

*Review Essay*

Shoeless Joe Jackson meets J.D. Salinger: Baseball and the Literary Imagination

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W.P. Kinsella, *Shoeless Joe*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982, pp. 265

Baseball, more than any other sport, more than almost any other human in fact, activates memory and imagination. Memory, through the vast of statistics, records, box scores, encyclopedias that record practically of every game ever played, every accomplishment of every player. through the myths, legends, exaggerations, and fantasies that have up around the game since its very invention by Abner Doubleday-itself myth. And the folklore of baseball, along with the many memoirs it has shows how thin and uncertain is the line that separates memory from how the two blend together in regard to this sport to form a American mythos. Did Ruth, e.g., really point out his 1932 Is it a factual memory or an imagined one?

Another human activity that activates and harmonizes memory and imagina(when it's done right, at any rate) is literature, especially fiction. W.P. brings together baseball and literature in his novel *Shoeless Joe*-not by writing a novel *about* baseball, but by writing a novel in which baseball writing become parallel means of activating and harmonizing memory and to creat anagogic myth. Many other novelists, most notably Malamud in *The Natural*, and to a lesser extent Philip Roth in *The American Novel*, have used baseball mythically, but Kinsella goes beyond mere use of baseball as myth by incorporating the myth-making process itself as the essential content of his novel. Pairing the mnemonic and creative powers of the literary imagination on the one hand with the same powers of the baseball imagination on the other hand is not a unique achievement-Robert Coover has done it, too, perhaps more successfully, though also more oppressively and claustrophobically-but it is a praiseworthy one.

In a marvelous article in *The New York Times Magazine* of September 26, 1982, "Odysseus at Fenway," classicist Emily Vermeule (picking up a hint from Roger Angell) imagines the archeologists of the future "perhaps reconstruct [ing] an entire society" from the "opaque," nearly indecipherable "texts" of box scores. But, she goes on to say, "archeology ... and the deciphering of even the most curious texts in the archives, can be dry work without a poet to give the results unforgettable rhythms for the national memory." Kinsella is such a "poet"-and an archeologist, too! His spokesman-narrator (and partial namesake) says at one point in the novel, "We are like archeologists exploring new territory."

Archeologists, of course, actually explore old territory-but old territory *become* new by being brought back to light again. The artifacts and textsthe old territory-provide the memories, but they must be reconstructed, recontexted, and interpreted by the imagination-the synthesis becoming the new territory. Kinsella draws on the most mythic character of all baseball memory, Shoeless Joe Jackson, and one of the most mythic characters of recent literary memory, J.D. Salinger, for his imaginative fantasy of the meeting of baseball and literature.

Failed insurance salesman and marginal Iowa corn farmer Ray Kinsella one spring evening hears a ballpark announcer's voice say, "If you build it, he will

come." Somehow Ray knows the "he" is Shoeless Joe and the "it" is a ballfield. He proceeds by his own personal labor to clear a portion of a cornfield and transform it to a ballfield, somewhat primitive and skeletal, but with a perfect left field (Joe's position) which, after three seasons of dedicated grounds-keeper's work on Ray's part, has grass "like green angora, soft as a baby's cheek." This labor of devotion does indeed conjure up Shoeless Joe Jackson, in the flesh, who plays magnificent baseball with ghostly teammates and opponents for Ray's delectation. As the short story from which the novel grew-now the novel's first chapter-closes, Joe and Ray agree that baseball in an Iowa cornfield is "heaven."

But Ray's reconstructing of the past and some of its legendary heroes is not finished. Joe encourages him to complete the entire ballfield, thus to give substance to the rest of the players-primarily the rest of the fabled Black Sox, but including also Ray's own father, a catcher who never made it above the Class B minors, but who now will get to play with the greats (albeit somewhat tarnished ones) of his own generation. More to the point, though (both for this essay and for Kinsella's novel), is the announcer's voice come again to Ray with the cryptic statement, "Ease his pain." Ray somehow knows that "his," this time, refers to J. D. Salinger, and that he must go to Salinger, not to interview him, but to take him to a baseball game!

