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Book Review: *The Fade-Away*

Scott D. Peterson

Wright State University - Main Campus, petersonsco@umsl.edu

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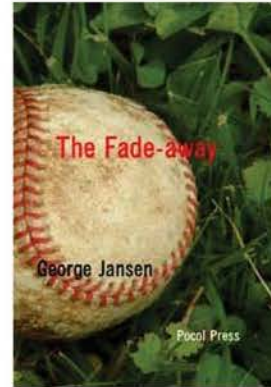
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the fade-away

Reviewed by Scott Peterson, University of Maine, Orono

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Even without the baseball on the cover and the reference to Christy Mathewson's out pitch, fans of baseball fiction should have no doubt that *The Fade-away* is a sport novel. The town baseball team is the heart of Port Newton, as revealed by the newspaper clippings that make up a number of the book's chapters. Baseball is the main concern of the book's narrators, from former-player Doc Fuller to second baseman Calvin Elwell, and Sophie Fuller, Doc's daughter and Calvin's girl-friend. Another way to look at a historical novel is to see if its seams show, along with whether or not the author can refrain from trotting out research that doesn't quite fit (otherwise known as Flannery O'Connor's "Kill your Darlings" Principle). Along similar lines, the mark of quality in a novel about racism could be whether or not the book sheds some light on making the world a better place. *The Fade-away* hits the mark on two of these three qualities.



For the most part, Jansen's readers are rewarded for the effort required to track the threads of the book's multiple narrators. Doc Fuller is perhaps the most effective narrator, as well as being strategically chosen since he is privy to much of Port Newton's inside game. Calvin Elwell, second baseman and bartender, speaks well as a player, although his voice might have been more distinct if it had carried bitter undertones from being replaced by a professional ringer as part of manager Foghorn's plan for copping the championship. Calvin tells us that he can't bad mouth Foghorn after being taken in by him, but that wouldn't necessarily stop him from showing resentment. Often the narrator with a score to settle tells a more pointed tale. Even more pointed, perhaps, would be for us to hear directly from Foghorn as the architect of the team's transformation or to hear from Jack Dobbs, the mysterious stranger who comes to Port Newton and becomes a target for local racism after being the first Native American to play in-and subsequently run out of-the major leagues.

With regard to the historical content of *The Fade-away*, the

"sources, disclaimers, acknowledgements" before the title page come close to being a case of the author getting between the reader and his work, to paraphrase Judith Winthrop, the literary critic turned baseball apologist in Heywood Broun's *The Sun Field*. Although these mea culpae seem somewhat defensive and untrusting toward the reader, the historical elements in the novel ring true overall. The device of excerpting from the Port Newton News is a large part of this success because it allows Jansen to summarize the town team's games without falling into the trap of play-by-play analysis, which has been the ruin of many a baseball novel, according to Kinsella. The material listed under "Local Brevities" and "Meetings and Events" captures the flavor of newspapers of the time-if not the appearance since setting them in columns would have given them a more authentic look. The author largely avoids showing off his research, although a trip to San Francisco's red light district has little consequence in the larger scope of the novel (i.e. Sophie never finds out about Calvin's adventure). Also, the opportunity to treat the topic of women attending boxing matches-to which they were invited in the late 1800s in an attempt to legitimize the sport-goes largely by the ropes since there is no larger discussion when Sophie and one of her friends sneak into an exhibition given by Gentleman Jim Corbett.

The Fade-away certainly documents the existence of racism at the turn of the last century, but this is something we already knew about as readers. As noted above, the book missed the opportunity to give Jack Dobbs his own voice to tell his own story. The romance between Dobbs and Lily Newton (who is the Emily Grierson of Port Newton, searching for the lost family fortune by digging holes in the yard and letting her lovers go without resorting to rat poison) is another avenue for advancing a progressive cause, but their story is told indirectly for the most part. Doc Fuller passes this off with a line about how "unanswered questions do seem to be the rule these days" (229), which may be true enough in our postmodern age, but still seems like a cop-out somehow. If the Dobbs-Newton union were to produce a child, wouldn't that create some hope for a better future, as is the case when Judith Winthrop and Tiny Tyler bring forth a power-hitting intellectual in *The Sun Field*? In Doc Fuller's take at the end of *The Fade-away*, the future of baseball in Port Newton is decidedly uncertain and the issue of racism is left to be resolved by future generations.

Jansen, George. *The Fade-away*. Clifton, VA: Pocol Press, 2007. 233 pp. \$17.95 paper.