Farm Team Short Guide

Farm Team by Will Weaver

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Farm life is a fact of life for Billy Baggs, a talented baseball player whose high school baseball career is cut short by his father's run-in with the law that lands him in jail.

While Abner Baggs peters out his summer days in the jail cell, fourteen-year-old Billy is left to tend to the chores on the family's Minnesota farm, his mother having to work in town and his brother having died a few years earlier in a tragic farming accident.

Bad news seems to face Billy on all fronts, but he keeps his sorrows to himself, pining after the baseball field until his mother gets the idea to build a field on the Baggs farm and invite all the neighbors to join the "farm team."

Throughout the course of the novel, Billy diligently works for his family, examines his changing relationship to girls, fends for himself against the wealthier "city" boys, all the while tuning an arm that was built for fastballs.

About the Author

Will Weaver was born and raised in Minnesota, and his home state provides the background for the majority of his stories. He writes in a rich, descriptive tone that voices a deep understanding of the physical landscape he describes.

Weaver has written several young adult novels about Billy Baggs, the central character in Farm Team. The first, Striking Out, was selected as an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults in 1994.

Again in 1996, Weaver won the ALA Best Book for Young Adults award for Farm Team, which also won the IRA Distinguished Book Award for Young Adults.

Before writing the Billy Baggs series, Weaver published two adult novels, Red Earth/White Earth and Gravestone Made of Wheat, a collection of stories written for the Greywolf Short Fiction Series. For these stories, Weaver garnered both the McKnight and Bush foundations' prizes for fiction.

Weaver lives with his wife and two children in the small town of Bemidji, Minnesota. He teaches English and creative writing at Bemidji State University.

Setting

While reading Farm Team, it is difficult not to smell the fresh earth clotted between the heifers' hooves or to see the blue skies patching across the Minnesota skyline.

Weaver creates a vivid, sensorial world into which the reader dives effortlessly, so thick and authentic are the descriptions throughout the novel.

The setting is a central force in Farm Team; the dichotomy between the haves and have-nots described through the land" scape of the town of Flint and the neighboring countryside helps build the tension of the novel to its climax.

Billy lives on the outskirts of the poor Minnesota town of Flint. He comes from a farming family, and farming defines his life, as does the life cycle of a small town.

Weaver juxtaposes the townspeople with the farming community, and thereby displays the tension of rural American life.

Furthermore, the constant descriptions of the farmland create a vivid picture of the poverty of the American farmer. In describing Billy's home, Weaver writes: As they neared the farm, he had Heather drive by once to make sure there were no police cars in the yard .. . Just the faded red barn, the narrow house that needed painting, the low chicken coop and sheds, plus the pale-green April grass along the south sides of buildings. In the middle of the yard, up on blocks and rusted, was the source of the current trouble—Mavis's '62 Chevy Impala. Its dark-blue paint had slipped like duck feathers molting.

A vivid picture of a well-worn, ramshackle farm property builds in the mind of the reader, indicating not just the look of the home, but the sense of poverty that pervades Billy's life and forms his perspective on the world. He is bitterly aware of his poverty and of the relative wealth of many of the families of the boys on the high school baseball team.

The setting is also important in that it provides the reader with a true sense of Billy's character, of his dedication to doing a job well and his perspicacity in the face of difficult teen experiences. Billy might well have been punished as an accomplice to his father's vandalism of Randy Meyers A-l Cars if not for the help of the baseball coach and the machinery of small-town life. Billy is defiant toward teachers, police, and the townspeople, and at times his attitude makes him seem unruly and just plain unacceptable. However, by describing in detail the farm and Billy's work on the farm, the loving manner in which he treats the animals and tends to the baseball field he builds on his property, Weaver allows the reader to understand the fuller picture of Billy and see him in light of his poverty and his difficult family life. By pouring descriptions of farm life into the novel and juxtaposing those with descriptions of the town, Weaver enables the reader to make a value judgment regarding what might be reasonable behavior for a fourteen-year-old poor farm boy.

In opposition to the farm, Weaver depicts the one suburban area of the town, where both the object of Billy's affections— the daughter of the judge who threw Billy's father in jail—and Billy's rival pitcher on the town baseball team live.

[Billy] entered Flint from the north, a route that brought him past Green Lawn, Flint's only suburb, a development of curving streets with modern rambler homes and trimmed shrubbery and tidy curbs... The landscaping flowed to a sidewalk that curved up to the one-story brick house. In front, facing the street, was a large, low picture window. Billy could see right inside the living room. There was a big TV, a sunburst clock on the wall, lots of pale couches and chairs, a china cabinet. The Langen house and yard looked cleaner, even, than the coach's place.