Now what is J.D. Salinger doing in a book about baseball? Well, though Kinsella doesn't mention it, the cover of the paperback edition of *The Catcher in the Rye* in the 50's (more recently replaced by an austere monochromatic cover) depicts a somewhat forlorn Holden Caulfield wearing a hunting cap, bill turned backward baseball catcher-style. And in that novel we learn that Holden's favorite author, other than his brother D. B., is Ring Lardner. Even more significantly, we find that Holden's revered dead brother Allie (perhaps a prototype of Salinger's Seymour Glass) had a baseball mitt covered with poems written in green ink, "so that he'd have something to read when he was in the field and nobody was up at bat." And in his last published story, "Hapworth 16, 1924" (*New Yorker*, June 19, 1965, pp. 32-113), which takes the form of a precocious and preposterous 30,000-word letter to his family from camp-bound seven-year-old Seymour (and which Kinsella does mention-see below-though not this detail), Salinger has Seymour refer to his stock of "exhausted" (i.e., already read) poems "in my drawer in N. Y. incorrectly marked athletic equipment."

Poems on a baseball glove? Poems in a drawer marked "athletic equipment"? Is it from these tiny hints that Kinsella deduces an equation between baseball and literature in Salinger? Or, at least, where he gets the idea for his own such equation, and his justification for introducing Salinger as a character in *Shoeless*

*Joe*? I would say so, especially in view of this passage from "Hapworth" which Kinsella himself (both author and character) quotes: "baseball, perhaps the most heartrending, delicious sport in the Western Hemisphere." The "Hapworth" story has some deeper implications for Kinsella's novel, but I must postpone them for a minute in order to mention another more obvious connection with Salinger: Ray Kinsella notes with amazement that his own name was used by Salinger for a major character in his early short story "A Young Girl in 1941 with No Waist at All" (*Mademoiselle*, May 1947, pp. 222-223, 292-302). This, by the way, is a fact, not a Borgesian invention by Kinsella the author, though of course having "Ray" discover this fact is a nice Borgesian touch.

What is an invention is an interview Salinger supposedly gave to "an obscure literary magazine" in which he revealed himself to be a devoted baseball fan whose childhood dream it was to play at the Polo Grounds, who hadn't attended a live baseball game since watching Sal Maglie pitch there in 1954, who still "kept a copy of the *Baseball Encyclopedia* in a prominent place on his bookshelf . . . [and] who avidly watched whatever baseball was available on television." And who laments, "they tore down the Polo Grounds in 1964" -a lament Kinsella (and here we find it hard to make a distinction between Kinsella the author and Kinsella the character-narrator) uses as the title of his second chapter. It is these "uncanny coincidences"-some fact, some fantasy, as noted in the previous two paragraphs-that gave Ray the courage to follow his voice and go after Salinger. "Or are there ever coincidences?" Ray asks.

These various blendings of fact and fantasy-words Salinger really said/wrote with the invented ones, Salinger himself as a real person and as a character, in the novel, *Kinsella* himself as a real person and as a character in this novel-are what make the novel so interesting and give it its focus on the creative process itself, on the complex interrelationships between memory and imagination, as I put it earlier. What is fact, what is fiction, and which is more "real?" Salinger (the character) raises this issue when he debunks to Ray the baseball interview he supposedly gave, along with the many other genuinely fake interviews produced by people who "get two words from a grocery clerk or a gas-station attendant and then write and publish an exclusive interview." On the surface level, of course, this statement has a rather obvious irony. But on a deeper level it assumes a more complex irony, what we might call a positive (as opposed to negative or sarcastic) irony: it is W. P. Kinsella's imagination that has actually produced this interview, not as a piece of phony journalism, but as a piece of genuine fiction; not, that is, as a fraud, but as a creation. And so, as Ray Kinsella's imagination has produced the revival of Shoeless Joe and the whole fantasy world of early 1920's baseball, has W. P. Kinsella's imagination produced this wonderful novel in which Ray etc.

