

Home Run or Strike Out? Reimagining baseball in Philip Roth's *Great American Novel* and Michael Chabon's *Summerland*

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Oft-forgotten novels by otherwise celebrated authors, Philip Roth's *The Great American Novel* (1973) and Michael Chabon's *Summerland* (2003), are linked by their use of baseball to explore a vast array of mythologies and narratives. *The Great American Novel* is written in the manner of an alternative history, in which an ageing sportswriter describes the destruction of a fictional baseball league. *Summerland*, in contrast, shows an 11-year old boy entering into a fantasy world dominated by baseball-playing fairies in order to rescue his father from the clutches of the villainous Coyote. Baseball becomes the locus of meaning for both texts, tied to a perception of childhood that has remained critically underexplored. The novels thus employ a sense of narrative playfulness to question whether the pursuit of baseball corrupts relationships with one's elders or enables them in the first place.

Roth's book ends disastrously and Chabon's ends well – an important point, given the comments that the authors have made about the sport of baseball itself. In an early essay, Roth speaks of baseball as something connected to his childhood that has since been tarnished or lost. He describes childhood memories of going with his father to watch the Newark Bears play in nearby Ruppert Stadium, a 'green wedge of pasture miraculously walled in among the factories.'¹



Ruppert Baseball Stadium, New Jersey
(photo by NJ Baseball, used with permission).

Chabon has a similarly idealised nostalgic view, stating that despite the untimely demise of his father's team, the Washington Senators, 'baseball is still a gift given by fathers to sons.'²

The theme of patrimony motivates and drives the narratives of these novels. In *Summerland*, the 11-year old Ethan Feld is reunited with his father, forming a closer union which starts when Ethan expresses an interest in playing as a catcher, his father's old position. In *The Great American Novel*, the 1943 'Ruppert Mundys' (the focal characters of the text) have a single competent player, whose father has sent him to the team in a failed effort to teach him humility. In both novels, male generational conflict forms part of baseball, and characters are frequently involved in futile attempts to modify stifling traditions.

The Baal family in Roth's novel provides a representative example of such themes. Base Baal, the eldest, is exiled for using rural baseball tactics in the major leagues; he tries to get a player 'out' by throwing the ball at his crotch. His son, Spit Baal, fares little better, fleeing to Nicaragua after attempting to deploy a urine-soaked baseball mid-game. Finally, we meet John Baal, an ex-con who refuses to play sober and who is eventually exiled for supposed communist leanings. Their mothers are barely mentioned at all; indeed, most of the supposed 'mothers' we meet in Roth's text are prostitutes. In Chabon's text, maternal absence becomes a repeated theme, and one which the central character confronts directly in a dream sequence close to the end of the book.

There is much in these novels that invites the reader not to take them too seriously. Despite this, both texts contain elaborate descriptions of fictional baseball games, reminiscent of high-quality sports journalism. Word Smith, narrator of *The Great American Novel*, regularly provides league tables, batting averages and score sheets, gently parodying baseball's love of statistics whilst providing 'evidence' for his narrative. *Summerland* even has its own fictional

1. P. Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (London: Vintage, 2007), p.221

2. M. Chabon, *Manhood for Amateurs* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), p.123

statistician in the form of Professor Alkabetz, whose exhaustive descriptions are often used to summarise games within Chabon's narrative. The highly regimented way of rating the abilities of players and teams is indicative of the importance of rules and regulations to the drama (and hence history) of the sport itself. Little wonder that in both novels, such rules become a primary source of generational conflict.

The *Great American Novel* features only a single (heavily accented) Jewish family, including Isaac, a child prodigy who believes that baseball is being played incorrectly, and that certain unspoken conventions need to be changed. Chief among these is the removal of the sacrifice bunt, where one player deliberately attempts to get 'out' in order to distract opponents from a fellow player. In *Summerland*, Spider-Rose, a juvenile princess, is more direct in her assault on the rules. She goes against the will of her mother, siding with the evil Coyote to enact the Designated Hitter rule, whereby a pitcher due to bat can be replaced by another player. As a consequence, Spider-Rose is sent to prison, where she meets the novel's protagonist (Ethan) and joins his improvised baseball team.

