowledge: "Mathewson could not learn me nothing" (212). Keefe's high opinion of himself on the diamond ("We are finishing second and I done most of it") (2) extends off the diamond to his relationships with his gold-digger girlfriends--Violet. Hazel, and Florrie. He falls in and out of infatuations several times, marries Florrie because she tells him he is the best ballplayer she has ever seen, separates from her, reunites because Florrie is pregnant, and predictably becomes an inept father. This darkly comic novel, in

which Lardner continually interweaves fictional baseball episodes with historical players and coaches, exposes the pathetic nature of Keefe, who is comic chiefly because he never realizes his limitations. *You Know Me Al* exhibits again how effective humor nearly always incorporates pathos.

Because of this fusion of comedy and pathos, the novel is, of course, satiric: intelligence, reason, human sympathy, generosity, and eagerness always to learn are implicitly essential for success both on and off the diamond. Through his letters to his friend Al back home, Keefe reveals himself as a static, tragic human type, not just a dumb baseball player. He never learns from experience, never alters his approach to his problems, and never fails to exhibit his egoism. He is never wrong or at fault, he thinks, even after a disastrous outing:

> I had a sore arm when I was warming up and Callahan should never ought to of sent me in there. And Schalk kept signing for my fast ball and I kept giving it to him because I thought he ought to know something about the batters. Weaver and Lord and all of them kept kicking them round the infield and Collins and Bodie couldn't catch nothing. (30)

As an unreliable narrator in the tradition of Huckleberry Finn, Keefe often offers a different reality from the one that we perceive. For instance, he is proud of his repartee, though we are see that his "comebacks" are not really so hot:

> Cobb came prancing up like he always does and yells Give me that slow one Boy. So I says All right. But I fooled him Instead of givieing him a slow one like sad I was going I handed 9)him a spitter. He hit it all right but it was a line drive right in Chase's hands. He says Pretty lucky Boy but I will get you next time. I come right back at him. I says Yes you will. (4)

And when he discusses his breakup with Hazel, he displays his parsimony:

> I guess my thirty dollars is gone because in her letter she called me a cheap skate and she inclosed one one-cent stamp and two twos and said se was paying me for the glass of beer I once bought her. I bought her more than that Al but I won't make no holler. (66-67)

In his Babbitt-like blundering through his life, Keefe is the close relation of Lardner's many later protagonists off the field—his "golden honeymooners," whose comprehension of their journey is limited to railroad timetables; his loquacious

barber in "Haircut," who can't see reality beyond the tips of his scissors; and his gas-company "poet" of "The Maysville Minstrel," who is equally oblivious to his literary shortcomings. Stephen Gale's situation, however, is different in that he eventually becomes aware that he is hopelessly trapped by his poverty, his lack of education, and—ultimately—by his own biological limitations.

It was Virginia Woolf in 1925 who first suggested the full metaphorical implications of Lardner's diamond: Jack Keefe, she wrote, is not only a laughable mediocrity in baseball but also a sad failure in life:

> Mr. Lardner has talents of a remarkable order. With extraordinary ease and aptitude, with the quickest strokes, the surest touch, the sharpest insights, he lets Jack Keefe the baseball player cut out his own outline, fill in his own depths, until the figure of the foolish, boastful, innocent athlete lives before us. As he babbles out his mind on paper there rise up friends, sweethearts, the scenery, the town, and country—all surround him and make him up in his completeness. We gaze into the depths of a society which goes its way intent on its own concerns. (Woolf 123)

No reader, however amused by Keefe's antics, can avoid deploring this character for his inability to learn, though most readers will at the same time feel a good deal of pity for this uneducated, ignorant, and hopelessly naïve human being. He is a descendant of Swift's Yahoos, hopelessly irrational in their life-long ineptitude. As I first observed in the introduction to *Letters of Ring Lardner* (vii), this reflection of the "larger game" is arguably Lardner's most significant literary legacy.

Following *You Know Me Al*, the group of baseball novels and films mentioned earlier has evolved from a relatively simple mirror of the failures and successes in life into more complicated psychological analysis and even theological allegory, in which the diamond becomes a fallen world with an absent god, until the players' redemption becomes possible through mystical comprehension and reaffirmation of spirituality, whereby some may gain salvation and second chances in life.

