The Universal Baseball Association Short Guide

The Universal Baseball Association by Robert Coover

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Characters

Most of the characters in The Universal Baseball Association are extensions of Henry's "protean" imagination. As indicated in the previous section, Damon is the ideal and Jock is a sacrificial victim. Only Hettie the prostitute, Zifferblatt the boss, and Lou Engle the friend, exist independent of Henry's imagination. Lou, a gourmet, is an interesting variation on Henry's quest for beauty and radiance. His zest for fine food is similar to Henry's need for his game to bring excitement into a dull life. After Damon's death, Henry invites Lou to join him in playing the game, but this last effort to share his experience with another person is a disaster because Lou cannot invest in the game the kind of seriousness Henry does. Instead of attending to the dice, Lou, like characters in The Public Burning (1977), talks about the plot of a film he has seen, again indicating Coover's interest in the degree to which cinema shapes our ability to respond to experiences. Henry's only experiment in sharing his creation ends when Lou spills pizza over the game board.

The most interesting characters of The Universal Baseball Association, however, have no existence independent of Henry's imagination. These are the heroes and legends of his game, the folklorists like Sandy Shaw and pranksters like Long Lew Lydell. Many of the managers, in their responses to Damon's death in year LVI, represent extremes of Henry's philosophical range. Barney Bancroft, "the old philosopher," attempts a calm and reasoned acceptance of a random event that must have meaning, thus recalling the main themes of The Origin of the Brunists (1966). Later Barney becomes League historian and eventually succeeds the sinister Fenimore McCaffree, a version of George Orwell's Big Brother in Nineteen Eighty-four (1949), as League chancellor but is assassinated in year LVII. With Bancroft's assassination comes the end of the Association's age of reason, although his book The UBA in the Balance remains a symbol of that era. Another manager, Pappy Rooney, joking about Damon's death and, while terrified of his own mortality, cruelly reminding others of theirs, represents the cynic.

Yet another, Hellborn Melbourne Trench, hurt and intimidated by Pappy's cynical remarks and taking refuge in drinking to ward off his fear of failure, represents the decent man worn down by defeat and trying to find resources to enable him to deal with frustration. When his dismal team fires him after LVI, Mel opens a bar.

Finally, Sycamore Flynn, the manager of Casey's team, is the alter ego Henry selects. Flynn undergoes a night of terror, but opts for the dutiful, pragmatist's response: he will play it out. So does his creator.

Social Concerns/Themes

At its most obvious level The Universal Baseball Association is concerned with the inability of the "real" world to live up to the aesthetic and heroic expectations of an imaginative person. Finding no excitement or radiance in the accounting firm for which he works, on the streets he walks, or in the bars he frequents, the hero retreats into a fantasy world his own imagination has created around a board baseball game he has invented. By the end of the novel, the hero has been fired from his job as an accountant for insubordination, inattentiveness, and absenteeism; he has insulted his only friend and can no longer hang out in his favorite bar. In short, he is completely isolated from his world. The intensity of his game has overwhelmed him. If readers sympathize with Henry as a man who says all he wants from life is the "magic of excellence," it is easy to read the novel as a satiric criticism of those institutions — work, politics, the general human community — that endorse and encourage mediocrity and frustrate any quest for excellence. Such institutions, represented in the novel by Henry's employer, Mr. Zifferblatt, conspire unwittingly to drive the creative person insane and to force the Henry Waughs of this world to retreat into their own imaginations.

Provocative as such a concept may be, much more than this is at stake in the "Universal" Baseball Association.

The novel is about those general or universal systems and paradigms people may create to give order, radiance, and harmony to their world and about the threats such systems may ultimately pose. Over the years Henry has sought in many games relief from the tedium of daily existence (critics often and appropriately cite Johan Huizinga's theories about the intensity of play in his classic Homo Ludens, which is mentioned in Coover's last chapter, as a background text for the The Universal Baseball Association), but it is in the very suitability of his baseball game for his purposes that its greatest dangers lie. Like the hero of "The Second Son," Henry does not particularly like real baseball, with all its spitting and swearing; he likes the game's symmetry, what he calls its "balance" and "accountability," an actuarial probability that can be synthesized statistically by correlating possible dice combinations with potential baseball situations.