Further exposing how different Billy's life is from the suburbanites, Billy leaves the Green Lawn neighborhood and drives straight to the city jail to visit his father.

These divisions between rich and poor pervade the novel and prove a linking theme to the events that occur.

Social Sensitivity

The novel deals forthrightly with the troubles most deeply imbedded in American mythology: poverty, the waning life of American farmers, freedom versus law and order, and racism. In addition, Weaver deals directly with the usual struggles of the average teenager: unrequited love, high school rivalries, and puberty. Weaver is at his most exciting, narratively, when he intermingles the universal struggles of teens with those social issues that are deeply American. For instance, the most prominent social issue addressed in the novel is the basic class struggle between the economically wealthy teens and the povertystricken farm kids.

Billy and his family come from a long line of farmers; they are proud of their work, sure of their abilities, and overwhelmingly aware of their place in society. Every encounter with the townsfolk, for both Billy and Abner, is a brush with anger and humiliation and righteousness. The Baggs are so deeply rooted in the sense of themselves as poor, and therefore somehow "less" than the wealthier people in the town of Flint, that they consistently assume that everyone else views them in the same way that they view themselves. Suzy Langen, daughter of the judge who sentenced Abner to jail, walks over to speak to Billy at the beach, and Billy asks why she is working with the mentally handicapped people. She tells him that she enjoys them, and Billy explains that he assumed that someone like Suzy would not have to work. She retorts that she does not like to ask her father for money. Billy has no choice but to tend to all of the chores on the farm when his father goes to jail, and even when his father is on the farm, summer equals full-time farm work for Billy.

The idea of working because someone wants to, choosing to work as opposed to not working, is an unimaginable possibility to a boy who has worked his whole life.

In school, the children divide themselves according to economic strata, and the tension between wealthy and the poor is constantly palpable. Weaver consistently points out the fact that the poorer high schoolers eat lunch together, in a separate section of the cafeteria from the wealthier students, and that even on the baseball team, the kids are divided by economic class. The baseball coach keeps the peace—even doing so by physical restraint, at times. The wealthy kids are unendingly cruel toward the poor, making direct jibes about the state of poverty the Indians and farm kids live in, as if they could help being born into their present circumstances. The novel centralizes on the idea of taking what you know of your life, accepting it as the present state of things, but realizing that anything is alterable, that fate is a matter of making choices and working toward one's goals. If anything, the novel is a mirror of the American dream, a totem to the Golden Rule.

Family hardships and the actions of his father wrest Billy away from his dream of playing baseball throughout the story. He does not complain; it is part of life. He is an exceptional boy, in that he accepts his father as he is and does not retaliate or react against his father. Perhaps this, too, is reflective of the life of a farming family—that it is a necessary concomitant to survival that they team up and keep the farm running,

forcing a sense of community and building a proprietary bond that transcends the little harms that family members wreak upon one another.

Classic issues of adolescence also riddle the novel; Farm Team is replete with the struggles of puberty-cracked voices, unearthed desires for the opposite sex, struggles with parents, searches for self-identity in the shadow of one's parents; no rock of youth is left unturned. Billy struggles at high school because he is poor, and the wealthy town boys make a point to try to denigrate him. He retaliates through violence, despite repeatedly being told by Coach Anderson that it will not behoove him to fight back. However, it is important to note that many times, when Billy is insulted by his wealthy rival, King Kenwood, he does bite his tongue and ignore King. He knows that his nature is that of a vengeful being, but he also knows, from past experience, that getting angry and reacting violently does not help him to "get even." This struggle to press on, to shed the violent tendencies instilled in him by his rash father, is a watershed for Billy; his conscience grows as he matures.

In creating a baseball team open to any and all members of the community and migrant workers—a truly indiscriminate tribe—Weaver moves past the class consciousness issue and opens the novel up to issues of race and self-identity. Who Billy is, no longer is defined by what he does not have, but by how welcoming he is to all of the motley crew that show up to play baseball on his farm. When a rusted station wagon arrives full to the brim with a Mexican family, Billy is presented with a completely new situation; he literally never has been privy to Mexicans, likening them to the Indians with whom he is constantly in contact. They try to speak Spanish to him, and he rebuffs their advances at first, pretending not to be interested in playing with the Mexican boys his age. As soon as he recognizes how talented the Mexican boys are at baseball, race, background, and language barriers all dissolve in his enthusiasm for the game. The same thing happens with all of the "players" who come to the Baggs farm to play on the "come one, come all" farm team. The love of the game and the community created by teamwork dissolve differences, and what emerges is a true ideal of the American melting pot.