Malamud's *The Natural* (1952) elevates the convention of the non-learner to epic and mythic proportions. Many scholars have discussed the central myth in *The*

Natural of the Fisher King and the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail. New York Knights Manager Pop Fisher is, of course, the wounded king, suffering from past failures in his second-division Wasteland, and Roy Hobbs is the Gawain-like knight in search of greatness: “I know I have the stuff and will get there” (109. But he is successfully tempted by his Lady Bercilak (Harriet Bird, then Memo Paris) and realize his moral imperfections too late: “He thought, I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again” (218).

The novel also contains a plethora of other myths common to baseball and to fiction in general: the farm boy led by the old has-been to the big leagues, the contest between the fading star (The Whammer) and the young phenom (Hobbs), the femme-fatale shooting, the choosing of the wrong woman, the room-swapping episode, the comeback guy, the magic bat, the lady in white who attempts to save him, the naïve acceptance of a bribe and ultimate expulsion from the game, and so forth. This stitching together of a quilt of clichés reveals the darker side of human nature in a manner similar to the saga of Jack Keefe. Roy Hobbs repeatedly acts irrationally, persists with the wrong woman, and does not learn better in time to avert failure on and off the diamond. Hobbs, who strikes out in his final at-bat (against the rookie phenom, Youngberry--reminiscent of Hobbs” initial victory over The Whammer), is, however, a more intelligent and therefore even more pitiful descendant of Keefe, because at the end he *knows* that he is a failure--something Jack Keefe never realizes. The novel, with all its excellent narrative qualities, thus becomes one of the sadder but more effective literary depictions of human failure.

Hollywood could not, of course, create a successful film ending with such abysmal failure, so the film version (1984), starring Robert Redford, becomes a saga of eventual triumph. Hobbs becomes a dynamic character, opting for the proper ethics and the right woman just in time. He throws the bribe money in the Judge’s face *before* the final game, and then hits the game-winning blast, shattering the light

standards and prompting a quasi-Fourth-of-July celebration. In light of the all-important fact that the cinematic Roy Hobbs does undergo an epiphany in time to change his life, the film also is realistic (Hunter 74-76).

In contrast with *You Know Me Al* and *The Natural*, Mark Harris's *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1955) is the success story of a semi-literate ballplayer, both in baseball and in life (and death). This novel, the second in the tetralogy of Henry Wiggin novels (including also *The Southpaw*, *Ticket for a Seamstitch*, and *It Looked Like For Ever*), is much superior to the other three. It is artfully done, with realistic dialogue (reminiscent of both *You Know Me Al* and *Huckleberry Finn*), character consistency, dramatic intensity, effective symbols, and elemental human themes. Its most obvious symbol is "TEGWAR" (the exciting card game without any rules), with which coach Joe Jaros fleeces gullible fans in hotel lobbies. Significantly, Bruce Pearson learns to play TEGWAR well before he dies. Here, Harris has created a "hero" in the manner of Willy Lowman and a more perceptive if semi-grammatical narrator whose closing declaration ("From here on in, I rag nobody") echoes an epiphany similar to Huck Finn's: "I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before." Just as Huck asserts that he wants no more of the irrational, prejudiced "sivilization" he has experienced along the Mississippi River Valley, Henry vows that he will remember always the essential value of sustained human sympathy,

Perhaps because its primary setting is the baseball diamond, *Bang the Drum Slowly* has been constantly underrated since it came out in 1955, just six years after Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Like Willy Loman, Harris's Bruce Pearson is a lesser man who faces adversity in so courageous a way as to render him admirable. This redefinition of the modern hero is Harris's major contribution to the Lardner

tradition and has become, along with *Death of a Salesman*, a watershed in the tradition of American heroism as depicted through the common man in literature.

Pearson is a fringe major league catcher who has drifted through his life without much motivation, until he learns that he will soon die from Hodgkin's disease. Instead of simply going home to die, he, unlike Jack Keefe and Roy Hobbes, makes the best of his final season by "keeping a book" on the pitchers and for the first time playing up to his potential on and off the field. He accepts his imminent death and does better than ever, becoming the starting catcher and earning the sympathy and appreciation of his teammates.