The appeal and danger of this baseball game over other board games Henry has created lie in its mythic potential. Just as the institution of baseball has legendary and mythic signification for American culture (the Ruths, Gehrigs, Dimaggios, Ripkins, Roses and Giamattis are heroes, disappointments, and victims larger than life), the game Henry invents demands that the raw data on which it is based be fleshed out into the status of legend.

Henry's imagination, which critic Neil Berman perceptively calls "protean," seizes upon the data his dice and charts provide to personalize these events. His alter ego Sandy Shaw, a former Association player, writes country ballads about the game's lore and legendary figures. In his own persona, but later through alter ego Barney Bancroft, Henry writes "the Book," a synthetic narrative history of the fiftysix seasons of Universal

Baseball Association play. This in itself suggests how fertile Henry's imagination is. For his own creation he performs the anthropological roles of bard and systematic historian.

The danger of such a system, with its emphasis on excellence and heroics, is that its legendary figures have charismatic appeal for their creator. Although the players are mere inventions of Henry's imagination, names and human attributes he has assigned to statistical sets, he begins to care too much about certain of these figures, and often confuses these creations with real people. For instance, a retired second baseman named Jake Bradley opened a bar after, in the idiom of Shaw's ballad, he accepted that "I'm all washed up, boys." Henry often calls the owner of the neighborhood bar he frequents "Jake," and Pete (the owner's real name) accepts this as a private joke. Toward the end of the novel, however, Jake, the character in the game, dies. Now Henry must find a new bar because to return to Pete's would challenge his game's reality in that Pete (Jake) would still be tending bar in the "real" world. Henry alters his literal behavior by finding a bar operated by someone he identifies as Mel Trench, recently fired as manager of one of the Association's teams.

Thus Henry's dilemma is that the real world is too drab for him, whereas the world of his imagination can confound him because, while supplying the radiance he wants, it may become a substitute for the world he has to live in. This dilemma is compounded, and Coover's theme is enriched because, as his name implies, J. Henry Waugh (suggesting Jehovah, an English version of YHWH, the name several Old Testament prophets called God; transcribed versions omitted the vowels) has a godlike relation with the world he has created. At a third level of meaning, The Universal Baseball Association treats the theme of God's possible relationships with his creation. This issue is the focus of Henry's relationship with two of his created characters, Damon Rutherford and Jock Casey.

As the novel begins, Damon is on his way to a perfect game and his sixth straight win. For Henry this is a rejuvenation, perhaps even a salvation, for his league. It is in its fifty-sixth season (Henry is also 56 years old), but the excellence of the early years is gone.

Henry has even considered abandoning his game, but this new hero, this "selfenclosed yet participating mystery," has revitalized Henry's interest, and therefore the reason for the league's existence. Damon's successfully completing the perfect game renews Henry's sexuality. He plays some ball with a prostitute, but instructs Hettie to call him Damon; Coover thus parodies myths of the gods' assuming non-divine forms to ravish human women (Zeus as swan, bull, river; after Damon's death, Henry assumes the form of Sewanee Law, an aging Association legend, to frolic with Hettie).

Damon brings new life to the game and its creator because Henry likes him too much. He, as God, begins to meddle with his creation's laws. Because he wants to see Damon pitch before baseball logic would suggest that the youth should play ("real" pitchers require three or four days' rest between starts), Henry invents a reason to put Damon on the mound; it is Damon's father's fifty-sixth birthday — but the rationale follows rather than precedes the decision to start Damon. To minimize the opposition, Henry has the opposing manager, another alter ego, substitute rookie Jock Casey for the ace pitcher

scheduled for the day. Henry-as-God has therefore interfered with the logic of his own creation to make it confirm with his desires. His crisis, and that of his Association, occurs when the dice dictate that Damon is killed by a pitch thrown by Casey.

