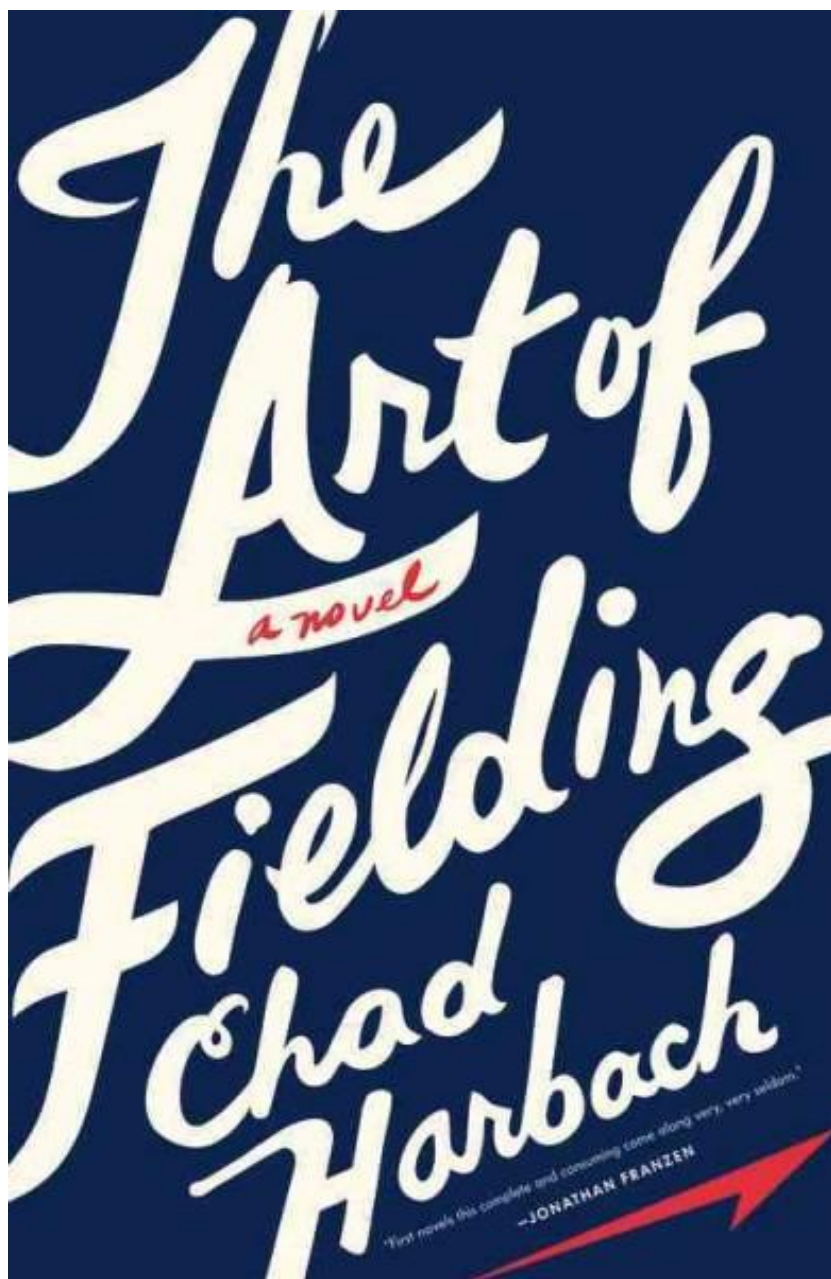


About the book...



At Westish College, a small school on the shore of Lake Michigan, baseball star Henry Skrimshander seems destined for big league stardom. But when a routine throw goes disastrously off course, the fates of five people are upended.

Henry's fight against self-doubt threatens to ruin his future. College president Guert Affenlight, a longtime bachelor, has fallen unexpectedly and helplessly in love. Owen Dunne, Henry's gay roommate and teammate, becomes caught up in a dangerous affair. Mike Schwartz, the Harpooners' team captain and Henry's best friend, realizes he has guided Henry's career at the expense of his own. And Pella Affenlight, Guert's daughter, returns to Westish after escaping an ill-fated marriage, determined to start a new life.

As the season counts down to its climactic final game, these five are forced to confront their deepest hopes, anxieties, and secrets. In the process they forge new bonds, and help one another find their true paths. Written with boundless intelligence and filled with the tenderness of youth, *The Art of Fielding* is an expansive, warmhearted novel about ambition and its limits, about family and friendship and love, and about commitment--to oneself and to others.

About the author...



