

Review Article

Trying to Reach Home: Real Baseball, Nostalgia and Hegemonic Masculine American Dreams

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Stefan Fatsis, *Wild and Outside: How a Renegade League Revived the Spirit of Baseball in America's Heartland*. Walker and Company, New York, 1995. Illus. pp. 295. \$US12.95.

Charles Frueling Springwood, *From Cooperstown to Dyresville: A Geography of Baseball Nostalgia*. Westview Press, Boulder, 1996. Appendix, illus., index. pp. xiv + 217. \$US15.95 (paper).

'The thrill of the grass' as Shoeless Joe Jackson suggests in W P Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* (1982) is what made baseball real to him. Another quote from the book repeated in the movie *Field of Dreams*, 'if you build it he [or they] will come' epitomises the phenomena discussed by Stefan Fatsis in his account of the rise of 'rebel' or independent baseball and Charles Frueling Springwood in his ethnographic studies of Cooperstown, New York, home of the Baseball Hall of Fame, and Dyresville, Iowa, where *Field of Dreams* was filmed. While these books are about different topics within American baseball, read together, they provide an excellent insight into the relationship between nostalgic identity and cultural consumption and the ways that hegemonic ideas work through the discourses and experiences surrounding baseball.

These books highlight many of the anxieties and problems in late capitalist post-Reagan America. The role of tourist sites in people's attempts to recapture some essence of the nation or the family is rapidly becoming a first world global phenomenon. Sameness and difference are sought both to confirm a sense of the 'natural order of things' or at least to reinforce common sense beliefs. As immigration and crime rates have

arisen, white middle-class Americans, who left the cities and the farms for the suburbs decades ago, appear to be searching for an America of the past where they feel 'safe' such as on Main Street USA at Walt Disney World or in Cooperstown, mythical 'home' of baseball. In addition, a new movement of independent professional baseball has attempted to take the game back to the way it used to be before artificial turf, multi-million dollar salaries and postmodernist-style hype. In Australia, those opposed to Super League and the rationalist commercialist policies of the Australian Football League may well identify with the movement known as Rebel Baseball as will those in England and elsewhere who are opposed to the sanitising, anti-democratic effects of new all-seat stadia.

In *Wild and Outside*, Stefan Fatsis chronicles the rise of the Northern League of Professional Baseball that emerged in 1993 in the cities of the upper mid-west in the USA and in Thunder Bay and Winnipeg in Canada. As his subtitle states, the book discusses 'how a renegade minor league revived the spirit of baseball in America's heartland' (cover). Fatsis chronicles the progression of the Northern League through its 1994 season and demonstrates that, although the Northern League has had its difficulties, with some franchises not able to survive, it has reached a market of fans disillusioned with establishment professional baseball in North America.

The Northern League was the brainchild of Miles Wolff, former owner of the Durham Bulls who were made famous by the 1987 movie *Bull Durham*. Wolff revitalised the Durham franchise which he bought for \$2417 in 1978. Durham became the model for a renaissance of minor league baseball in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1987 minor league attendance reached 20 million for the first time since 1951 when 25 million attended. In 1993 it topped 30 million for the first time since 1950 when twice as many teams and three times as many leagues existed. As Arthur T Johnson discusses in his 1993 book *Minor League Baseball and Local Economic Development* many smaller North American cities were willing to spend public money in the late 1980s and 1990s to build or upgrade baseball stadia to attract or retain minor league baseball. Wolff ran into problems in his attempt to secure public funding for a badly needed upgrade or new stadium. In 1990 he decided to sell the Bulls for what Fatsis suggests amounted to a return of about \$4 million on his original investment (p. 27).

Within a two-month period in 1990 after Wolff decided to sell, he

was contacted by boosters from Thunder Bay, Duluth, Minnesota and Sioux Falls, South Dakota about how they could attract a minor league baseball franchise. Wolff noticed that these cities were in a large area devoid of minor league baseball and set out to establish a league. Rather than be controlled by the dictates of a major league team, though, Wolff set out to make the league independent. A Northern League had existed from 1903 to 1971 with 29 different cities hosting a team at one time or another.

