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Book Review: *The Great God Baseball*

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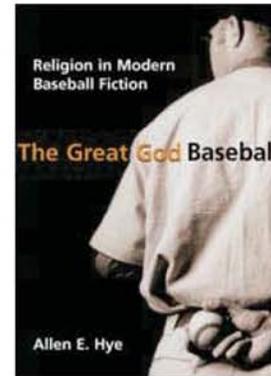
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the great god baseball

Reviewed by Scott Peterson, University of Maine, Orono

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The stated goals of this book are both evangelical and scholarly as Hye seeks to convince his readers, including the casual and non-baseball varieties, to pick up the nine books in his "lineup." He also seeks to fill some of the gaps in sport literature scholarship and have his book serve as "an agent for the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional renewal offered by the great game and literature of baseball" (12). This is a worthy pre-game and the works one would expect to find in such a discussion are here: *The Celebrant* and *Things Invisible to See*, along with a few surprises and relative unknowns, *The Brothers K* and *Spitballs & Holy Water*. True to his goals, Hye does a more than adequate job of teasing out religious references found in his lineup-without overloading the nonacademic reader with jargon and extensive footnotes.



Hye's book is organized chronologically, allowing his readers to trace the arc of baseball novels with religious elements from *The Year the Yankees Won the Pennant* (1954) to *Havana Heat* (2000). Along the way, he explicates the religious references on a number of levels and his footnotes connect examples of parallel imagery. For instance, he notes the similarity in the use of dove imagery in *The Natural*, *Spitballs & Holy Water*, and *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* (although some scholars-and composition instructors might question the degree of correspondence between the first two due to the fact that only a few words are changed). Just as extra innings treat fans to free baseball, the book's appendix offers additional plot sketches, artwork, biblical quotes, tall tales, and a quiz.

Hye is perhaps at his strongest while discussing *Shoeless Joe* and *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* by W. P. Kinsella. For the former novel, he organizes his discussion around magic, melodrama, the American Dream, and religious imagery. For the latter novel, he examines three religious systems that he finds in the book: fundamental Christianity, Native American religion, and baseball itself. For visual learners, he includes a chart that maps out these three systems. What's more,

reading this book encouraged me to read two books I might not have otherwise picked up and reconsider two more that I have already read, thus, proving Hye successful in his evangelical effort.

My only quibble with the book comes from moments where my questions go unanswered. For example, returning to the dove/baseball imagery discussed above, the larger issue of what an author might accomplish by linking a baseball to a dove is left untouched. Just what does it mean, or perhaps more importantly what does it do, when dove/ball disappears before the hitter can connect? Is the message of peace received or did the hitter just strike out with Jesus? What would have happened if he had connected, let alone "knocked the cover off the ball"? (Randy Johnson might be able to furnish us with an answer here, but that was a pitched ball, not batted. Plus, it was pigeon, and we already "have a deal" with them, don't we?)

In another instance, Hye makes the connection between the darkened sky when Babe Ruth strikes out against the African American nun in *Spitballs & Holy Water* and a biblical passage describing the death of Jesus on the cross. The similarities are there on the surface, but what of the deeper significance? Does that mean we are to parallel the passion of Christ with the passions of Babe Ruth? In Donohue's novel, Ruth is sacrificed to a degree when he is initiated into the Ku Klux Klan, but he is also rewarded with a 60 home run season, a stigmata he could no doubt live with.

Perhaps these are unfair criticisms because they are beyond the scope of Hye's intended discussion. At the same time, I wonder if we might benefit from a rule that is similar to Michael Oriard's sport novel test: to gauge whether or not it is a religious sport novel or a sport novel with occasional religious references, we could try removing those references to see what is left. Some of the books in Hye's lineup might indeed be less engaging after such an exercise, namely *The Celebrant* and *Things Invisible to See*. Others, such as *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant* and *Shoeless Joe*, however, might remain largely unchanged with the incidental references removed.

Hye, Allen E. *The Great God Baseball*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004. 192 pp. \$40.00 cloth; \$18 paper.

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