

ASINOF, ELIOT. *Off-Season*. Writing Baseball Series. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000. Pp. 176. \$25.00 cb. \$15.75 pb.

In 1963—in baseball years, eons ago—Eliot Asinof crafted a superb re-imagining of the 1919 Black Sox scandal, *Eight Men Out*. Retelling history from the transformed viewpoint of the early sixties, Asinof captured the crowded intersection of baseball with cultural memory, and with America's beliefs about itself—our fitful ethics, grasping ingenuity, the destructive tensions of race and class but also our collective wish to mean well despite our actions. Asinof knew baseball's biggest scandal registered our most contradictory longings: help yourself, brother, and good luck staying pure.

He's done it again in *Off-Season* on a scale at once smaller because more nearly fictional but larger, more troublesome, because the social stakes may be even higher. *Off-Season* is a relatively short "baseball novel" (little of the game makes it to the page, but the title is *Off-Season*). Asinof has another agenda, one that some reviewers have labeled social realism, the kind of fiction that went down well in the thirties but might struggle for an audience in the shriek zone of multinational capitalism and celebrity bios. We should all hope not. The novel mines what both attracts *and* repulses us about contemporary American life and its double, baseball. Asinof goes after its (and so, our) obsession with money, control, excess, winning at any cost. Yet he knows there is a contradictory desire: corporate baseball's inverse, its innocence, Cooperstown at dawn, all the good/bad baseball films that trick us into believing it's all for the love of the game, folks. That desire to believe registers our sense of justice, our drive to expose boot-licking hangers-on, our hope, however deluded, that fat cats can be punished. It's a child's dream that we can somehow hold on to the last pure motive in the ballpark, but it keeps us coming back for more.

Asinof tracks these twin tensions in American culture with a dugout view on our vexed relation with race and class: the cards in permanent circulation and a useful strategy for constructing bodies in contemporary fiction. Along the way, he worries the collusion of sports with infotainment and reporters, despite Asinof's apparent sense that in such exposés lies our redemption. Not least, *Off-Season* explores our fixation on hot bodies, socially marked bodies—and, with increasing perversity as the plot gears up—dead ones.

The hot body in the novel belongs to "Black Jack" Cagle, a two-time Cy Young Award-winning pitcher for the L. A. Dodgers. Jack's bad boy image has been wholly crafted by his agent, but he's adjusting, "especially since he didn't really know who he was anyway." Asinof deftly nails how consumer culture constructs identities: approximate an idea of self, fold without resistance to the pressures of style, go with the flow. Jack Cagle stands in as well as anyone else in recent fiction as proof of the novelist Don DeLillo's claim that "the shape and fate of the culture determine the shape and fate of the self." In Jack, U.S. adolescent fantasies sit uncomfortably alongside vapid truisms, on the one hand and, on the other, our most immoral collective act, racism. Succeed, no matter on whose backs. Be beautiful and young—but attach a "blonds only" sign. Win, but know that winning exacts an ambiguous moral victory at best.

Jack has old troubles with his father, a decorated Vietnam vet and now local sheriff, and a predatory girlfriend, a Barbie doll whose wealth, narcissism, and sexual abandon threaten to become parody. In fact, I could never quite decide if Asinof intended Judith to be the narcissistic stereotype she revoltingly is, but remained annoyed by her and similarly stock characters throughout the novel (the saintly and long-suffering black wife, the wrongly accused victim, the boy-man who can't work it out with his distant louse of a father, a new girl for Jack named Foxx, a Miss Kitty of the Fourth Estate). It's unclear whether these characters are meant to be clichés or just are not presented with enough complexity to be more riveting.

If the characters are a little thin, what works better is the conceit: the novel begins with Jack's trip back home to a tiny Missouri town (Read: a racist, sexist, red-neck wasteland, pop. 6181, with a requisite flag on every porch. Read closer: a fair enough description of large portions of middle America in the eighties and nineties). There to dedicate a two-million-dollar playing field he's given to his hometown, Jack comes across a mysterious death that eventually forces him to confront his own caricature: power, good looks and winning have almost always been a white boy's game, and now he will have to choose whether to pursue truth or head back to L.A. with his fame intact. The dead body in question is Cyrus Coles, a black man who had taught Jack how to pitch when both were in high school, and whom Jack had abandoned, moving on to pricey habits while the Coles were beaten down in bum-luck Missouri. The novel condenses to a moral question, then, and the answer, sad to say, is a little predictable. Does Jack have the starch to do something decent, something that will no doubt seriously mess with his success?

Maybe in a novel, sure. It's consoling to think a powerful man can get back to principles in an arena as compromised as major league sports. Consoling, but not convincing. *Off-Season* would be a better book if Jack Cagle's struggle seemed less staged, and if readers had some uncertainty about his decision. But near the end of the book, readers will forgive any formula because of Asinof's gift: however diminished the game may have become, its beauty remains undeniable. The novel resonates with memory and longing for something that might not ever have been: a time when the game lifted people up, when people who played baseball, or who came close but failed, or just followed a team for the joy of it knew they were in on a national secret. We could be better, less cynical. What Asinof does best is capture how much we can still love baseball, even though we're burned out by the deal-making, the scandals, the guy who won't play because of a hangnail. In a late-novel rant he decries the "[b]ig boys who can't hit their weight. Can't bunt. Can't run the bases right. . . . I hear them sayin' how they found God, but by God they can't find the cut-off man. They can't even stay in the batter's box, always half-way down the foul line after every pitch, zippin' the velcro on their battin gloves, fussin' with their shirts, their caps. . . . Too much bullshit out there, all for show. Things like that, they add up" (p. 148).

He's right, of course: as a metaphor for life in the U.S., baseball's bound to let us down. We want too much, maybe, whether money *or* doing the right thing. Asinof's insight is that he knows we can't decide what to do when we can't tell whether the "or" amounts to an "and." But this he knows for sure: every surplus is a moral. Excess demands an ethical response. Unfortunately, that's a high fly we can't seem to catch.

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