And, as noted above, Ray and W. P. tend to become one. Now of course we must beware of the freshman fallacy of identifying author with narrating character (*persona*). But Kinsella certainly (and intentionally) tempts us to let down our skepticism in this regard, as Salinger earlier had tempted us to do by hinting at the similarities between himself and Buddy Glass. Ray, having already told us (readers) the story "Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa" as chapter one, then in chapter two has to tell it to Salinger. And at the end of *that* chapter Ray promises to tell him the story of "the kidnapping of J. D. Salinger," in which they have just been participants! (The fifth and last chapter, by the way, is called "The Rapture of J. D. Salinger," rapture being another kind of "kidnapping," but I leave it to the reader to investigate that for him/ herself.)

Now the relationship between fact and fantasy is a matter of great troublesomeness to the precocious seven-year-old philosopher Seymour Glass in Salinger's "Hapworth 16, 1924," though Seymour frames the problem in terms of fact vs. personal opinion. Since the story has never been reprinted and is thus not easily accessible, I quote at length:

For the dubious satisfaction of calling anything in this beautiful, maddening world an unassailable, respectable fact, we are quite firmly obligated, like good-humored prisoners [an allusion to Plato's cave allegory?], to fall back on the flimsy information offered in excellent faith by our eyes, hands, ears, and simple, heartrending brains. Do you call that a superb criterion? I do not! It is very touching, without a shadow of a doubt, but it is far, far from superb. It is utter, blind reliance on heartrending personal agencies. You are familiar with the expression "go-between;" even the human brain is a charming go-between! I was born without any looming confidence in any go-between on the face of the earth, I am afraid, an unfortunate situation, to be sure, but I have no business failing to take a moment to tell you the cheerful truth of the matter. Here, however, we move quite closer to the crux of the constant turmoil in my ridiculous breast. While I have no confidence whatsoever in go-betweens, personal opinion, and unassailable, respectable facts, I am also, in my heart, exceedingly fond of them all; I am hopelessly touched to the quick at the bravery of every magnificent human being accepting this charming, flimsy information every heartrending moment of his life! My God, human beings are brave creatures! Every last, touching coward on the face of the earth is unspeakably brave! Imagine accepting all these flimsy, personal agencies at charming, face value! Quite at the same time to be sure, it is a vicious circle. I am sadly convinced that it would *be* a gentle, durable favor to everybody if someone broke through this vicious circle. One often wishes, however, there were not such a damn rush about it. One is never more separated from one's charming, loved ones than when one even ponders this delicate matter. Unfortunately, there is a great rush about it in my own case; I am quite referring to the shortness of this appearance. What I am seeking, with the very ample but in some ways quite scrawny amount of time left in this appearance, is a solution to the problem that is both honorable and unheartless. Here, however, I drop the subject like a hot potatoe; I have merely scratched one of its myriad surfaces. [Eccentric punctuation sic throughout.] (And drop it he does, instantly and totally.) Perhaps this passage illuminates Seymour's/Salinger's curious adjective "heartrending" as he uses it to describe baseball earlier; it also, I think; provides a stimulus for Kinsella's equating of baseball and the creative imagination. Seymour here sounds like Coleridge as described by Keats in his famous "negative capability" passage: "Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge." For Coleridge lacked that which Shakespeare had so "enormously," and which Keats himself strove for so valiantly: "Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Seymour at age seven is certainly tormented by "irritable reaching after fact and reason." As Seymour later became a poet (so the other Glass family stories tell us), perhaps he found some kind of Keatsian solution-or, I should say rather, transcendence of the problem. We never really know, since Salinger never gives us any but the tiniest and most trivial indications of what Seymour's poetry actually was. and Seymour's suicide may have been prompted by his very failure to find such solution or transcendence. But that's not much to the point here, anyway, since we're interested in Seymour only as a stimulus to Kinsella's imagination, not as a full-fledged influence over him.