Literary Qualities

Weaver chooses a third-person omniscient narrator to tell the story in Farm Team.

What is interesting about his narrator, however, is that the narrator speaks, at least part of the time, in the colloquialism of the characters. In fact, and silly as it sounds, the narrator is not too unlike the voice-over narrator on the old television show The Dukes of Hazzard. The narrator lends a richer shape to the story by speaking the language of the characters. For instance, the narrator often describes the characters' use of certain colorful language by stating things like, "Gina called him something unprintable."

The reader is drawn out of the action of the tale and reminded that he is reading a story.

By doing this, the narrator creates a conspiracy of sorts with the reader, drawing him in and making him feel that he is a part of the very telling of the story. To some extent, the technique hearkens back to the ancient methods of storytelling, when a storyteller gathered others around a campfire and related his story, making eye contact and soliciting responses, thereby creating community. Weaver's narrative techniques serve as an eyewink to the reader, colluding with the reader and inviting the reader to care about the story being told.

It is clear that Weaver loves language; he moves easily between the slang of the towns' people and rich, pictorial descriptions of the landscape and farm life. During an early springtime baseball practice, the narrator creates a vivid picture of the scene: Fielding practice continued as a light snow began to fall. At first the flakes were fine, sharp, glinting little particles, and the boys kept throwing, catching. Slowly the snow thickened to long, lazy flakes, like goose down falling from a thousand broken pillows. The boys caught huge snowflakes on their tongues and made fake baseballs; when the coach wasn't looking, they fired them at each other. They also practiced long, hooking slides in the slippery snow.

Soon, from the outfield Billy had to squint to see home plate. The coach and Butch Redbird were dim silhouettes in the slowdancing, wavering whiteness.

Weaver's language allows readers of all proclivities to be engaged; the baseball lovers feel the energy and desires inherent in playing the game; the strong narrative will keep non-sports fans engaged; and the vivid depictions of farm life likely will interest readers of all genres. The more specific the moment that Weaver describes, the more lyrical his language becomes. For instance, he describes Raul Gonzalez's ball-playing in the following manner: "Raul—take two." The coach hit a sharp bouncer to Raul's right. Raul speared it, spun left and sidearmed the ball to second. There Jesus, in perfect timing, floated over second base, where he caught the ball, dipped a foot to graze the bag, then rifled the ball on to first.

The picture is vivid; even a non-fan of baseball can see the scene, and perhaps even begin to see the beauty and grace in baseball that its players see. Interspersed

throughout the novel are such mental photographs, of landscape, of the texture of the farming community, of the quotidian lives of the people. It is clear that Weaver has a strong affinity for the Midwest farmland communities, and this affinity lends a truth and depth to the novel that readers can appreciate.

Weaver also employs repetition throughout Farm Team. The repetition serves variant purposes, among them humor and a fluidity of language that gives a sense of rhythm to the characters' lives.

The ending Weaver has invented reiterates the narrator's power of omniscience: Weaver takes the scene that he has been describing, that of a baseball game being played out on a farm, and describes it from every imaginable perspective. The dreamy quality of Weaver's snapshot approach to description rounds out the story by taking it to a more universal level.

And the big game? How did it proceed?

The answer depends upon your point of view. Consider, for example, the airplane pilot. As the players took the field, high above the Baggs farm was a Beechcraft Queen Aire,... The pilot turned his head, then banked his plane for a closer look . . .

At ground level, the cows leaned on the outfield fence and switched their tails, and quivered the skin on their backs .. . their job was to make milk, which they did well, and anything beyond making milk, anything new to look at, was a bonus .. . The little kids playing hide-and-seek among the rows of parked cars .. . In one of the cars were the Haroldson girl and the Keefner boy, both sixteen, locked in a French kiss .. . The small, old ladies of the Lutheran Auxiliary were too busy to keep score.

The story takes on a panoramic, movielike quality; one can almost see the film panning over the crowds and zeroing in on each vignette. It is powerful storytelling, and with film as influential as it is on the youth generation, Weaver's style should have mass appeal.

Themes and Characters

Billy Baggs is a quintessential fourteenyear-old: mistrusting of authority, begrudging in his attitude toward his father, uncertain about his feelings for girls but eager to figure it out, moody, brash, and touched still by an innocence that allows events to constantly surprise him. Billy's economic status as a poor farm boy defines and separates him from many of his classmates and creates rivalries with the wealthier boys. In addition, the fact that Billy is poorer than many of the other people in his community creates a chip on Billy's shoulder that makes him brash and sullen. However, this sullenness is buoyed by Billy's genuine kindness toward his mother and toward the family's farm animals, and further tempered by the dedication Billy shows to his jailed father, his farm team, and to the farm itself. He does his work, and he does not complain, nor does he take any guff from anyone in town.

