EXTRA INNINGS: WRITING ON BASEBALL
By Richard Peterson
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This book is part of the Univ. of Illinois Press' distinguished series on sport and society. It is the second of the series that addresses the literature of baseball; the first was Timothy Morris' Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction (1997). The two works define and approach their subject from different perspectives. Peterson's is important because it is informal and contains an unusual understanding about what baseball literature is; it is also critical as well as analytic.

Extra Innings is an academic book, but its stance is informal. The book begins with an odd autobiographical essay, an account of the author's four appearances at the annual Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture. Its oddness comes from Peterson's manner of presentation. He speaks of his appearances as "an adventure that would end up, like the quest for the white whale, in deception, scandal, horror, and tragedy" (p.1). He must be kidding, I thought to myself, and, having finished the book, I think I was right. One dimension of the chapter parodies the excesses Peterson finds in baseball fiction.

The book's last chapter also has an odd informality about it. Called "How to Write a True Baseball Story", it is a fantasy about Peterson's encounter with Ring Lardner, on the latter's birthday, in the stacks of the Southern Illinois Univ. library. Lardner proposes to tell Peterson how to put the truth about baseball into fiction: "No boobs or rubes. No naturals or supernaturals. No fields of dreams. No fathers playing catch with sons. No two outs in the bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, three-two counts, no let's win the pennant or World Series for little Bobby or Billy in the hospital. Just the truth" (p.154). What Lardner proceeds to tell as truth is in the form of a fairy tale that Peterson characterizes as "a bitter parable about the betrayal of baseball by those most responsible for loving and taking care of the game" (p.156).

Where this conclusion leaves us, I'm not sure, but these two chapters establish an unorthodox context for the critical material of the nine chapters in between. In these nine chapters, Peterson describes a literature of baseball that includes history, fiction, and journalism in ways that are new to this reader. In the first two of these chapters he describes what he calls the essential "dream narrative" of baseball writing that has "praised and kept faith in the world of baseball by developing a narrative tradition in the midst of social, political, and cultural change that is capable of evoking images of baseball as timeless, seamless, and self-delighting as well as instructive, cathartic, and purposeful" (p.37). The next two present an examination of baseball historians from Spink and Spalding to Alexander and Rader in terms of this "dream narrative". The movement, Peterson is glad to say, is away from the "dream narrative" and toward the complexities of human history.
There follow three chapters on baseball fiction. Here is Peterson's own summary of fictional vision of baseball (p.111): "The game of baseball is often a reflection of the game of life, where the baseball dream routinely transforms players into heroes and legends, and where baseball's readers can indulge their romantic fantasies while picking up lessons on the value of moral conduct and the virtue of having a good heart. For all the claims of Mark Harris for a tradition of realism and for all the accomplishments of Asinof and Greenberg in writing serious novels, baseball's own romantic tradition with its dream narrative still reigns over the baseball fictional landscape and still invites fairy-tale narratives, moral romances, and romantic tragedies."

There is a chapter on short fiction and one on novels. The third of these chapters focuses on the image of African-Americans in baseball fiction, concluding that they "still wait for a more realistic lens to give the proper perspective and rightful place to their experiences in the history of baseball" (p.124). Parenthetically, I think Peterson would respond positively to Gary Ashwill's "Underground Pastime: The Hidden History of the Negro Leagues" in the Fall 2002 issue of Southern Exposure.

Peterson's chapter on "the postmodern baseball writer" is a kind of miniature of the book as a whole. Peterson comments on books as various as Jim Bouton's Ball Four (1970), David James Duncan's The Brothers K (1992), and John Helyar's Lords of the Realm (1994), showing how each is "postmodern". These "kiss-and-tell biographies, ... revisionist and mediated histories, and ... subversive fictions" (p.136) "have anticipated, helped define, and continue to explore and perhaps even exploit the disillusionment and cynicism surrounding baseball today" (p.125). His use of the "dream narrative" to discuss various kinds of writing is one of the book's principal strengths.

Another strength is that he uses the "dream narrative" as a critical as well as an analytic tool, to make judgments about the quality of the books he's discussing. For this reader, this was most noticeable in Peterson's treatment of "realist" writers Ring Lardner and Mark Harris. Peterson wonders if Lardner is really part of a realist tradition in baseball fiction (p.81): "While the narrative voice and the realistic details appear to give Lardner's baseball stories an air of reality, the inflated egos and outrageous behavior of Lardner's bookish narrators and the magical appeal of names like Cobb and Ruth also play to the view of baseball players as larger than life and the game itself as mythical. By freely mixing the historical, legendary, and fantastic, Lardner's stories actually blur the line between the credible and the incredible. As narrative models they anticipate the intertextuality of magic and realism now common to the baseball short story. As standards for baseball fiction they invite the celebration of baseball as a metaphor for American life and as an expression of the American Dream even as they mock human nature."

Peterson hopes for a different sort of writing. He hopes for "a consideration of baseball as an ordinary event on an ordinary day- not all games are the final or seventh game-or an interest in turning the ordinary, the common, and the routine in baseball into the extraordinary through a narrative art limited by an air of reality or the ring of truth, rather than inflated by the traditional belief in the generative and transformative power of the
game itself" (p.87). Neither Lardner's nor Harris' fiction reaches this standard. Harris' fiction is dismissed (p.101) as "a series of baseball novels with the trappings of realism that nevertheless remain sentimental and superficial as literary narratives. While they appear to offer a realistic look at baseball, Harris's novels hardly mark the beginning of a tradition of realism for baseball's readers. Instead they open the door for baseball novels that often display a surface or superficial realism but rarely advance beyond baseball stereotypes and hackneyed plotting." I found both these judgment initially unpalatable, but Peterson's thoughtful argument made them comprehensible, if not acceptable.

When Peterson comes, in a last chapter entitled "In Defense of Baseball Books," to name ten baseball books deserving of being ranked among the twentieth century's 100 best, it's not surprising that Harris is absent from the list. Lardner's *You Know Me Al* (1914) is, surprisingly, one of only two works of fiction that do make the list [Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* (1952) is the other]. *Extra Innings* covers so well the various kinds of prose writing on baseball that it's too bad it doesn't contain a chapter on poetry. Readers are advised to remember that Peterson's "Works Cited" is not a full bibliography of the subject. Otherwise, *Extra Innings* is an important contribution to the study of writing about baseball.