

SCHULIAN, JOHN. *Twilight of the Long-ball Gods: Dispatches from the Disappearing Heart of Baseball*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. Pp. iv+184. \$12.95 pb.

John Schulian's *Twilight of the Long-Ball Gods: Dispatches from the Disappearing Heart of Baseball* swings for the fence and comes up with a clutch, stand-up double. At 182 pages the book is a worthy, albeit slight, read for a rain-out.

In its combination of journalistic tease and poetic lyricism, the title proves vintage Schulian. A longtime *Sports Illustrated* contributor and self-professed co-creator of television's *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Schulian collects under pseudo epic title a dozen dispatches from his twenty plus years covering the boys of summer; the book's twelve, highly readable chapters bear datelines ranging from a 1977 *Chicago Daily News* human interest story detailing ex-White Sox compadres and confidantes Steve Stone and Ken Brett to a splendid 1999 *Sports Illustrated* feature honoring Utah's Eskimo Pie youth league and its hard-driven coach-creator Bailey Santistevan.

While Schulian's delightful book benefits from the author's great gift for camp, craft, and charisma (see: *Xena*) alongside first-rate literary sports journalism, Schulian's 1980s Hollywood television hiatus (the author still lives in Pasadena) means the book suffers from a Rip Van Winkle syndrome. In lieu of comprehensive chronicling, the volume draws primarily from Schulian's early eighties work at the *Chicago Sun-Times*, languishing in its more parochial, Chicago-centric middle chapters, which devote thirteen gratuitous pages, for example, to eccentric former Sox owner Bill Veeck, among other Windy City fetishes. Most of all, the book's title, suggesting exclusive homage to the home run giants of yore, amounts to a misnomer.

Though at times the book's patchwork quilt of commentary, feature journalism, and essay-memoir feels too hastily stitched and too artfully packaged for press, the book is well worth the afternoon required to digest it. Mixed in with forgettable, occasional prose is some truly unforgettable baseball writing—wickedly good stuff that lends credence to blurbists' characteristically hyperbolic comparisons of Schulian to Red Smith and A.J. Leibling. At his best, Schulian is a rare talent, combining a one-time ballplayer's love for the game (to his credit, Schulian played in Utah's amateur leagues) with an encyclopedic knowledge of the diamond's forgotten histories.

Schulian's sweet delivery in *Twilight of the Long-ball Gods* is evident in his chapter one prose ode to 1950s minor league baseball in the author's boyhood home, Los Angeles, and in an introduction that declares upfront an affinity for "bittersweet journalism" of the "lost, forgotten, and overlooked" (p. x). This emphasis on the marginally sublime, what the author describes as "baseball's shadow world" (p. x), parallels Pat Conroy's recent stand-out sports memoir *My Losing Season*, though Schulian wisely checks his swing on pure autobiography in favor of his bread and butter: feature journalism.

The Negro league and its underrated cast of stars, including "the black Babe Ruth," Josh Gibson, do well by Schulian's graceful writing of the disenfranchised. In his love for the sport's working class heroes, its lunchbucket guys (minor league wannabe John Ruane,

hard-luck, Triple A mainstay Russ Morman, and Eskimo-Pie-leaguer-turned-big-league-scout Don Rust, to name a few) Schulian's writing sparkles even as it matures. Schulian's early writing occasionally falls victim to unearned omniscience and overt pathos, as in the author's evocation of Baltimore, Babe Ruth's birthplace ("Poverty sticks its tongue out at the progress one block north, and the old men who kill time with wine chuckle mercilessly at such effrontery. They fear no wrecker's ball" [p. 97]). By contrast, the author's later writing, bookending an otherwise chronological collection, shows a master at his well-honed craft.

Despite an avowed emphasis on the game's bush leagues and leaguers, along the way Schulian reinvigorates the mixed legacies of African-American pioneers Jackie Robinson, Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige, and Jimmie Crutchfield in addition to more modern Midwest Leaguers like Moe Hill, whose miraculously rediscovered home run stroke earned him 300 write-in votes for mayor in the all-white Wisconsin town in which he played.

While *Twilight of the Long-ball Gods* suffers from a nostalgia it indulges all too willingly, finding curmudgeon's fault with everything from night games to cable television broadcasts, Schulian argues lyrically and convincingly that the best of baseball exists, if not in the past, on the game's rough and untended edges. Importantly, *Twilight* succeeds at honoring the game's *Bull Durham*-styled lore, making its reader long for their own playing days or else a down-to-earth bleacher seat at local single A tilt. In sum, the author offers impressionistic tribute to a game played by men who Schulian lauds, aptly alluding to a Tom Waits lyric, for living on "nothing but dreams and train smoke" (p. xi).

—ZACHRAY M. JACK
North Central College