

# Elysian Fields $\diamond$ Quarterly<sup>®</sup>

THE BASEBALL REVIEW™

## Hero of a Thousand Bases . . . Or Less?

Book Review by Daniel Gabriel

Steve Spoerl. *Sut McCaslin: A Baseball Romance*. Lincoln, Neb.: Writers Club Press and iUniverse.com, 2000, 156 pp., \$10.95, paper.

I know you've never heard of Sut McCaslin, or Steve Spoerl, or probably even iUniverse.com, but before you go off to grind your teeth over the latest frustrating money talk from the big leagues, slow down here and listen to a tale.

When *EFQ* publisher Tom Goldstein approached me about doing another review, I asked him to give me some fiction. I've got all the baseball reality news I can handle right now. He went deep into his bench and came out with this little gem. Now it's going to take awhile to describe this book, and I know it won't suit everybody, but perhaps you'll bear with me. Part of its very charm is that of the little-used bench player who jumps onto the field and performs creditably, if not spectacularly. One doesn't expect the same things from Luis Sojo as from Derek Jeter.

This is not to say that *Sut McCaslin* is pedestrian, or clichéd. It's just that where the author takes us has little glory, little plot, and, frankly, little connection to the modern "whine the length of the limo ride" world of Major League Baseball.

The book operates at several levels. On one, we follow the course of another losing season in the life of the 1950s Washington Senators. The players work, drink, commiserate, and long for a trade to the Yankees. (Sut's teammate Seth Macy: "The Yankees made an offer for me. Can you imagine?" . . . He plucks at his drab uniform. "Me—in pinstripes. . . . I would a paid the money myself, Sut.") Spoerl tells this well, twirling us through the casual conversation and occasional suspiciously loquacious late-night outbursts of men who know their brief time on the stage is slipping away.

On another level, the book explores the inner life of Sut McCaslin, backup outfielder and sometime pinch hitter, who appears no more or no less insightful than the teammates around him. He just wants to play. (Late in the first game, the manager tells him to get loose. "He wants to smile but he keeps a straight face. If you play on Opening Day there's nothing to keep you from playing every game, all season long. This could be the break, the one big move." At the end of the inning, the manager forgets to put him in.) Sut, however, is undergoing a crisis of identity, and it is his struggle to break the loop of fate that provides the book with its ostensible dramatic action. I'll save you that bit, because there aren't a whole lot of plot surprises offered here.

But it's on the upper levels that this book begins to distinguish itself. Personally, I'm not a big fan of baseball as allegory. I like the game for itself, for its history, for the actual feel of ball striking bat and the joyous surge as your glove stretches to make the catch, but Spoerl managed to take me along on his ride. In part, that's because he has a genuine feel for language. I'm afraid it sounds pompous—and perhaps misleading—to describe his prose as Joycean (I'm thinking primarily of the early James Joyce of *Dubliners*), but I'm telling you, there's a fair bit of that here. Perhaps it's more accurate to compare him with Jack Kerouac. Certainly they share the same love of the game, of small-time Americana, of the midnight city streets full of lonely souls peering out of upper windows and everybody saddened by the weight of memories. As with Joyce and Kerouac, Spoerl's prose works best in context, in the long rhythms of multipage sections. This is not a book to dip into here and there; it reads like a train ride, unbroken from start to finish. I'm not even sure you should draw breath along the way and, at 156 pages, you can easily read it in a sitting or two.

But here are a few select slices, just to whet your taste:

It's raining in Detroit. Sut can't think of a thing. He stares out his window. Late in the afternoon, dirty grey light in the sky, cars move slowly in the street and bleat, below Sut are long crawling lines . . . stopping and then a quick roar! through the slick streets, rubber sucking on concrete, wipers lashing and snarling . . . . The ballgame washes away.

Or later, in conversation with an unknown man in a bar, the man speaks: ". . . thinking back to further years thin lanternjawed gangling men arms hanging to their knees and buggywhipping blazing fastballs, retiring the potbellied freeswinging power hitters from the days before, earlier summers, the men with brutal bats who took the game from the one-run tacticians, the original game, Wagner and McGraw full of memory sitting along the baseline in the old days . . ."

Or this: "Sometimes he walks through empty ballparks, alone in the early morning hours before batting practice, past surprising deep shadows among flat hard bolts of sunlight along the cement corridor, another time late at night after all the ballplayers have left, stops to lean against the cool concrete walls when he is tired. Stories run through him."

There is also an overlay of the times, replete with nagging racism and rampant McCarthyism. Cuban Kid Ebony, the new phenom, has his face deliberately crushed by a pitch, to the general shoulder-shrugging of all around. Sut's woman friend Ivy upbraids him about his lack of awareness of the Negro Leagues. When Sut smiles away her homage to Josh Gibson, she says, "And it wasn't any brain tumor he died of, Sut. Suppose you were better than Babe Ruth but they wouldn't let you prove it?"

McCarthy himself makes an appearance, but his significance lies more in the naive, xenophobic attitudes of the players to his crusade. One of the Senators—the baseball ones, that is—responds to the Un-American Activities inquiries like this: "Anything they want to know, hey,

tell them everything you've heard. These are the people that run the country, you know. Tell them everything. Even the rumors, that's how facts start out." Another guy adds, "But it's the ones we don't have any proof on that are the most dangerous. Sure you can see that."

