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"Wild Play" Black and White in Jerome Charyn's Baseball Novel, The Seventh Babe

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The really big news out of spring training last year was not about contracts or rookie shortstops, but rather it was that the University Press of Mississippi was reissuing *The Seventh Babe* by Jerome Charyn. Good news indeed. This is a wonderful book with an unforgettable eponymous character, a rebel hero in the American grain, Babe Ragland, who flees the constraints of white baseball in the first half of this century for the wild barnstorming spontaneity of the Negro Leagues.

It's a shame that so many fans of baseball and American culture have missed the delight of this novel, which imaginatively reworks some of baseball's dominant myths and clichés, as well as some of its most bizarre footnotes. Full of twists and turns, wild characters (both fictional and historical), voodoo and mystery, *The Seventh Babe* successfully brings the world of 'magic realism" to baseball. This book offers genuine rewards for those who like to consider America from the intellectual grandstand of our national pastime.

William Plummer, in his review of *The Seventh Babe* in the *New York Times* in May, 1979, described Charyn as "ambitious" and "daring," and declared this story "strange and wonderful, ...successfully appropriating Garcia Marquez's peculiar flair for the comic sublime." Later that summer, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt called the novel "a hallucinated image of what lies outside the official histories and record books."

Jerome Charyn is remarkably prolific, having written some thirty novels, over half of which are still in print. Until recently, *The Seventh Babe* had been unavailable for many years. This neglect is unfortunate as *The Seventh Babe* belongs alongside *The Natural, Shoeless Joe, The Celebrant,* and the Henry Wiggin trilogy of Mark Harris on the top rung of baseball fiction. It stands alone among these books, however, in exploring the imaginative intersection between white baseball and black baseball in the segregated first half of this century.

In *The Seventh Babe*, Charyn presents a dramatic portrait of black baseball with its makeshift teams and great players plying

backwater-America. This exciting exhibition of speedballs is in stark contrast to the white, law and order baseball Establishment of the post-Black Sox era, with its stolid traditions, station-to-station strategy, big-money conventions, and big-shot owners. Best of all, Charyn also introduces Babe Ragland, a character worthy of a place on any All-Star team of American fictional heroes.

Babe Ragland, Baseball Hero

The Seventh Babe opens with the nineteen year old Babe winning a spot on the woeful Boston Red Sox of 1923, suffering already the Curse of the Bambino in the immediate aftermath of the sale of Babe Ruth to the rival Yankees. It ends with Babe Ragland in his seventy-fifth year, still playing the game, traveling the country with his Cincinnati Colored Giants. On the book's very last page, the aged Babe is taking on and defeating a makeshift team of Amherst College boys in Holyoke, Mass.

This Babe, the seventh "Babe" to play Major League baseball, is a lefty shortstop who little resembles his slugging namesake. He is a ragdoll of a player, a shade under six feet tall and 130 pounds dripping wet. Observes a bemused teammate, "'he's all elbows and them other Babes was big round men.' Unlike them other Babes, this one is a demon in the dirt, an awesome *fielder* with a fifty cent glove stuck on the wrong hand: "The kid was everywhere. You couldn't drag bunt, or loop the ball in shallow left field. He would stagger, hop, twist, and rise off his knees with *something* in his glove.'"

This Babe (or "Rags" as he is variously called) can't even survive his second year in Boston, can't play in the Majors past his twentieth year. Like Malamud's Roy Hobbs in *The Natural*, his innocent desire to play ball is overwhelmed by the powerful forces arrayed against him, led by Red Sox owner impresario Hollis McKee.[1] McKee forces Rags into an ill-fated Beacon Hill marriage and ultimately frames him with a trumped up gambling charge. Meglomaniacal Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the "Emperor of Baseball," piously plays his role and kicks the kid out of the game. The Babe tells Landis to "suck eggs."