In many ways, Billy is like all other teenagers, but he is heavily laden with responsibility for taking care of his family's farm, which gives the readers a chance to abate judgment on some of the stubbornness and anger that Billy exhibits toward other characters. He is constantly "flipping the finger" at anything and anyone who deigns to look sideways at him or tell him something he does not want to hear. Yet he is just as suddenly protective of Heather Erickson, a sixteen-year-old neighbor who recently had a baby out of wedlock and is struggling with her sudden thrusting from adolescence into motherhood. At the swimming hole, Billy stayed close to Heather and the baby . . . Billy didn't like the way Heather stood there on the rocks, holding the baby; something about her and the baby and the water gave him the willies ... Then again, he didn't imagine it was easy, having a kid at age sixteen.

Billy is a beautifully realized character.

He judges quickly, but amends judgments just as quickly, as with the Gonzalez sons, who climb out of the jalopy of an old station wagon, but then play ball adeptly. By the second time Billy sees them, he has forgot ten any differences between himself and the Mexican boys and sees only the strong strains of talent for the game of baseball.

Baseball serves as a bridge for many of the characters in the novel. In fact, it is the game of baseball that is the catalyst for most of the positive events that occur in the novel: unexpected friendships develop, neighbors begin to warm to each other, hermetic country folk come out of the woodwork and join the community, Billy's mother gains a sense of empowerment, and Billy gets to play baseball, which is his greatest love.

An interesting aspect of Farm Team is that, despite having to take on adult roles—caring for the farm, looking out for his mother—Billy has two prominent adult male role models: his father and his baseball coach. His father, Abner, for all his quicktempered obstinacy and anger, figures prominently in Billy's life, both physically and emotionally. Billy stays at the car lot with his father, despite knowing that his father is going to destroy the property in revenge for being sold a "lemon," and that Billy himself will get into trouble; he refuses to "rat" on his father to the police and also defends his father

against the jibes of his classmates; he visits his father in jail fairly often; and he does all of the work that the two of them— three of them, if the work that Billy's dead brother used to do is considered—after his father goes to jail. Billy is intensely loyal to his father in the face of little display of affection or fatherly conduct.

Abner Baggs is a study in class consciousness. With his every action, he teaches Billy to resent and distrust authority and the wealthy class. Abner's very first act in the book is his total destruction of the car lot. When neither the lot owner nor the law will help, Abner finally takes matters into his own hands in a rash act of extreme vandalism, and it lands him back in front of the judge with whom he already has formed a negative history. His actions also cause considerable trouble for Billy, whom he intimidates into staying with him to vandalize the car lot. Abner acts on his anger, and it is clear that Billy has learned that trait from his father. After Abner crushes all the vehicles and the office at the car lot, the sheriff offers him a way out: "Afternoon, Abner," the sheriff said.

"How do, Harvey," Abner said. He remained in his seat.

"Trouble with the Cat?"

"Nope."

"Like maybe the steering hydraulics broke or something?" Billy heard the sheriff whisper something sharply to Abner.

Abner shook his head sideways. "Nope," Abner said. "I keep my equipment in good repair."

"Maybe you just lost control of it?" the sheriff said.

"I'm the best Cat skinner in Flint County, you know that, Harvey."

The sheriff sighed and tipped back his cap. "Well, don't say I didn't try to help you, Abner," he said.

Proud and angry, like father like son.

Right after Abner is sentenced to jail, Billy allows his emotions to dictate his actions, much like his father. Just outside the hearing room, Billy gets in a fight with the crowd after a "Told you so" from King Kenwood, the wealthy rival pitcher on the local baseball team.

Anger is a prevalent theme in Farm Team, and the havoc that it consistently wreaks is a clear lesson in the danger of letting one's emotions cloud one's decision-making process.

The other prominent father figure for Billy, Coach Anderson, is a classic foil for Billy, acting as the voice of reason as well as the voice of dreams. It is the coach who consistently steps into situations in which Billy is about to get into a fight and stops the

mayhem. He is also a vehicle through which Weaver tells the background information of the novel—through the conversations between Billy and the coach. Billy is a promising baseball star, a boy with an incredible arm, and so it behooves Coach Anderson to protect his possible prodigy.

However, it is clear from the extra steps that Coach Anderson takes to help Billy—he posts bail for Abner—that he truly is interested in the boy's welfare. This caring sets Billy's situation apart from the majority of the demographic in which Billy resides. For most poverty-stricken farm boys, there is no Coach Anderson. The coach is a major force in Billy's life, encouraging Billy past his obstinacy, bailing him out of trouble time and time again. From this persistence, the reader gains a notion of the strength of Billy's talents as a ball player; as well as a notion of the strength of character that shines through Billy's tough exterior.