Henry Wiggin, the quasi-literate narrator of Bruce's story, much in the tradition of the semi-literate narrators in the works of Mark Twain and Ring Lardner, also is heroic because he not only recognizes but remembers the values of human sympathy and friendship. Bruce and Henry's discordant teammates have earlier made Bruce the butt of their jokes because of his naiveté, but when they learn that Bruce is going to die, that knowledge unifies them in a new awareness of human mortality. After winning the World Series, however, they forget what they have learned and do not even attend his funeral.

Also often overlooked is the dramatic excellence of the way in which key scenes move the novel forward. Near the beginning, Henry, observing Bruce, marvels at the way in which people go on living after we know they are dying (14-16). It is a new insight for a young man whose values heretofore have been primarily self-centered and monetary. Later on, during spring training, Bruce demonstrates new thoughtfulness by querying Henry on how he, Bruce, might improve as a ballplayer. It is Henry who tells Bruce to "keep a book" on the pitchers, implying that he must learn from past experience (78-80). After the season is underway and the bickering New York Mammoths fail to play well together, manager Dutch Schnell holds a clubhouse meeting to emphasize how cohesiveness is essential to

win, just as the fingers on a hand must work together to kill a fly. But the players do not comprehend the message until their gradual awareness of Bruce's fatal disease brings the team together in human sympathy. In the clubhouse scene during the rain delay (211-13), Piney Woods sings the cowboy ballad from which the novel gets its title. This ballad describes a young cowboy dying of a gunshot wound, who has spent most of his life "in the card house or down at old Rosie's" but who nevertheless asserts his significance as a human being and requests an honorable burial. The scene is blatantly sentimental, (reminiscent of so many episodes in Dickens's novels), as almost everyone perceives Bruce to be the dying cowboy, but it works, as Nature "cries" outside. In view of such theatrically dramatic scenes, it should be no surprise that the 1972 film, scripted by Harris and starring Robert DeNiro and Michael Moriarty, was such a fine film. The final scene, at the cemetery, emphasizes Bruce's courage in facing death, and also focuses on Henry's greater awareness of the need in life always to be sympathetic of the human condition.

Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968) further reshapes the Lardner tradition not only through more complex psychological analysis of the protagonist but by operating allegorically on historical, political, and theological levels. On the literal level, it depicts a schizophrenic 56-year-old accountant who increasingly prefers the imaginary baseball league he has created to his real world as an accountant. Even in his sexual life with Hettie, the bar girl, Henry visualizes intercourse in terms of running bases. On the historical level, the novel illustrates the degree to which the mind can create and modify history. The full past and present of the Universal Baseball Association off the field as well as on exist in Henry's mind. The quasi-Monopoly game Henry has created on his kitchen table operates through complicated dice usage based on mathematical probabilities and chance. What is more interesting, though, is the way in which Henry fills in the lives of these baseball players to make them three-dimensional:

> And the fans blew the roof off [after Damon Rutherford's no-hitter]. They leaped the wall, slid down the dugout roofs, overran the cops, flooded in from the outfield bleachers, threw hats and scorecards into the air. Rooney hustled his Haymakers to the showers, but couldn't stop the Pioneer fans from lifting poor Horvath to their shoulders. There was a fight and Hard John bloodied a couple noses, but nobody even bothered to swing back at him. (16-17)

In Henry's mind, the players' lives are no less concrete off the field. While groping after Casey's death for a way to restore order to the UBA, he imagines visiting a party at a bar run by Jake Bradley, the old UBA second baseman turned barkeeper, who has died in accordance with Henry's UBA actuarial tables:

> He could hardly believe it. There he was, behind the bar, white-aproned, smiling moon face, paunch and all: *Hellborn Melborne Trench*. Henry smiled back, thought inside it was damn near a belly laugh, hooked up his hat and coat, and asked for brandy. VSOP, the best. Yes, he must have given up that hopeless job of running the Celts to open a bar, carry on the great tradition of Jake Bradley, oh yes, and all the boys were gathering, coming through the door, *grand opening!* even the young ones now that the season was over and the training rules were down. Witness York and Ham Craft and Maggie Evarts and Walt McCamish and Bo McBean, here they come. (217-18)