Reviews

Booklist/**Starred Review**/

Sports fiction has a built-in plot problem. The drama usually rides on a team's success or failure as it moves through a season to the Big Game. The team either overcomes adversity and wins, following in the cliché-strewn tradition of everything from *The Bad News Bears* to *Rocky*, or it loses, a literarily more resonant route, to be sure, but inevitably unsatisfying if the reader has become a fan along the way. First-novelist Harbach finds an inventive and thoroughly satisfying solution to the Big Game problem, and it works because the reader doesn't live or die with what happens on the field. This sprawling multiple-story saga follows the coming-of-age and

Chad Harbach grew up in Wisconsin and was educated at Harvard and the University of Virginia. He is a cofounder and coeditor of *n+1*.

midlife crises of five characters at Westish College, a small liberal-arts school in Wisconsin. At the center of it all is Henry Skrimshander, a shortstop of phenomenal ability who has led the school's baseball team to unprecedented heights. Then a wildly errant throw from Henry's usually infallible arm provides the catalyst for game-changing events not only in Henry's life but also in those of his roommate, Owen Dunne; his best friend and mentor, the team's catcher, Mike Schwartz; the school's president, Guert Affenlight; and the president's daughter, Pella. In an immediately accessible narrative reminiscent of John Irving, Harbach (cofounder of the popular literary journal *n+1*) draws readers into the lives of his characters, plumbing their psyches with remarkable psychological acuity and exploring the transformative effect that love and friendship can have on troubled souls. And, yes, it's a hell of a baseball story, too, no matter who wins.

Library Journal

In this deft first novel, a baseball prodigy comes to Westish College, a small school in upper Wisconsin. Henry Skrimshander is recruited by Mike Schwartz, who plays at Westish and recognizes Henry as one of the greatest shortstops ever. Henry's roommate, the pot-smoking, gay, African American Owen Dunne, also joins the team. College president Guert Affenlight develops a passionate crush on Owen, with whom he improbably begins a clandestine relationship. Unfortunately, as

Henry closes in on a fielding milestone, he loses his confidence and falls apart. Guert's long-lost daughter, who has returned to Westish after the collapse of her marriage and hooked up with Mike, tries to help Henry find his throwing arm again. Meanwhile, the ongoing affair between Owen and Guert becomes increasingly difficult to hide as the book climaxes at the Division III national championship. VERDICT Succeeding on many levels, this highly enjoyable and intelligent novel offers several coming-of-age tales set against the background of an exciting and convincing baseball drama. Harbach paints a humorous and resonant portrait of a small college community while effectively portraying the Wisconsin landscape and a lake that provides an almost mystical source of solace and renewal. This should be a popular novel.

BookPage Reviews

A debut swinging for the fences

You don't have to like baseball to savor Chad Harbach's sumptuous debut novel, a wise and tender story of love and friendship, ambition and the cruelty of dashed dreams, featuring an appealing cast of characters. From the day he discovers Henry Skrimshander on a sun-bleached American Legion baseball field, Mike Schwartz is on a mission to turn the gifted shortstop into a major-league-caliber player. Mike, the team captain who's writing his senior thesis on the Stoics and quotes Schiller in his pregame speeches, persuades

Henry to enroll at tiny Westish College, a school with a charming, if eccentric, attachment to Herman Melville that stems from the unearthing of a long-forgotten lecture the novelist gave there in 1880.

Thanks to Mike's obsessive coaching, Henry is on the fast track to a hefty signing bonus, until the day a routine throw to first base sails wide, nearly killing his roommate, outfielder Owen "Buddha" Dunne, probably the only player in baseball history to read Kierkegaard in the dugout. But Owen is much more than a victim of Henry's errant arm. He's the lover of Guert Affenlight, Melville scholar and Westish College president, whose 23-year-old daughter Pella appears on campus, fleeing her brief marriage, and eventually falls into a relationship with Mike Schwartz. The ensuing intricate emotional dances only add to the growing tension as the Westish Harpooners improbably claw their way to the Division III national championship game.

Harbach demonstrates an impressive gift for balancing his exploration of these fragile entanglements with an absorbing, well-plotted story, so we're rooting as hard for the small company of troubled souls as we are for the ragtag Westish nine.

There aren't many books of 500 pages that feel too short. But like a true fan enjoying a game of baseball as it scrolls its leisurely signature across a summer afternoon, there are moments when you will find yourself wishing *The Art of Fielding* would never end. It's that good.

Kirkus Reviews

An amiable, Middle American, baseball-centric coming-of-age tale.