Rags, however, is no pitiable Buck Weaver[2], perpetually petitioning the powers of baseball for reinstatement. In fact, in his banishment, he is released from the "neon wilderness" of Boston and the moneyed snakes who control the game. He becomes an official

"outlaw," required to play outside the pale of organized baseball. He happily decides to play "nigger ball" and joins the Cincinnati Colored Giants, a barnstorming team of ace black players, led by another lefty, the incomparable Pharoh Yarbull.

Riches to Rags

In creating this memorable character of Babe Ragland, Charyn is playing with some treasured themes in American literature. The youthful Rags of Boston is a mightily confused young man. It turns out, like Gatsby, he is attempting to live out his "Platonic conception" of himself: his personal history, as he claims it, is identical to the most celebrated Babe. He insists that he too is an orphan who learned to play ball in the St. Mary's School for Boys, "a country boy from Baltimore, like Babe Ruth."

Ironically, his ambition is opposite to that of Gatsby: he is a rich boy who longs to be rid of the confinement of privilege. Babe is in fact Cedric Tannehill, in flight from Amherst College and the life of a young aristocrat. His time on the Sox is punctuated by angry whispered exchanges with Mr. Griffey, the unctuous factotum of Babe's actual father, Marcus Tannehill, a copper and cattle magnate from Texas who deplores the commonness of his heir's choice of vocation.

Rag's fervent desire is for the pure identity of "ballplayer." He believes the rags to riches arc of Babe Ruth, Shoeless Joe Jackson, John McGraw, is the proper biography for a ballplayer. His brief stay in Boston is marked by the most intense identity confusion. "Who was he," the narrator asks, "Cedric Tannehill, or the seventh Babe?...Would someone please tell the kid who he was? He could catch a baseball in either fist. That's as much as he knew." His confusion makes him mean and self-destructive; he becomes the "bad boy of Boston," and it is only a matter of time before his fate is sealed.

Rags' agony in Boston, his two year descent into ignominy, consumes over half of the narrative in *The Seventh Babe*. Time moves slowly indeed in the first four chapters and is accelerated in the next five (total of nine chapters, appropriately enough) which encompass the rest of his long life in baseball with the Cincinnati Colored Giants. This manipulation of time appropriately reflects

Rags' approach to life. Free just to play ball and be who he wants to be, he loses track of the months and years, even his own age.

Roy Hobbs vs Babe

Where Malamud's *The Natural* ends, Charyn's book takes off. When Roy Hobbs leaves the Knights Stadium and the scene of his fateful whiff, he is accosted by the newsboy who pleads, "say it ain't true, Roy?" In the last sentence of that book, readers are informed that Roy "lifted his hands to his face and wept many bitter tears." Rags, on the other hand, "twenty years old ... the best third baseman the Red Sox have ever had," walks out of Fenway Park, banished from baseball, and is liberated. He walks into a life of fulfillment in the nether world of black baseball, an outlaw on a "phantom" team. What happens in the last third of the novel is a picaresque adventure of high order as Babe Ragland of the Cincinnati Colored Giants transcends race through his unconditional love of the game.

> Rags had that perfect team he'd always wanted. With Pharoh, Yam, and Swimmy Wells, there wasn't a weak spot on the Giants. They had bats, they had brains and gloves. None of them smirked at the kid's white hands. They sucked Rags into their scheme of liquid motion. Legs and arms would melt around a ball. Nothing got through.

Roy Hobbs of *The Natural* declares that he wants to be known as the "best there ever was in the game.... I will be the champ," he says, "and have what goes with it." Of course, it is the "what goes with it" that gets him in trouble. Rag's goal is just to play ball and his glory is that he rejects "what goes with it" and finds freedom in a pure baseball world in the Negro Leagues, ironically a segregated world of social and economic exclusion. "I'm a ballplayer," he says simply, and he pursues, and finds, a place where that narrow aspiration can find exuberant expression. He finds fulfillment where others would find hardship.