On the theological level, the novel is another version of *Paradise Lost*, depicting an Eden lost through irrational free will. J. Henry Waugh (JHWH) is Jahweh, another name for the *Old Testament* God, and the principles of reason and free will are identical to Milton's description of the precepts with which God created the world and which led to the fall of man. But Coover's depiction of the aftermath of the fall is different from Milton's. Whereas Milton "justified the ways of God to man" through Christ's sacrifice to offer mankind a second chance for grace, Coover decribes a world that comes apart after a pitched ball by chance kills Henry's favorite player, Damon Rutherford. In his grieving effort to restore order, Henry upsets the principle of chance completely by sacrificing the offending pitcher, Jock Casey (note the initials). He arbitrarily lays down the dice so as to have Casey fatally struck by a batted ball in an effort to set things right. "I'm sorry, boy," Henry says. This sacrifice backfires, though, by completely perverting the delicate balance of

mathematical probabilities and chance. The UBA goes awry as logic disappears: the wrong teams win, and chaos ensues.

Consequently, God disappears from the world He has created. In despair, Henry abdicates his role as Creator and vanishes after the big party. We assume that he sits facing the wall like Melville's Bartleby in some psychiatric hospital. Saying "I quit," Henry leaves the UBA to continue on its own. The last chapter thus depicts a creation that has lost its creator. Here, Coover speculates on how the world might function if God were dead or gone away. After Henry's abdication, the UBA continues its chaotic political struggles for the next hundred years. The original Bogglers are the party that values "individualism and egocentrism" (216-17) over the pressures of society. The Legalists value the "social construct" (101) arrived at through the "accretion of population" (216). The Guildsmen focus on "a moral and philosophical concern" (217) with the relationship of man to society And the Universalists broadly hope "to bring order out of chaos" (240).

Ritualism, in the manner of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," now dominates over reason, with annual reenactment of the original tragedies and the deaths of those who assume the roles of Rutherford and Casey. For Ingram and Flynn, enactors of these roles a hundred years later, the game of baseball (and life) is to be played for its own sake, whatever may happen. Life "is just what it is," Damon remarks. He "holds the baseball up between them. It is hard and white and alive in the sun" (242). This sort of grim acceptance is the only remaining value in a now-godless, fallen, irrational world.

William Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* (1982) takes Coover's allegory a step further by restoring a benevolent and loquatious creator to his creation. If one obeys the mystical voice of "god" (the pronouncements of a disembodied baseball announcer), one can obtain the second chance that most of us need in a life prevalent with the failures that Roy Hobbs experienced. Baseball, as life, is a "game" in which failure

occurs more often than success. Even the best of hitters make seven outs out of every ten at-bats. Only one of the 31 major-league teams will win the World Series.

In *Shoeless Joe*, the farmer-dreamer-narrator, Ray Kinsella, is a more intelligent if no less impractical version of J. Henry Waugh. Burdened with the memory of a bad relationship with his dead father, who worshipped the White Sox and particularly Shoeless Joe Jackson, Ray obeys the command of "the great god Baseball" to build a diamond in the middle of his Iowa cornfield, so that his idol, the banned and long-dead Joe Jackson, can come there to play. Of course, his neighbors "think I am crazy" for plowing up an acre of corn, His wife, Annie, a male vision of the ideal wife, supports him: "'Oh love' she said, 'if it makes you happy you should do it." (4).

In Ray's endeavor, "it is the game that's important—the tension, the strategy, the ballet of the fielders, the angle of the bat." The overall divine purpose is not yet clear, but Ray sequentially undergoes more mystical experiences with his "god," who orders him not only to build the field on his Iowa farm but to "ease his [J.D. Salinger's] pain" by driving to New Hampshire and taking the reclusive writer to a Boston Red Sox game. There, the scoreboard recounts (only to Ray and Salinger) the statistics of Moonlight Graham, a ballplayer-turned-doctor who played only in one big-league game and never got to bat. The same mysterious baseball announcer as in previous revelations then orders the two to "go the distance" to Minnesota to seek out Graham.

After tracking "Doc" Graham to Chisholm, Minnesota, they find he has been dead for 20 years. Nevertheless, Ray encounters him on an evening stroll, but cannot convince him to go with them to the Iowa ballpark and eventually must give up his quest. However, on the way back to Iowa, they pick up a young hitchhiker named Archie Graham, who aspires to travel and play baseball. During the return, Ray also has a dream encounter with Eddie Scissons, a local Iowa City fixture who has falsely

created the impression that he is “the oldest living Chicago Cub.” This time, Ray’s oracle speaks of “sharing and betrayal” in a way that clearly relates to Scissons.

Back at Ray’s field, ghosts intermingle with live people: Shoeless Joe and his fellow outcasts play ball again, Moonlight Graham can at last hit against major-league pitching, and Scissons can convert a lie into a truth. During the “games” on this field, all participants receive second chances in life, and previously unattainable dreams come true. In this redemptive “church,” Eddie Scissons preaches that “the word of salvation is baseball,” and J.D. Salinger eventually walks into the mystical cornfield to visit the afterworld and obtain new inspiration for writing,

Finally, the complete divine purpose is revealed, as the ghost of Ray’s father joins the White Sox on the field as their catcher. Ray then has a second opportunity for a loving familial relationship. Perhaps the most astounding achievement of all is author William Kinsella’s, in creating this fantasy narrative in a way that suspends the reader’s disbelief to make the mystical events credible for the moment and to project Ray Kinsella as a sane, realistic, sympathetic, and enlightened character.

Field of Dreams (1989), the cinematic version of *Shoeless Joe*, also is a remarkable dramatic achievement, starring Kevin Costner as Ray and James Earl Jones as Terence Mann (Salinger). The events are approximately the same, with an especially effective ending during which Ray and his father play catch while auto lights in the distance signify the coming of tourists who will solve Ray’s financial difficulties. The movie omits a few superfluous characters, such as Ray’s twin brother, in the interest of obtaining a tighter plot, but it also unfortunately omits Eddie Scissons, the key spokesperson for the divine authority of the diamond. And it adds a trite, unnecessary scene at a school board meeting, where Ray realizes what he already intuitively knows in the novel—that Mann (Salinger) is the one whose pain he must ease. Devout baseball fans are, of course, horrified when the cinematic Joe Jackson bats righthanded.

Though not based on a novel, *Bull Durham* (1988), written and directed by Ron Shelton, intensifies the religious motif of this increasingly complex tradition: the ballpark becomes a "cathedral" where people worship the game and seek salvation through perception of the fundamental truths of life. This "Church of Baseball" offers second chances, and people get married at home plate. Annie Savoy (Susan Sarandon), the baseball groupie, is actually to be viewed in the classical sense as a "baseball priestess" who must educate ballplayers (one at a time) in the skills of the "game." The baseball metaphor that Lardner began has evolved from a relatively simple mirror of the larger game to a "cathedral" in which participants and spectators may worship the "God of Baseball," who offers all attendees the opportunity to learn more about life and true salvation.

In fact, the major participants all are either learners or teachers. Like Annie, Crash Davis (Kevin Costner), the minor league catcher who spent all of 21 days in "The Show," is a tutor to the young phenom pitcher, Nuke Laloosh (Tim Robbins). Through their mutual skills, they succeed in teaching Nuke all the clichés and non-thinking habits he needs to make it to the major leagues. But Annie and Crash also are learners, for they achieve redemption—and perhaps also a second chance to make it to "The Show" (as teachers) through their love of the game and each other.

After *Bull Durham*, this tradition of baseball as metaphor appears to have reached an apex, perhaps because it is hard to imagine how its conventions could develop further. Two more novels and a play, however, require our attention. August Wilson's Pulitzer-Prize-winning two-act play "Fences" (1983) uses the ball field metaphorically but in a negative way (Koprince 349): Set in 1957, just ten years after Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier, this play depicts how racial prejudice against African Americans has kept former baseball star Troy Maxon outside the fences of major-league ballparks. The play also dramatizes tragically

how Maxon has attempted unsuccessfully to fence out the discriminations against him as well as the repercussions of his own personal shortcomings.

Michael Shaara's *For Love of the Game* appeared in 1991, followed by an entertaining if sentimental movie (starring Kevin Costner again) based on the novel, but the novel and movie add little to Lardner's basic metaphor. The announcer, Vin Scully, does refer to "the cathedral of Yankee Stadium," and the aging main character's name is Billy *Chapel*, whose passion for and pride in baseball encourage him in his last appearance before retirement to pitch a perfect game in this "cathedral" (culminating with his retiring the young rookie phenom on a groundout), and the aftermath of that feat allows him, unlike Jack Keefe, to realize that what is most important in his life is not just baseball but his companionship with Carol Grey.