Such moments significantly complicate a model of baseball-as-patrimony. Neither of these characters regard baseball as a gift to be cherished, but rather as an idea to be improved, even if both require adults to enact their schemes. Moreover, both rebellions turn the regulations and structure of baseball against themselves by taking them to their logical extreme. In Isaac's case, we see an excess of statistics; for example, he works out that dropping the sacrifice bunt will directly (and exactly) result in an extra sixty-two runs per year.³ Spider-Rose's argument is similarly dependent on logic, albeit of a more childlike variety. She argues that baseball is 'boring' in places, and that her rule adds variety to replace the predictable.⁴ Improved efficiency and variety, however, are not in the remit of baseball, whose consistent depiction as a national religion in both texts prevents it from having the pliability of a myth.

These generational conflicts serve a moralistic purpose of sorts, but are prevented from resembling fables through an awareness that a rigorous system can be as oppressive as it can be comforting. By doing so, the novels challenge the traditions and assumptions of baseball by

placing insurrectionary voices in the mouths of children. The place of the narrators between the perspectives of adulthood and childhood (and between conformity and rebellion) is carefully maintained.

Writing on the baseball novel, Timothy Morris queries the reluctance to discuss childhood, arguing that:

No other popular genre is so continually concerned with putting away childish things as is the baseball novel...one could say that the genre is determined to disillusion children. Adult baseball fiction is darker, more disturbing and more sinister than is other adult genre fiction.⁵

Chabon and Roth's novels seem to support this, but have different means of demonstrating the disavowal of all things childish. In both novels, rejecting the input of younger voices seems to exacerbate existing problems. Chabon, however, is willing to delay the disillusioning for as long as possible. Spider-Rose's rebellion takes place within the context of a culture structured around the rules of baseball, so it does not come as much of a surprise that her rebellion ends up corroding the very culture she sought to improve. Emblematic of its importance to *Summerland*'s culture, the baseball field itself begins to decay, ending up 'grey and lifeless, a kind of scab upon the earth.'⁶ Yet scabs, as any child knows, eventually heal. Thus Chabon has the field repaired thanks to the bumbling efforts of the children and outcasts of his central 'team'. There is no such luck for the child-genius in Roth's book. His team attempts to follow both his orders and those of the official (adult) management team, and they end up confused and indecisive. The players may even represent the conflicted position of Roth himself, torn between a childish nostalgia and an adult cynicism.

Childhood influences many peripheral themes in the novels, an example being the concept of 'home'. The novels constantly associate a sense of home with a sense of loss – Roth's team wanders the league pining for its lost stadium, whilst even Chabon's hardy heroine, the tomboyish Jennifer T., gets homesick for her native ballpark.

Jennifer T. refuses to be identified by her last name - but despite this, it continues to be used

3. P. Roth, *The Great American Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), p.296

4. M. Chabon, *Summerland* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), p.247

5. T. Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), p.2

6. Chabon, *Summerland*, p.249

in the 'official' accounts of her games. Her surname comes to represent the inevitability of generational conflict, usually involving her ne'er-do-well father, Albert. In comparison to Albert, who 'did not seem to live anywhere at all', Jennifer lives in a ramshackle house owned by three elderly aunts. Although her baseball gear is spotless, the house itself is dilapidated and archaic. The novel reinforces the separation between the two environments, which Chabon utilises to question the link between the domains they represent. Having been initially depicted fleeing from her drunken father, Jennifer comes to tacitly acknowledge that her ability to escape is enabled by the knowledge of those in her home:

She missed the dirt and the smell of the grass at Ian 'Jock' MacDougal Regional Ball Field. She missed... the scratchy cheeks of her Uncle Mo, and even the three ancient and irritable ladies in their enormous recliners.⁸

Jennifer's homesickness does not extend to the place she actually lives in. Her home is not mentioned until after her local ballpark; the home field has become the more important symbol. These competing ideas of 'home' determine the manner of Jennifer's familial reconciliation. Albert is created in the image of the supportive father watching from the stands - 'a dad with his boy - I know the type'⁹, as Roth summarises the stereotype. Chabon resolves the competing ideas of 'home' by recreating them in a familiar form; Roth's refusal to reconcile the two ideas plays an equally important narrative role.

Roth is suspicious of home as a stable category. His entire novel focuses on a 'homeless' team. Roth gives few details of Mundy Park itself, describing instead its conversion into a military camp. The park becomes a myth, for which its immediate physical realities become less important than its symbolic implications. Roth does not dismiss the desire for home - rather, he places it at the centre of his novel. For example, the Mundys realise how drab their away strip looks compared to their vibrant home outfit, and the pathos generated by their grief should not be dismissed as mere rhetorical playfulness on the part of Roth.