"Nigger-ball"

Charyn's inclusion of racial themes elevates *The Seventh Babe* into the company of baseball's classics. Written well before interest in the Negro Leagues became fashionable, Charyn clearly knew of the existence of the "Atlantis"[3] of black ball in segregated America and its distinct contrast to white organized ball. Readers discover early how Rags, or Tannehill, the copper heir, became this dervish of a ballplayer. Rags explains his introduction to the game:

> I learned baseball from the niggers on my father's ranch (in Texas). They didn't have any uniforms. Just neckerchiefs. It was the blue neckerchiefs against the red. But they sure could play. And they didn't have the big leagues on their backs, teaching them how to hit and field the ball. If a lefty took a liking to third, nobody stopped you. They had lefty catchers, lefty shortstops, and everything. Those red and blue neckerchiefs could have pissed on the Sox.

Rags knows of the Colored Giants because he played against them in the winter between his first and second seasons in Boston. He was a member of the Harry Heilman All-Stars who toured with the Giants, losing every game but one. Though the All-Stars were outclassed by the Giants,[4] Rags' unconventional play did not escape the notice of the Giants themselves. Their owner, Carl Raines, remarks, "That ain't no white man out there. He plays like a nigger." It is the highest compliment Rags can be paid.

In his rebellion, Rags becomes a most American hero. Like Huck, and other great lefties in our literature, he resists civilizing, as it leaves a bad taste. So he strikes out for the territories with the "sockamayocks" of the Colored Giants. The sockamayocks are the scrubs of the Giants and are brilliant at carving out baseball fields in forests, pastures, and swamps, reflecting in this baseball metaphor the wilderness of black America in the second quarter of the century. These "phantoms in gold and white," these wild men in "magic pyjamas," crisscross the country, playing 600 games a year, hauling their own tired generator and lights.[5]

Like other sporting heroes in American literature, the city cannot contain Rags and he rejects it. He wishes to be a foundling left at the door of the school for bad boys in Baltimore, but he is a Westerner and cannot help but express his youthful training. He is after all a cowboy, raised by black cowboy/ballplayers on his father's sprawling ranch:

> The ranch could have swallowed up ten Boston swamps and twenty Beacon Hills. The kid developed a dinosaur's eye for open spaces. And a coyote's ear. Baseball seized hold of his senses. It wasn't a series of rituals between men in flannel suits. It was wild

> play. Rags defined himself against the territory of an infield and the smack of horsehide on wood like a prairie animal. His instinct was to lunge for that ball, grit his teeth, and throw.

Satch vs Diz

Charyn incorporates into *The Seventh Babe* one of the great confrontations in black/white competition during baseball's segregation: the classic duel in Los Angeles' Wrigley Field in November of 1934 between Dizzy Dean, the greatest pitcher in white baseball, the winner of 32 games that season, and Satchel Paige, the flamboyant black fireballer, the Babe Ruth of Negro baseball. Both had assembled powerful teams of legitimate all-stars. In the thirteenth inning of this epic, Paige's stars pushed across a measly run to win the game, 1-0. Dean had struck out thirteen; Paige fifteen. Witnessing Paige's artistry in this game was Bill Veeck, who later as the owner of the Cleveland Indians, would give Paige his opportunity in white Major League ball in 1948.

Charyn gives his own spin to this great game. In *The Seventh Babe,* Diz brings his all-star team to a pasture in Enid, Oklahoma to confront Rags, the Colored Giants and their ace hurler, Yam Murray. In the bottom of the twenty-fifth inning, Rags pinch-hits his roommate, the hunchback batboy Scarbrough[6] who offers Diz an impossible strike zone.[7] Diz can't pitch to this contorted figure who walks, of course, and is then knocked in with a blast by the old and crippled Pharoah Yarbull, who retires after this magnificent contest.

There are other wonderfully reimagined scenes and figures in *The Seventh Babe*. In Ira Sharpe, the youthful Giants shortstop, Charyn offers a Jackie Robinson character, though he does not give him a central role. Ira is the Pharoah's protégé and successor and his signing reflects the clandestine scouting of the Negro Leagues by the Dodgers -- and the specific pursuit of Jackie Robinson by Branch Rickey's right hand man, Clyde Sukeforth.