Billy's relationship with his mother is as illuminating to Billy's character as is his relationship with his father. Billy is utterly supportive of his mother; he dotes on her in many ways. Their relationship displays Billy's sense of honor, honoring her authority despite the fact that he is running the farm, taking on the role of landowner and adult. Billy's positive relationship with his mother—they are as much friends as mother/ son—likely fuels Billy's generous attitude toward the few girls who feature in the novel. He is gruff toward them, in the natural way that a fourteen-year-old boy is gruff toward females, but he displays genuine kindness that is not common in an adolescent male. Billy is no longer a prototypical male teenager. Although he often acts like a teen, dealing with teen lust and a teen's temper, rashness, and gripping desires, as the novel progresses and Billy's relationships with other characters deepen in the reader's eyes, it is clear that Billy is living the American dream—persevering in the midst of poverty and bad luck and misfortune.

Topics for Discussion

1. What are some hardships that a farm owner faces that do not exist for city dwellers?

2. What is the significance of baseball to Billy Baggs's life?

3. What does it take to become a serious baseball player?

4. How does Billy Baggs's life in Flint, Minnesota, compare with your own?

Does living in a rural community seem comfortable or scary? Exciting or dull?

5. Billy is fourteen years old and runs his family's farm. Is this a common way of living? What is or may be exceptional about his lifestyle?

6. Do you think that Billy had good reasons for staying with his father when his father decides to destroy the A-l Cars lot?

7. Discuss Billy's relationship with his father. Is it a conventional relationship?

8. Characterize Billy. Consider how he sees his life as compared with how others might view it.

9. Characterize Billy's relationship with his mother. How does it compare to his relationship with his father?

10. Why does Billy seem to view everyone he meets with mistrust? What circumstances of his life might have led him to feel that way?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How does one become a professional baseball player? What might it be like to live on the road, playing in different places? What are some of the sacrifices one has to make?

2. How realistically does the author depict rural American life? Could this story have taken place in real life?

3. What is it like to live on a farm? What might be different about one's schedule and lifestyle choices for a farmer than for city dwellers?

4. How does Billy deal with his feelings toward his father? Is there a better way in which Billy might have tried to communicate with him?

5. How do different people deal with the death of loved ones? Is there a "best" way to cope with death?

184 Farm Team 6. Have you ever been to a jail? What is it like to serve jail time?

7. What are some of the problems facing American farmers today?

For Further Reference

Carton, Debbie. Review of Farm Team. Booklist (September 1, 1995): 66. A brief but positive review of the novel.

Review of Farm Team. Publishers Weekly (June 26, 1995): 108. A complimentary appraisal of the novel's strengths.

"Will Weaver." In Contemporary Authors, Vol. 143. Detroit: Gale, 1994, pp. 483-84.

An overview of Weaver's life and work.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Farm Team is the second novel in a trilogy about Billy Baggs. The first of the three, Striking Out, begins with Billy at thirteen years of age picking up a stray baseball that has landed outside the right-field fence and firing a perfect throw to the catcher. The story follows Billy as he joins the team and deals with the difficulty of farm life, his struggle to deal with the tragic death of his brother, and the strained relationships with the boys on the team who come from a wealthier economic class.

The third novel in the trilogy is Hard Ball.

Billy develops a crush on a pretty classmate, who is both lifelong friend to his wealthy sports rival, King Kenwood, and daughter of the judge who long ago unfairly jailed Billy's father. While suffering the backlash of his father's lingering bitterness, Billy discovers that he and King are vying not only for the same girl's attention but also for the same star position on their freshman baseball team. An innovative coach devises a plan to help the boys decide their futures as athletes and possibly resolve the struggles in their respective households.

Other novelists writing in the same vein as Weaver include Don Rodabaugh and Alden R. Carter. Rodabaugh's memoirs, Now When I Was a Kid, relates what it was like growing up on a Kansas farm during the Depression and includes heart-breaking stories as well as highly amusing anecdotes about the nitty-gritty of farm life. In Bull Catcher, Carter writes about two friends, Neil "Bull" Larsen and Jeff Hansen, who view the world from the telescope of baseball. The boys doggedly pursue their dreams of baseball fame, along the way dealing with love and friendship and rivalry. When Jeff receives a scholarship and Bull does not, the boys must find a way to understand how the experiences and gifts in one's life come in unexpected packages, and that life follows anything but an expected path.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996