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Book Review: *The Wide Turn Toward Home*

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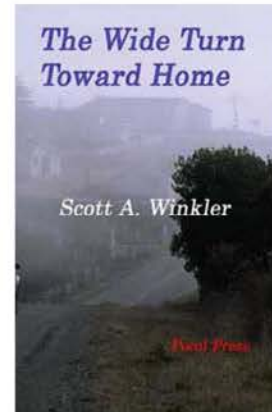
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the wide turn toward home

Reviewed by Scott D. Peterson, University of Maine

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In "How to Write a True Baseball Story," Richard Peterson employs the ghost of Ring Lardner to dish out advice to a would-be practitioner of the genre. Lardner advises the rookie writer to avoid tall tales of his ball playing youth, games of catch with his dead father, and all the other oh-so-familiar formulas in favor of seeking the simple-and often unpleasant-truth about baseball. Following Peterson's rubric, the introspective protagonists of Winkler's collection would bat somewhere near a cool .500, which is an impressive debut. But truth is not everything in the game of baseball (Just ask A-Rod) and the other stories in Winkler's collection go far to show his knowledge of baseball fiction and the game's history.



Three of the stories in the collection show the influence of W.P. Kinsella. In "The Genuine Article," a former Negro League pitcher sees dead teammates. "Lezcano" is baseball fiction's longest-and most satisfying-dead puppy story. Its climax works even though every baseball fan knows Johnny Damon doesn't have enough arm to throw anyone out at home. This story could also fit into the baseball literature's growing sub-genre of "Yankee-Hater" stories. After invoking Kinsella with the twists at the end of the two previous pieces, Winkler brings magical realism to the fore in "The Scorebook," where the titular object allows wish fulfillment for boys of all ages. More than any other piece in the collection, this story points to the blending of genres often found in baseball fiction, from Malamud's need to impress his professors by fortifying *The Natural* with Arthurian myth to Michael Bishop's adaptation of Mary Shelley's monster in *Brittle Innings*. Perhaps, that is what Peterson was driving at with his prescription to reach for the simple truth about baseball.

"Come January" and "Now a Word from the Beaver" are both little more than sketches-albeit promising ones-that set up confrontations that are not dramatized: in the former tale, a young wife needs to talk with her minor league ball player husband about the end of his dream, and in the latter story,

a son has to come out to his major league star player father about his sexual orientation. The first showdown is a relatively common trope in baseball fiction, so Winker is perhaps to be praised for capturing the right tone and leaving some of the story's baggage unpacked. The second theme, however, has not been done to death and the sport fiction world would no doubt benefit from an honest and thought-provoking rendition of it.

The other two stories are first person narratives. "Burning Gorman Thomas" blends the 1982 World Series with the death of the narrator's grandmother. It features the "baseball voodoo" of a junior high fan caught between baseball cards and his first thoughts about the opposite sex. As the adults around him treat each other badly, the narrator learns another painful lesson about Game 7 and sluggers who represent the tying run. "Jerry" is narrated by a major league pitcher who is a student of baseball literature and a would-be baseball novelist-continuing the tradition started by Mark Harris' Henry Wiggen. The title character is a scoreboard operator for the team and becomes a sort of mascot for the bullpen crew, which prompts Winker to invoke the habit of superstitious teams at the turn of the last century, proving he knows his baseball history.

The novella that lends its title to the collection tells the story of a major league player who is trying to choose between returning to the life and people he left at the start of his baseball career or a shot at the majors as a pitching coach. While this plotline appeared regularly in the mass-market magazines of the early 1900s, Winkler improves upon the story by unfolding the process of the player's decision within the framework of a nine-inning game-beginning with the top of the ninth as Jeff Luckow awaits the offer that might be his ticket to the show. At the same time, he is in the process of inheriting the family farm from his father and rekindling a romance with his childhood sweetheart. In short, his story is living proof of the Chinese blessing-and curse-of "may your life be interesting." As with the mascot reference in "Jerry," Winkler proves once again that he has his reader in mind when he invokes Bull Durham just as the reader is making a connection between Luckow and Crash Davis. Luckow's technique of training his protégé, JR, through the intricacies of baseball video games might be a bit far-fetched (and/or a reference to Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*), but the practice leads to genuine synergy between the two later in the novella. Another testament of the novella's effectiveness is that I was actively involved with Luckow's decision through the bottom of the ninth.

Winkler's collection illustrates the truism that the best baseball stories are really about something other than

baseball-whether life lessons about family or deciding what one wants to be when one grows up. At the same time, it also evinces the curious blending of genres that occurs in many baseball stories-as if just telling a baseball story isn't enough to stand alone, as is the case with the Kinsella-inspired stories in the collection. Thus, readers who are familiar with the genre will find a little bit of everything here and new readers to baseball fiction will have a fine and engaging introduction.

Winkler, Scott. *The Wide Turn toward Home*. Clifton, Virginia: Pocol Press, 2008. 171 pp. \$14.95 paper.

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