**Imagining Baseball: America's Pastime and Popular Culture**  
By **David McGimpsey**  
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*Reviewed by Leverett T. (Terry) Smith*  
North Carolina Wesleyan College, Rocky Mount, NC 27804

*Imagining Baseball* is an academic book, not so much a book about baseball as a book about books about baseball. No, it's more than that; it's a book about "what baseball means in American culture". And as books of this sort go, it's unusually well done.

The first chapter I found the most difficult to read. McGimpsey writes (p.2): "This book is a discussion of the tropes in baseball's cultural products. Specifically, I will be looking at how certain expressions signal conflict and how this conflict informs any discussion of the acculturation of baseball." I think I understand these sentences, but I didn't until I'd read the body of the book. McGimpsey wants to examine baseball fiction as a part of the culture of the baseball business. "A question I find myself asking," he writes (p.26), "is not just how baseball fictions comment on baseball but how baseball fiction exists as part of the business of baseball."

The body of the book consists of four chapters, each focusing on a specific image or theme associated with baseball: 1) the image of the big fix-McGimpsey writes (p.44) "aware that the game can be fixed or compromised, they articulate the essences of baseball as above the ordinary material of American popular culture" and that "baseball is imagined to be better than that"; 2) baseball as pastoral-this "nostalgic, pastoral vision" is located "in service of its business", as witness the various "old-fashioned" ballparks recently built; 3) baseball as a stage for democracy and its ability to assimilate various kinds of outsiders; and 4) baseball's celebration of the transference of proper values between generations, caught in the image of the father-and-son game of catch.

It is McGimpsey's use of these themes to read baseball fictions that makes those readings noteworthy. One can begin the book convinced that one doesn't need to read another word about, say, Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* and then find oneself interested yet again by McGimpsey's treatment of the book as an example of baseball as pastoral. McGimpsey looks briefly at all the major writers of baseball fiction, including Kinsella, Lardner, Malamud, Harris, Coover, Greenberg, and Duncan.

McGimpsey's focus on popular culture compels him to examine more than just highbrow fiction. Each chapter begins with comments on the life of the image in popular culture. The Rose-Giamatti affair, the new old-fashioned ballparks, the reception of Jim Bouton's *Ball Four*, Dave Pallone's autobiography, and Ronald Reagan's *America* all come in for commentary. He also discusses television and the movies, commenting extensively on *The Natural* and *Bang the Drum Slowly*, and having interesting things to say about *The Bad News Bears*. There are even analyses of particular episodes of *The X-Files, Northern Exposure*, and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. 
McGimpsey's judgments are occasionally quite eye-opening. Kinsella's books are characterized (p.36) as "the writerly equivalent of Norman Rockwell or Lawrence Welk", and he refers to Ken Burns' epic *Baseball* as a "gusher" (p.133).

The book is well written, though there are lapses into academic jargon, which McGimpsey himself recognizes in commenting on a phrase from *Northern Exposure*, clearly designed to reveal academic pretension, by admitting (p.162) parenthetically that "I'm ... worried that 'antiphiliopietistic metaphor for America's role in post-Cold War geopolitics' adequately describes my fourth chapter." Much of the book is more clearly written than that.

There is a useful, nine-page "Works Cited" section at the end of the book.