He briefly considers ending the creation that has brought him so much pain but decides to play out the season to see what happens. His opportunity to interfere again occurs when Casey, who has been ruthlessly effective since killing Damon, faces a situation in which a throw of dice coming up 6-6-6 results in the pitcher's being struck fatally by a line drive. Coincidentally, the batter is the catcher to whom Damon pitched. Fully aware that this is a sacrifice and even a murder (if a name and set of human attributes defining a statistical abstraction can be murdered), Henry murmurs "I'm sorry, boy" and deliberately sets down the die in a fashion that guarantees Casey's death.

This death is a sacrifice that ensures Henry's unconditional commitment to his game. Although Casey has been portrayed as the villain he is in Henry's eyes for killing Damon, the initials Coover gives this character (JC) are suggestive. He too is a "second son," as Damon was; Henry deliberately kills Casey to allow his creation to survive.

By the end of the novel, readers have completely lost track of chronological time. One hundred seasons of Association games have been played since Jock's sacrifice and rival political and religious factions have arisen within the Association, split on questions of the divinity of Casey and/or Rutherford and on the meaning, if any, of their deaths. Henry, who exercised his god-like power to make creation serve his interests, then again to save the creation he had compromised, is nowhere to be seen; in the final chapter, the narrator refers to Henry as Dame Society, and a cynical player wonders if athletes must perform a mysterious ritual for "that old whore." That same player indicates Coover's concern with the ontology of religious systems when he responds to doubts about whether Henry even exists with the comment that he has "come to the conclusion that God exists and he is a nut."

Techniques

This is technically Coover's most brilliant achievement in the novel form, rivalling his stories "The Babysitter" and "A Pedestrian Accident" in originality and effectiveness. Coover's technique is to blur deliberately the distinctions readers can make between the world Henry inhabits and the one he creates. As critics often note, when the novel opens, readers seem to learn of the description of a literal baseball game — as if they were at a ballpark.

When the hero steps out to get food and beer, readers must change their perspective; now perhaps they are watching someone watch a game on television, even if the team or player names are unfamiliar (most mimetic baseball novels, like Bernard Malamud's The Natural (1952), use recogniz able teams); eventually, while Henry eats his sandwich and handles the dice, readers realize what kind of game is being played.

Similar confusion about which is more real, the world Henry inhabits or that he creates, is deliberately created by the author throughout the novel, so that readers experience the same epistemological confusion Henry does. As the book proceeds, the created world impinges more and more heavily on the experienced one. After Damon's death, Henry goes to Lou's to visit and, announcing a "death" listens to classical music; quickly Lou's apartment becomes a "cathedral," and the strains of Purcell and Mozart become funeral music. Leaving the apartment/cathedral in despair, Henry goes to Pete's (Jake's) bar for a wake, where Association ballplayers congregate. He apparently creates quite a scene, for Pete later comments on how boisterous Henry was, presumably acting out some of the antics of his ballplayers as he got drunk. Perhaps Henry sang Shaw's bawdy "Ballad of Long Lew Lydell" for the real customers.

Coover's brilliant final chapter completes the design and fulfills the theme of the novel. Henry, the god/man creator of his universe, is absent. The players assemble to fulfill some kind of ritual, the exact nature of which is a mystery to some of them and to the reader. It seems to be an All-Star game, but the implications are tribal and mythic. The best rookies are gathered on "Damonsday" to enact again "the Parable of the Duel," a synthesis of the killing of Damon and that of Jock. The rookies, representing a wide range of theological and philosophical options from faith to doubt to nihilism, debate what the ritual is, whether it has meaning, whether Henry exists, whether Jock was evil and Damon good or vice versa. As they debate the initiation ceremony, hints are dropped suggesting that it may involve some kind of sacrifice. Hardy Ingram, a descendant of the catcher whose batted ball killed Casey and who enacts Damon's role today, feels himself actually becoming Damon; but who takes Jock's role remains a secret, and the book ends when Hardy/Damon, poised and cool on the mound, recognizes that participation in the process is more important than whatever meaning people may choose to attach to it: "It's not a trial . . . not even a lesson. It's just what it is." Coover's second novel, however, is "what it is" and much more.

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