Henry Skrimshander seems bound for nowhere special, and fast. He's good enough out on the field, but not quite good enough for the Majors or the Ivy League; as he knows, "College coaches were like girls: their eyes went straight to the biggest, bulkiest guys, regardless of what those guys were really worth." Through good dumb luck, though, catcher Mike Schwartz discovers Henry and gets him a scholarship at Westish College, a middling but OK school up by Lake Michigan, which, though not of Ivy standing, doesn't lack for cliques and cabals. Henry feels somewhat adrift there, though he's steadied by the odd wisdom of the book that gives Harbach's its title. "Death is the sanction of all that the athlete does," runs one of its apothegms, even though death seems less a part of baseball than of, say, bullfighting. Henry's parents are somewhat more than adrift when they learn that he's bunking with a gay roommate who helpfully buys their son clothes so that he can fit in; their small-town heads are in full swoon, but no more than the school's eccentric president, who decides that he might be in love with one of his students at the time that his divorcee adult daughter returns home to whip up storms of the heart all her own. The tale takes turns reminiscent of *The World According to Garp*, though the influence is incidental; Harbach would seem to owe as much to Twain and

Vonnegut as to anyone else. In the end, nothing ever quite turns out like anyone expects, which, as grown-ups know, is the nature of life. The recognition of that truth can lead novelists and their characters into cynicism or lazy contempt, but Harbach's keep both stiff upper lips and smiles on their faces.

A promising debut—and one guaranteed to draw attention, for it commanded an unusually big advance and will likely be pushed accordingly. Stay tuned.

Publishers Weekly

Recalling works as disparate as Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and Scott Lasser's *Battle Creek*, Harbach's big-hearted and defiantly old-fashioned debut demonstrates the rippling effects of a single baseball gone awry. When college shortstop phenom Henry Skrimshander accidentally beans teammate Owen Dunne with a misplaced throw, it starts a chain reaction on the campus of Westish College, "that little school in the crook of the baseball glove that is Wisconsin." Owen is solicitously visited in the hospital by school president Guert Affenlight, a widower, who falls in love with the seductive gay student, a "serious breach of professional conduct" that sends potentially devastating ripples through the school. Affenlight's daughter, Pella, after a failed marriage in San Francisco, returns to become part of a love triangle with Henry and Mike Schwartz, the team

captain and Henry's unofficial mentor. And just when Henry's hopes of playing for the St. Louis Cardinals come within reach, he suffers a crisis of confidence, even as his team makes a rousing run at the championship. Through it all, Henry finds inspiration in the often philosophically tinged teachings found in *The Art of Fielding* ("Death is the sanction of all that the athlete does"), by a fictional retired shortstop. Harbach manages incisive characterizations of his five main players, even as his narrative, overlong and prone to affectation, tests the reader's patience.

Discussion questions

(<http://www.hachettebookgroup.com>)

1. Does male friendship always involve competition? In what ways? Can men ever be just friends? Are their relationships more competitive than those between women?
2. After a long streak of errorless games, why does Henry lose his once-effortless throw? What has changed in Henry? Do you think this sort of crisis is unique to athletics? Could, say, a painter go through a similar crisis?

3. Harbach never writes from Owen's point of view. In what ways did this affect your understanding of Owen's character? Of his feelings toward Guert? Is their relationship one-sided, or perfectly reciprocal?
4. Mike devotes much of his time and energy to mentoring and helping Henry. Does he give Henry *too* much of his time and energy? Can someone give too much?
5. After hitting Owen and losing his accuracy, Henry immerses himself in grueling physical activity: running the stadium steps, racing Starblind, doing endless chin-ups, swimming in the lake. Why does he do this? Is his body to blame for his throwing problems? Discuss the relationship between the body and the mind in *The Art of Fielding*.
6. Are Pella and Henry in love? What brings them together? Why do they stay together?
7. Guert is decades older than Mike, Henry, Owen, and Pella, but in what ways is he similar to the students, despite his age?

8. "Monomania"—the obsessive pursuit of a single thing—is one of the major themes of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Is it also a major theme of *The Art of Fielding*? If so, for which characters, and in what ways?
9. The athletes talk about sacrificing their bodies to get better, and the "sacrifice bunt" is a baseball term that comes up frequently. Is Henry sacrificing himself when he stops eating? Why? Is his last at bat a sacrifice?
10. Are Mike, Henry, and Pella all striving for perfection? Is perfection possible? Is it worth striving for, even if it's impossible? Why or why not? Do their desires evolve over the course of the novel? In what ways?
11. When Affenlight is confronted about his relationship with Owen, he thinks: "What kind of conversation would they be having if Owen were a girl? Bruce would be using the same legalese, the expression on his face would still be stern, but he'd be pouring himself a scotch. The gleam in his eye would say, *Good for you, Guert. Still got it, eh?*" Do you think this is true? Would you have seen Guert differently?

12. Why does Pella exhume her father's body and bury it in the lake?

13. In Aparicio Rodriguez's *The Art of Fielding*, he writes: "There are three stages: Thoughtless being. