

GRIMES, TOM. *Season's End*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. Pp. 319. \$14 pb.

In *Season's End*, Tom Grimes gives us a novel about a baseball player and English major who thinks about politics, the corporate mentality, and the cosmos. Despite some interesting ideas and many beautifully written sentences, the novel ultimately does not work.

Season's End spans about ten years in the life of outfielder and narrator Mike Williams who, after showing early promise, experiences an isolated and empty life as a celebrity. His playing days are haunted by the thought of death, the resentment of his teammates (who think Mike is bucking the Players's Association), and his father's rage. His main interactions occur with a slick agent and a menacing, crippled owner. While the passing years are signaled by references to free agency, Viet Nam, different presidents, and assassinations, the second half of the book centers on the 1981 season. With a strike looming and his marriage crumbling, Mike is offered a lucrative, secret cable deal in exchange for a pennant. But when his arm is afflicted with a mysterious ailment, the season's end looks bleak, as his career and possibly his life are jeopardized.

The novel suffers from a variety of problems. The plot, what there is of it, comes too late to matter and has no resolution. The characters are neither real nor sympathetic; Mike's increasing distance from both his wife, Barbara, and his dying father does not touch us. The reader's lack of connection with the characters and the many plot threads that lead nowhere are, one feels sure, part of Grimes's intention, but they hardly make for satisfying reading.

The style of the book, though interesting, is also problematical. Williams's and his agent's continual references to literary and pop culture figures are implausible and irritating (what are the chances that both a baseball player *and* his agent would be so literate?). Within five pages we read of "Dickensian tics and flourishes," of "Felliniesque starkness," and that thinking on a videotape looks "very Dostoevskian," while references are made to Wyatt Earp, Lionel Barrymore, and Li'l Abner (pp. 73-77). Even more damaging are the frequent meditative, abstract passages to which any plot line is essentially peripheral. This is unfortunate because Grimes is strong when he writes realistic scenes and dialogue. One of his best chapters, for example, is a fairly matter-of-fact account of Mike's background and growing up. His sense of humor, always evident through his narrator's cynicism, is most effective in scenes such as the one where Mike and his wife argue over whether to name their daughter after a baseball player. Mike says, "If we go with Regina, we could call her Reggie for short. There's Babe. Babe is good. Melissa. Then we could go with Mel. Mel Ott, Mel Allen, Mel Stottlemeyer. You get a lot of range with Mel. It's a kind of discount-store-type name. What do you think?" (p. 139). Such mundane, pleasant scenes occur too seldom, however, and the book is instead weighed down with passages such as this: "NUMBERS: somehow they're connected to death, our ruminations on the final and the infinite. They describe for us, in an incontestable way, the invisible and ineluctable limits of the game" (p. 8).

Sport historians, on the other hand, may be interested in the view of contemporary baseball offered here. Grimes and his narrator are all too aware of the depressing economic realities driving the game. For the players, annuities and the *Wall Street Journal* seem to matter more than baseball itself, and the management and his agent regard Mike only as an investment. The power of the media and the dangers inherent in being a celebrity both affect Mike's life. Baseball history is not neglected; references to Curt Flood, Andy Messersmith, and Dave McNally demonstrate the importance of free agency to this time period, and some episodes are drawn from real life. In one scene where a brawl between the manager and a player is televised nationally, readers may recognize a similar incident involving Billy Martin and Reggie Jackson. But the baseball references, no more important in the narrator's mind than Saigon, Andy Griffith, and the "republic," seem almost incidental.

Grimes has written a postmodern novel that is actually an extended meditation on death and a chaotic universe. While its profundity may appeal to some, the average reader or the sports historian looking for a satisfying baseball novel will be disappointed in *Season's End*.

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