Even Sut finds himself a bit caught up in the hysteria. When McCarthy visits a game in St. Louis, the whole team is as breathy as an ingenue at the ball. "I wonder where McCarthy is sitting. You'd think there would be flags up, something, signs pointing him out. Television cameras."

I should issue a couple of warnings, too, for folks who are likely to be put off by these sorts of things: First off, there are any number of "waxing philosophical" passages, including the jacket blurb's hyperbole about "Following generally the pattern established by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, the novel re-enacts the mythic journey of the hero through mid-century America." While I'm not normally keen on this, I actually found myself slipping into the flow that Spoerl lays forth. Make your own call:

"Take the great ones, gentlemen, and this is where the proof of your game does lie. The great ones are *preconsciously* great.

They will prevail no matter what the structure, the interpretations, the level of competition.

"And there are the precious few, your great Ruthian heroes, who will create. They will adapt the game to themselves. These are the rare ones. Others can at best only bend the rules. . . . No player is the game. No one, not even Ruth, has been the player for all seasons. The field is open, gentlemen."

The other thing to note is that, while there is absolutely no magical realism here, the book does exist in something of a parallel universe. For all its basis in reality—the Senators dragging along in seventh place, Kaline and Kuehn leading the Tigers, etc.—it plays with both time and personalities. While the book follows the course of a single season, it is a season in which the Braves have not yet moved to Milwaukee (must be pre-1953), Billy Martin is in the Army (got to be '54), and Mantle wins the Triple Crown (1956, of course). None of this disturbs the flow of the story; it's only pedants like me who need to shrug off the inconsistencies.

Sut McCaslin and his Senator teammates are all (I believe) invented characters. Most of the guys they play against, however, are real figures from

baseball history. But there are a couple of notable exceptions. One is Cuban Kid Ebony, whose tale actually seems most like that of Roberto Clemente, though it would be a mistake to try to read too much into that. The other major figure in the book is a pitcher named Slade, who is somewhat improbably chasing Cy Young's career record for victories. I say improbably because Young's 511 wins has never seriously been challenged by anybody, let alone a player whose career would probably have been interrupted by World War II. But once you buy the premise, Spoerl handles it well. Slade isn't a gunslinger like Bob Feller or a master of multiple pitches like Christy Mathewson; he's simply a tough old buzzard who does whatever it takes to win. His career has been given up for dead on more than one occasion, but you get the feeling that he's like a mangy hound on the trail of a wounded fox. It may take everything he's got, but he's not about to let his prey escape. I saw pieces of Warren Spahn, Grover Alexander, and the old, dead-arm Lefty Grove. Not a bad little subplot.

So there it is. A minor gem? An unfocused poetic rant? Just what you'd expect from print-on-demand technology? I suspect opinions may vary widely. This won't, by any means, make my Hall-of-Fame baseball book list, but I'm plenty glad I ran into it. —EFQ



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# Some Early Reviews for *Sut McCaslin, A Baseball Romance* -

Bookviews by Alan Caruba, May 2001

In spring, our thoughts turn to baseball. I received *Sut McCaslin: A Baseball Romance* (\$10.95, Writers Club Press) from Steve Spoerl and discovered a delightful story about baseball in the 1950's. Sut is a reserve outfielder on the Washington Senators, possibly the worst team ever to play the game. This first novel reveals a talented author at work, thoroughly enjoying himself while working with great themes and small, all seen through the prism of the game.

## BOOKS

Wisconsin State Journal

Sunday, November 5, 2000 • F3

### Pitching baseball as a metaphor for life

*Sut McCaslin* is a baseball player for the Washington Senators, the worst team in baseball and an unlikely character to lead a novel.

But Madison librarian Steve Spoerl thinks the character can introduce his readers to the more subtle aspects of life in the 1950s.

In "*Sut McCaslin: A Baseball Romance*" (Writers Club Press: \$10.95), Spoerl claims his character is a mid-century American hero, not a romantic figure, but a mediocre one, a hero who wins a few and loses a few.

*McCaslin* is a pretty bad player on a pretty bad team. He and his teammates sit in bars and watch the Army-McCarthy hearings on television. The racism of the time pervades his life.

But, following a game in St. Louis, Sut meets Ivy, a black woman, and decides to change his life.

Spoerl says his story is an allegory that delves into the nature and meaning of baseball.

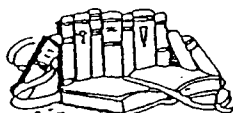
— William R. Wineke

USA TODAY BASEBALL WEEKLY

MARCH 21-27, 2001

***Sut McCaslin: A Baseball Romance* by Steve Spoerl (iUniverse.com Publishing: \$10.95)**

Cold War issues of the 1950s and the civil rights movement amid a baseball backdrop in this saga about a veteran Washington Senators outfielder caught up in D.C. politics.



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## THE MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

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*Sut McCaslin: A Baseball Romance*  
Steve Spoerl

0-595-13107-7 \$10.95

*Sut McCaslin: A Baseball Romance* is the story of a major league baseball player in the early 1950s who is on the worst team in baseball. Cultural insights and sports history blend in the story of a player who lives only for another game.