As *Shoeless Joe* proceeds, Salinger joins Ray on his quest to fulfill his baseball fantasies, in the process bringing back to life one more ancient ballplayer to join Shoeless Joe, Ray's father, and the other "immortals" who frolic in Ray's cornfield ballpark. They do this by the power of memory reinforced by imagination. "Memory's a funny thing," says a man in the hometown of the deceased ballplayer they're pursuing. "It's like all those memories we have of Doc Graham had gone to sleep and sunk way down inside us. But once you started asking about him and started us talking about him, why they swum right up to the surface again. It's almost like you brought Doc back to life." But the memories are enriched with the dream-like encrustations of the imagination: "The memory sure does you strange sometimes."

This "bringing back to life" is the final key to Kinsella's paralleling of baseball and writing, and, I think, to his use of Salinger (even if we can't go so far as to agree with the *Time* writer who said that the seventy-one-page dialogue between Bessie and Zooey "leaves broad hints, for those who care to take them, that Salinger has set himself to writing an American *Remembrance of Things Past*." September 15, 1961, reprinted in Henry Anatole Grunwald, *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait* [New York, 1962], p. 8). For in the lengthy passage from "Hapworth" quoted above we note Seymour's reference to "this appearance." He is referring to a theory of reincarnation. While not wishing to get into the matter of Salinger's use of Eastern religions and how serious and literal he's being here, I want to suggest that this idea of reincarnation is a beautiful metaphor for the creation or recreation of a character through the powers of the literary imagination. In a touching passage in the novel Ray tells us of his mother's acerbic response to his proudly bringing home the first bird he shot: "Bring it back to life." "I can't" says the abashed boy. But later as an adult he finds that he can bring people back to life so they can have a second chance, and he can bring his dreams to life so he can share them with others.

In the most incandescent passage in the novel he tells Salinger of the "magic" of his baseball field, of his "creation":

"What is this magic you keep talking about?"

"It's the place and the time. The right place and right time. Iowa is the right place, and the time is right, too—a time when all the cosmic tumblers have clicked into place and the universe opens up for a few seconds, or hours, and shows you what is possible."

"And what do you see? What do you feel?"

"Your mind stops, hangs suspended like a glowing Chinese lantern, and you feel a sensation of wonder, of awe, a tingling, a shortness of breath. . ."

"And then?"

"And then you not only see, but hear, and smell, and taste, and touch whatever is closest to your heart's desire. Your secret dreams that grow over the years like apple seeds sown in your belly, grow up through you in leafy wonder and finally sprout through your skin, gentle and soft and wondrous, and they breathe and have a life of their own. . ."

"You've done this?" "A time or two."

"Is it always the same?"

"It is and it isn't. The controlling fantasy is the same: the baseball stadium, the Chicago White Sox, Shoeless Joe Jackson. But the experiences are different. Baseball games are like snowflakes; no two are ever the same."

It's at this point that Salinger becomes a believer and joins Ray on his quest. Though Kinsella doesn't say so specifically, I feel sure that he means us to see Salinger's response as coming from his sense of kinship with Ray-Ray's enthusiastic account of his experience of his baseball imagination being essentially the same as Salinger's own experience of his own literary imagination. The two become one. And it's all, of course, W. P. Kinsella's experience of his own imagination, become ours too as we read this wonderful book.

I use the word "wonderful" advisedly, primarily in its denotative, descriptive sense: a book full of wonders, marvels, miracles; and only secondarily in its connotative, evaluative sense: a good book, a book that's pleasant to read, that leaves one with a sense of joy-though, unfortunately, also with some irritation at its shortcomings: sentimentality, lack of ironic distancing between author and *persona*, a sometimes cloying style overloaded with cute metaphors, Ray's impossibly pert, perky, perfect wife, and some rather creaky plot devices. But don't let these cavils keep you from reading a novel that's as much fun as a good ballgame.