Gil Gamesh, a former star pitcher and 'the enraged son of a crazed father'¹⁰, exemplifies baseball's connection to notions of home in the novel, but

also reinforces the idea that the contrast between the two may lead to violence. Sitting in his now-abandoned childhood home, Gil describes how he came to baseball after his father taught him to throw stones at those bullying him for having a foreign accent. Viewing this as a parody of the 'rags-to-riches' ideal of the American dream seems to overly simplify the passage. Neither text argues that familial homes are unimportant. Rather, they depict worlds in which home, as corrupted on the baseball field, reflects a deeper corruption rooted in family conflict.

One of the more abstract ways in which generational conflict is explored is through the role given to books themselves. Roth discusses baseball as 'the literature of his boyhood.'¹¹ This link between books, boyhood and baseball is found over the course of Roth's text, intersecting in themes of generational conflict, but he seldom links them in the plot of the novel itself. For Chabon on the other hand, plot can reconcile these three terms with ease since he uses the fantasy universe in his narrative to make the connections explicit.

Chabon links literature and baseball by making books the key to self-sufficiency for his child characters. The two protagonists, Ethan and Jennifer, are given books as gifts to aid them in their quest, by characters who are aware of the Summerland world, but not directly implicated in their adventure. Ethan receives *How to Catch Lightning and Smoke*, a collection of romanticised insights elaborating on the role of the 'catcher'. The book helps orientate him to his new position, and also enables him to defeat a giant who has challenged him to a game of catch. Jennifer reads the *Wa-He-Ta Handbook*, a guide from a defunct children's organisation based on Native American folklore. Knowledge gained from this book allows her to embrace a certain sense of innocence, and also to free a companion locked in the giant's lair during Ethan's victory on the baseball field. Books are portrayed as both plot device and character development tools in a gently meta-fictional way, which has the effect of sanctifying literary predecessors. In plot terms, book knowledge may even suppress generational rebellion by enabling the characters to attain a position in which resolution with wayward fathers is possible. On this note, it is worth pointing out that Wa-He-Ta stands for Wonder, Hopefulness and Trust, traits that Chabon accuses contemporary American culture of neglecting.

In *The Great American Novel*, classic texts are constantly referenced, as is a vast amount of

7. Chabon, *Summerland*, p.69

8. Chabon, *Summerland*, p.265

9. Roth, *The Great American Novel*, p.31

10. Roth, *The Great American Novel*, p.280

11. Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, p.222

baseball fiction. On a superficial level, this can seem to give the novel an undue tension, hence the tendency of those writing on Roth to view the novel as a prelude to his better experimental fiction. However, this glosses over the significance of his references, particularly in the prologue to Roth's work. In this section, Roth's narrator confronts several of his supposed competitors, whilst introducing his topic in a deliberately awkward and rambling manner. For example, the scarlet letter that lends Nathaniel Hawthorne the title of his famous book turns into the stitched letter on a baseball shirt.¹²

Word Smith's prologue constantly references father-son relationships, introducing his own father in an incongruous but important aside that states that 'a boy's illusions about his father are notorious.'¹³ The narrator contends with issues of patrimony before handling its symbolic incarnations (the literary predecessors that have influenced his book), but never allies the two.

12. Roth, *The Great American Novel*, p.49

13. Roth, *The Great American Novel*, p.44

All three elements that form the theme of inter-generational relationships in Chabon (books, boyhood and baseball) are visible, but they seldom intersect, thus generating a narrative tension. Given the tone of Roth's book, this should be expected. The sons in Roth's text are prevented from reconciling with their parents, usually by being murdered gruesomely before they get the chance; those without obvious parental issues seem to die from more normal causes. Paternal conflict, it seems, never turns out well.

The ways the novels address the issue of generational influence is, as I have tried to argue, not as simple as a happy or sad ending may suggest. Neither moralistic nor rebellious, both novels work by adopting a subversive, ludic perspective through the medium of baseball. The placing of narrators between paternal and childhood perspectives may thus echo the position of the authors themselves, placed between an older generation that inspired their love of baseball and a younger generation getting, for better or worse, acquainted with it for the first time.

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