"It Ain't For Me"

Rags does get his chance to play again in the Major Leagues. In 1943, he is invited to return to the white game by Judge Landis, who is near death and has learned of McKee's perfidy in framing Rags. He

declines, but he does forgive the Commissioner: "don't let that bother you, Judge. I like the Cincinnati Giants....I would have been miserable if I had to stay with the Sox."

Then, in 1949, after Robinson and other pioneers have integrated the game, Rags signs on with his old Red Sox manager, Briggs Josephson, now managing the St. Louis Browns -- and lasts six days. He returns to Fenway and misses his old teammates from the 20s -- and looks over the field and can't "find a single colored man" on either team -- or in the stands. It's boring, this game: "I'm sorry," he says. "But the Browns aint for me." It's back to the Giants and the back roads for Rags.

Babe Ragland's youthful fall from grace was a fortunate fall indeed. It was his salvation. He was resurrected into a world in which he belonged, a baseball world -- a black baseball world where the simple love of the game redeemed this troubled man and allowed him, in Roy Hobbs words, to be "the best there is in the game," on his own terms.

In *The Seventh Babe*, Charyn celebrates black baseball but doesn't romanticize it. Babe's is a tough life that reflects the sentiments of Negro Leaguer and Hall of Famer, Buck O'Neill:

> Born too soon? Forget it. You forget that. Waste no tears for me. I had a beautiful life. I played with the greatest ballplayers in the world, and I played against the best ballplayers in the world. I saw this country, and a lot of other countries, and I met some wonderful people.[8]

Like O'Neill, Babe expresses an attachment to the game which transcends the difficulties of circumstance.

The University of Mississippi reissue of *The Seventh Babe* is well-timed. It adds to a growing body of work that explores the intellectual connections in baseball and American culture. It is often said that baseball is the sport (along with boxing perhaps) which has engaged the minds of our most talented writers. It has been around for so long and has connected so intimately with the social fabric of American life. Charyn offers characters and events which reflect both large themes in American life and specific moments in baseball legend. *The Seventh Babe* is an important contribution to the baseball library offering a striking interplay between imagination and history.♦

Endnotes

[1]McKee is a Harry Frazee analogue. Frazee was the Red Sox owner who sold Babe Ruth to finance his Broadway shows and introduced the "Curse of the Bambino" to Red Sox fans forever and ever.

[2]White Sox third-baseman, Weaver was the *least* guilty of the eight players expelled from baseball for throwing the 1919 World series, forever to be known as the Black Sox. He accepted no money, and altered in no way his naturally aggressive play (he was known as "the ginger man" for his hustle), but he knew about the fix and did not report it, thus earning a lifetime ban from organized baseball from Landis. He is the narrator in the novel, *Hoopla* by Harry Stein, and the focus of the John Sayles film, "Eight Men Out."

[3]This is Mark Ribowsky's term for the hidden world of black baseball, from *Don't Look Back: Satchel Paige in the Shadows of Baseball* (New York: Simon & Shuster's, 1994), p.7.

[4]as was the case generally when white and black teams played in the off-season.

[5]just as the Negro Leagues' Kansas City Monarchs did, well before President Roosevelt pulled the switch at Crosley Field in Cincinnati in 1936 in the celebrated first night game in white ball.

[6]In developing the character of Scarbrough, Charyn is expanding upon Eddie Bennett, the dwarf batboy of the Yankees in the 1920s. Bennett was a favorite of Babe Ruth.

[7]This strategy is a specific reference to the midget character-actor, Eddie Gaedel (3'7", 60 lbs.), who was given a contract by Bill Veeck, owner of the woeful St. Louis Browns, and sent to the plate in a game against Detroit on August 19, 1951. Wearing the number 1/8, holding a toy bat, and crouching at the plate, Gaedel offered a 1 1/2 inch strike zone, according to Veeck in his autobiography, *Veeck as in Wreck*. He drew a walk on four pitches -- and was banned from baseball the next day by executive order by the President of the American League.

[8]Buck O'Niell, *Black Diamonds: Life in the Negro Leagues from the Men Who Lived It*, John B. Holway (New York: Stadium Books, 1991), p.104.