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## Book Review: *Knocking on Heaven's Door*

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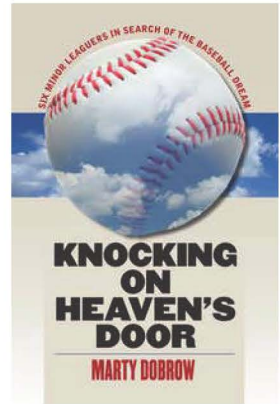
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# knocking on heaven's door

**Reviewed by Scott D. Peterson, University of Maine**

3 August 2011

Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, baseball has had more than its share of apologists to proclaim the game's virtues and unique qualities—how the game lends itself to narrative, how it's a meritocracy that rewards hard work and perseverance, or how it acts as a conduit to the American Dream. What baseball literature needs in the present day and age is more writers to tell the whole story—and Marty Dobrow's *Knocking on Heaven's Door* does just that. The book gives us six stories—any one of which is worthy of its own book—and provides a layered look at minor league dreams in the first decade of the twentieth century. While this quest is familiar to readers of sport literature, the depth of Dobrow's approach and the deft qualities of his prose will reward any and all readers.



On one hand, some elements of the book could come from any point in the last 130 years of baseball narratives: the minor leaguer toiling in the shadow of a star player, the local product who plays for his home town team, the highly touted prospects who experience injury early and must work their way back. Other elements are unique to our time, such as the player trying to distance himself from the taint of steroid use. Others—like the knuckleball pitcher who is the son of Folsom Prison guards—are worthy of their own place alongside Casey at the Bat and Katie Casey in American popular culture.

But these are no one-dimensional baseball heroes or cartoon caricatures. The players in Dobrow's book live and breathe, hope and harbor doubts, succeed and fail, rise to the challenge and melt down ignobly. They have families and part-time off-season jobs. They take long bus rides and red eye flights, and room with real-life Annie Savoy (minus the sex, as Dobrow quickly qualifies). By the end—which is as bittersweet an arrival as in any good book—the reader has come to know each of these players. What's more, it is difficult not to root for each of them as well, pulling like any hometown fan for them to succeed.

All of this is not to say that the book is not without its inherent challenges. Its depth and breadth almost require a scorecard to track the large cast of characters across ten years and various stops from the bus leagues of the Northeast to the ballparks of South Korea. Dobrow's ability to tell so many stories at once—six players, plus their families, plus their "mom and pop" agents—is further demonstrated when he connects each of the players with a key theme from baseball literature. The "local boy who made good" quality of Manny del Carmen's story illustrates the *Bildung* narrative used by baseball writers since the earliest days of the game's enculturation. Doug Clark's narrative examines "the dream" and the premise of hard work rewarded, thus calling the meritocracy theme into question. Using Randy Ruiz's experience, Dobrow looks at the figure of the journeyman, the romance of the game, and the role of the press. Matt Torra's story reveals the hard reality of the familiar comeback narrative, while Brad Baker's tale shows how the investment—to the point of using the "we" of ultimate identification—does not always lead to success. Finally the grind of Charlie Zink's path through the minors echoes the efforts of the other players, highlighting their triumphs and failures.

In addition to being artfully constructed, *Knocking on Heaven's Door* is also beautifully written. The book has that quality of all excellent prose in that it can make the reader forget the words on the page and allow him or her to focus on the story being told. Brad Baker's baseball dreams are contrasted with the reality of his situation in an image-filled passage that also highlights key themes with a carefully contrasted triplet:

As seen from outer space, Las Vegas is said to be the brightest place on earth. It doesn't feel that way to Leyden's favorite son, however. The glittery promise, the vast possibility, the shining sense of what might have been have all started to fade.  
(173)

Another strong passage makes a thought-provoking literary comparison while discussing Doug Clark's seeming inability to work hard enough to overcome an early—and inaccurate—assessment of his commitment: "If Orwell's statement 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others' fit minor league baseball to a T, one thing was clear: it made no sense to dwell on" (202). The opening lines of some chapters set up the themes to be explored and throw in alliteration that would make Uncle Albert (Spalding) proud—even if some of the terms don't present the game in the best light: "The 2005 minor league season was a mixture of the puerile, the peculiar, the pure, and the poignant"

(217). The consistently strong quality of Dobrow's prose is clearly one of the book's strengths.

Present—and future—readers will benefit from the inside look provided by Dobrow's book. Myths will be broken when readers see how the game is not the meritocracy its apologists claim it to be. The romance of the game will be lost when readers experience the grind of minor league existence (without the benefit of Susan Sarandon's lively Southern twang). Those same readers will learn what Stephen Riess and other sport culture historians have known for years: that baseball is a path to upward mobility for a much smaller number of aspirants than popular belief—and proponents of the game—would have us believe. At the end of the day, *Knocking on Heaven's Door* gives us the rarest of sport literature: the true baseball story (to borrow from Richard Peterson's definition) that tells us the truth about the game without sugar-coating its unpleasanties or removing its warts—while somehow still managing to make us love it all the more.

*Knocking on Heaven's Door*, Marty Dobrow. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, paper, 368 pages, 49 illus., \$24.95.

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