Much more significant is Mark Winegardner's *The Veracruz Blues* (1996), easily the best of the more recent baseball novels. In its coverage of the 1946 raids by the Mexican League on major league rosters, it implies much about "the oppressive and sometimes imperialistic nature of American culture" (Crinti 391). Winegardner is especially indebted to *You Know Me Al* for his strategy of fusing real people and real events with fictional characters and actions, as well as for his use of the sometimes unreliable narrator--philandering, alcoholic would-be novelist turned sports writer Frank Bullinger Jr., a fictional story-teller obviously also related to Harris's Henry Wiggin. More perceptive than Keefe and better educated than Wiggin, Bullinger still does not always fully comprehend the racism, exploitation, greed, ambition, and human conditions that are implicit in his "interviews."

These "interviews," with such real-life characters as ballplayers Danny Gardella, Theolic "Fireball" Smith, and Roberto Ortiz, and actress Maria Félix, dramatize the 1946 "Season of Gold" in which the Mexican League attempted to establish itself as a third major league. These characters all reveal themselves as

comic yet tragic human beings trapped in an imperfect world by their own predicaments and flaws. The first interview, with African-American pitcher "Fireball" Smith, reveals how Jorge Pasquel, millionaire commissioner of the league, recruited (at much-inflated salaries) both African Americans and Whites from then-segregated U.S. professional baseball to form an integrated Mexican League (Virtue 69-93). All goes well until the U.S. owners suspend the White players who have "jumped" their U.S. contracts (and thus violated the now-infamous reserve clause), and some of the White players (Mickey Owen is prominently mentioned) object to the racial integration that Pasquel's league initially offered. Subsequent interviews with Gardella and Ortiz depict how segregation gradually reappears as the African Americans are grouped on lesser teams (which then become the better teams). Gardella's interviews not only describe his sometimes-zany conduct and up-and-down career but also emphasize his role in suing to modify the reserve clause that bound players to teams beyond their contracts.

Maria Félix's interview (she is Jorge Pasquel's mistress) particularly demonstrates how Pasquel degenerates from a generous promoter of civil rights to a disillusioned manipulator of teams, players, and fans. Near the beginning, of their relationship, he tells her; "My league will be an egalitarian symbol of the new Mexico . . . that will ring throughout the world when we defeat the American baseball champion in a true World Series" (158). But his dreams for his League and for his personal fame decline, and his disillusionment extends to his personal life, as his wife and mistress come into conflict. In his fall, he is the most tragic character in the novel, Roberto Ortiz pronounces Pasquel's epitaph: "Mr. Jorge Pasquel, who conducted his life and his business like an all-or-nothing slugger, failed in his attempt to make the Mexican League a true major league, and also failed to understand the magnitude of what he did do" (181).

Beyond Pasquel, the novel reveals more about human conditions, as Dandridge and Smith finally realize:

> "Look, Dandy," Theolic blurted. "I'll say it if you will."
> "Say what?"
> But he knew. There was a long silence.
> "It wasn't so awful," Dandridge said. "What we had."
> "It wasn't so good."
> "We didn't get what we wanted," Dandridge said, "but who the hell does?"
> "Jackie."
> "Enough about Jackie Robinson. Say the name Jackie Robinson once more, I'll hang up."
> "Jackie Robinson."
> There was a long silence.
> "You still there, Theo?"
> "Where would I go?"
> "Look, what I'm tryin to say is, we didn't get all we wanted, but what we got wasn't so bad, In fat, it was terrific. We had fun. We played a great game and met nice people and saw the world and didn't get shot at. We managed to do things boys dream of." (248-49)

Bullinger, as narrator, has his own epiphany: "Mexico is so different from the United States, so near and yet so far, that Americans, or at least the ones I've known, never do quite manage to understand. But it's the mystery of the things you don't understand, finally, that makes life worth living" (250).

As we have observed, this metaphor of baseball as a reflection of the ultimate game has evolved from Lardner's relatively basic symbolism to (among other things) a depiction of the diamond as a theological playing field on which imperfect humans may atone for their sins and receive a second chance at salvation. This tradition deserves full recognition, and Ring Lardner, as its initiator, deserves appropriate credit. It is perhaps his greatest contribution to American literature.

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