The League survived its first season and Fatsis moves on quickly to his detailed study of the second season when the novelty of the Northern League was not enough to attract fans. Some clubs ran into financial difficulties. Duluth, for example, lost \$120 000. The League survived despite some economic difficulties. To thank fans of his St Paul team, Mike Veeck, son of major league owner Bill Veeck, organised a 'Field of Dreams Night' in which the stadium was given over to the fans. Admission and parking were free and Veeck planned to play nine radio broadcasts of classic events in baseball history. Unfortunately for him and the fans, officials of Major League Baseball, who owned the rights to the broadcast, defied the spirit of the evening and refused permission to use the broadcasts, only deciding to do so on the afternoon of the event. Veeck forged ahead and over 1800 fans watched fireworks, a Little League baseball game, a highlight film of the 1965 Minnesota-Los Angeles World Series and *The Natural*, one of the great nostalgic baseball movies.

In 1995 major league baseball players returned from their strike to play to crowds that were 20 per cent smaller than before the strike. The Northern League soon received much media attention as a successful competition where teams were linked to communities. ESPN, *60 Minutes* and the NBC *Today Show* all went to St Paul to cover the League. Even the Northern League suffered an attendance loss in 1995, however, but only by 6 per cent. All was not gloomy, however, as St Paul averaged 6300 for the season and for their final regular season game, Winnipeg attracted 20 749 paying customers, more than seven major league games played the same night.

Fatsis states that 'Independent baseball kept spreading like a virus' (p. 281) in the 1990s. All was not smooth sailing for owners, though, as four of the eleven leagues that began in 1995 folded by July. Part of the problem for many of these leagues and teams were that owners were not experienced in running baseball. Despite recent arguments to the contrary,

knowledge and experience of a sport is a vital factor in successful administration of sport.

In 1996 nine 'rebel' baseball leagues played with teams from New England to the West. Teams in these leagues, which averaged from a few hundred to a few thousand fans, attempted to rekindle a spirit of baseball teams linked to communities. The notion of baseball as something essential to community identity in the United States evokes much nostalgia, but in the context of rebel baseball it also exists in contemporary realities. The nostalgia for idealised communities in baseball, however, also drives thousands of Americans to make pilgrimages to historic and invented baseball series such as the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown or the site where the movie *Field of Dreams* was filmed. Springwood analyses the nostalgised tourism of baseball in his book *From Cooperstown to Dyresville*.

Once every few years a book comes along that everyone interested in sports studies should read. Springwood's ethnographic study of Cooperstown, home of major league baseball's Hall of Fame, and Dyresville, where *Field of Dreams* was filmed, is one of those books. A long with Richard Gruneau and David Whitson's *Hockey Night in Canada* (1993) and Michael Oriard's *Reading Football* (1993), Springwood's book stands out as a classic in the 1990s sports studies literature. Not only is Springwood's book significant for its approach, but it is theoretically sound, well argued and supported and the best of what ethnographic study has to offer in our attempts to come to grips with the meanings that are attached to sport. Springwood does an excellent job blending theory with analysis drawn from people's experiences in situating the nostalgia around baseball in broader social and cultural context. If you want to understand the 'meanings' attached to baseball in the United States, then Springwood's book is the place to begin.

Springwood addresses the myths surrounding the origins of baseball and the competing discourses concerning the rural myth of Cooperstown versus the reality of Cartwright and others' role in New York City in establishing the game in the 1840s. More significant for Springwood, however, are the way in which these competing narratives played out over time. He discusses in detail the shortcomings of the Mills Committee set up in 1907 by Albert Spalding to confirm American origins for baseball. On very poor evidence, the Committee confirmed Cooperstown in upstate New York as the birthplace of baseball as supposedly founded

by Abner Doubleday in 1839. More crucially for the future reliving of the past, however, was the building of Doubleday Field in 1920, its rededication as 'the birthplace of baseball' in 1934 and the opening of the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1939.

Springwood points out that any 'invention of a hall of fame is a significant cultural "technology" because it will necessarily engage certain rules and parameters for determining who is and who is not a... and thus any hall of fame becomes a repository of redemptive social values and a space for the reproduction of social memory' (p. 38). He goes on to point to the Hall of Fame's role in fulfilling a desire for an America that could be conflated into ideals of baseball and agrarianism. 'The whole of Cooperstown's Main Street... suggests that the paramount tourist practice here is a consumption ritual, where nostalgia is commoditized and reproduced via an overwhelming reduplication of signs and images' (p. 72). In Cooperstown one can 'see' America in all its idealised glory through baseball, the Farmer's Museum and the beauty of the Finger Lakes of New York. Additionally, as Springwood attests tourists consume their nostalgia through the purchase of numerous souvenir and nostalgic items. Springwood went so far during his field work as to play for the Leatherstocking Base Ball Club which plays demonstration matches under nineteenth century rules during the summer. As Springwood tells us, 'the performative practices of the LBBC provide a subtle reinforcement and rehearsal of this articulation of baseball and an agrarian tradition' (p. 86). In Cooperstown then, nostalgic visions of an idealised and white male-dominated America can be visited and lived.

