
MORRIS, TIMOTHY. *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction*. Sport and Society Series. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1997. Pp. xii, 190. Notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cb, \$13.95 pb.

In *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction*, Timothy Morris, an English professor at the University of Texas at Arlington, brilliantly analyzes baseball fiction, both adult and juvenile, in terms of four main issues appearing throughout the genre: assimilation, heterosexuality, language, and meritocracy. He deals with these issues among many other possibilities because they are so problematic for 1990s America. In a final chapter he considers genre fiction generally and what it means to be literary. This book, which deals with many complex cultural issues and novels both well known and obscure, is a gold mine of information and ideas. It displays the author's wide-ranging knowledge, wit, and a sure grasp of baseball fiction and history, literary theory, and cultural and political ideology.

Morris bases his arguments on the premise that, contrary to what many people would like to believe, adult baseball fiction is not all that different from fiction written for children. In an introduction that carefully explains his methodology, Morris states that "the cultural work and ideological constructions of adult baseball fiction are continuous with those of juvenile baseball fiction" (p. 3). One of the joys of this book is his exploration of how the four main ideas appear in juvenile stories, such as John Tunis's *Keystone Kids* and *Highpockets* and the obscure novel *The Strike-Out King* by Julian De Vries; Morris's blend of summary and witty analysis works extremely well. As he makes clear, he knows

that the authors, especially those of the juvenile texts, intended none of the “racial, sexual, and political implication” he finds there, but he treats the juvenile texts as serious fiction, which allows for multiple meanings because he believes that people read adult and juvenile fiction the same way.

Chapter one, “Everyone Wants to Play for the Yankees,” discusses Jewish assimilation into America as handled in Tunis’s *Keystone Kids* and Greenberg’s *The Celebrant*. As Morris explains, “Baseball fiction is . . . concerned with a general dynamics of assimilation of which Jewish experience is the type example” (p. 4). Chapter two, “I Do Not Mean Fairy Love,” which analyzes the requisite heterosexuality in baseball fiction, brings in the greatest number of novels for discussion, including *Bang the Drum Slowly*, *Highpockets*, *Man on Spikes*, *The Greatest Slump of All Time*, and the little-known and bizarre *Strike-Out King*. The fact that this novel is not particularly good does not matter to Morris; in fact as he says, “the subliterate quality of *The Strike-Out King* is what makes this text available for the study of the cultural work of its genre” (p. 73).

Chapter three looks at another sign of assimilation, the immigrant’s adoption of the English language. Not only are the rules of the game important, but “[I]n baseball fiction the problem of becoming an American and becoming a man are . . . worked out also across the rules and strategies of language” (p. 80). Morris discusses at length Bette Bao Lord’s *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson*, an illustrated book about a Chinese girl who becomes a real American by playing baseball and beginning to speak English. Another major topic of this chapter is the scapegoating of Spanish-speaking ballplayers, a convention that appears throughout baseball fiction.

Chapter four, “Hitting the Bell Curve,” provides historical background on the beginnings of baseball and the transitions from amateur to professional players in order to discuss the complex issue of meritocracy: what makes a ballplayer good, how he is judged and rewarded, and how the whole concept of meritocracy, largely unquestioned, actually works in baseball and the world at large. The concept of meritocracy is particularly problematic for America today, as Morris shows in his discussion of *The Bell Curve*, the recent, controversial book about intelligence, race, and class structure.

The last chapter, “But Is It Literature?,” considers the difference between genre fiction and real literature, how literature is defined these days, and whether good literature can be easy to read, and brings in theorists such as Robert Alter, Jonathan Culler, and Stanley Fish. Though this chapter might challenge those of us who shy away from literary theory, it is still full of interesting bits of information and humor; Morris does a good job of using specific examples to make the theory more concrete, and a riff on recognizing symptoms of a reading addiction had me laughing out loud.

Making the Team is a thought-provoking book that truly works as criticism. Morris refers to Jacques Barzun’s well-known comment that one needs to learn

baseball in order to understand America; in this book, the author proves that one can understand America just from reading baseball fiction.

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