In Dyresville by contrast, Springwood argues that the visitors to the 'Field of Dreams' contest grand nationalisms and displace them with ideals centred on the family, gender and cultural conservative values brought on during and after the Reagan era. Specifically, the Dyresville site centres on the relationships between fathers and sons based on the visions of the movie. At both sites, Springwood concludes, the emergent discourses are white, male and conservative, though the articulations of these differ from national nostalgic longings to familial, male inter-generational bonding.

A few criticisms can be made but these do not detract from the overall excellence of the book. In discussing the marginalisation of African-Americans and women at the Hall of Fame, Springwood stops short of a final critique when he fails to note that the location of the exhibits for the

All-American Girls Professional Baseball League and the Negro Leagues are off to the side, virtually out of the way of the main flow of exhibits in the museum. Additionally, while Springwood mentions the absence of Shoeless Joe Jackson at Cooperstown and his spiritual presence at Dyresville, he fails to cite several recent works that examine Jackson and the Black Sox scandal.

Springwood concludes with theoretical discussions of baseball, popular culture and power in 1990s America drawing on Bourdieu, Adorno, Benjamin, Lefebvre, Soja, John Berger and David Harvey. He uses the term 'spatial practice' understood as 'the particular ways in which the social is expressed in material form through the production of space — museums, monuments, landscapes, and buildings — in such a way as to link local cultural projects to global ones... spatializations are embedded in hegemonic processes that allow privileged cultural narratives to become transformed into "place" and thus achieve representation in the form of a landscape' (p. 172). Tourism itself thus becomes a form of practiced leisure and travel a 'political sign of cultural consumption' (p. 174).

In the final chapter Springwood ventures beyond his narrative to examine John Krich's 1989 book, *El Beisbol: Travels Through the Pan-American Pastime* and Vanalyne Green's 1989 film, *A Spy in the House That Ruth Built*. He discusses how the game is no longer white and all-male and how Green subverts and confronts the masculine discourses surrounding the game. Green directly challenges masculine dominance through subverting the masculine gaze and capturing it for herself in the statement 'I didn't want to seem like someone who fucks baseball players even though I am dying to fuck baseball players'. Another reviewer tried to discuss this statement in the inaugural issue of *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* only to have the statement censored without consent. Springwood delves into this incident in detail, which as a reviews editor, I found intriguing. As Springwood concludes, though, both 'Krish and Green have cultivated unique structures of feeling that run parallel to and invert the hegemonic structures emergent in these tourist practices' (p. 193).

All in all, *From Cooperstown to Dyresville* is a superb read with stories of 'real' people's experiences merged with the author's own experiences which are also written into the text. The critical use of theory only adds further to the excellent ethnographical research undertaken by

Springwood. This book should be essential reading for all serious students in sports studies, tourism studies and cultural studies.

While many studies have analysed the history of professional establishment baseball, these two books identify other ways in which Americans (and many Canadians) interact with baseball as a social and cultural enterprise. The rise of rebel baseball league, although privately owned, mark a unique departure from the dominant sports culture in North America where the bottom line for owners is not massive profit, but a sporting team that is situated within a local community where teams and fans can interact on a regular basis and baseball can be in a sense consumed nostalgically or at least feel more 'real' to fans. The visits by baseball fans to cultural shrines are other significant sites where meanings surrounding baseball can subvert dominant discourses emerging in establishment professional baseball, or at least where such meanings can be reinterpreted. While much of the 'history' being consumed at such sites as Cooperstown and Dyresville is imaginary, it is nevertheless a powerful cultural force where identities are renewed and regenerated, though often in conservative ways. Through rebel baseball (and some minor league baseball) and baseball tourist sites, many mostly white American males are indeed trying to 'reach home' though the home being sought is as illusory as it is imaginary — such are the powers of nostalgia and hegemonic masculinity in contemporary North America. As Springwood demonstrates in his final chapter, there are many challenges to the baseball of American white male nostalgic recollections, though these remain on the margins at Cooperstown and Dyresville where white fathers teach their white sons about baseball, and their version of American cultural identity and 'family values'.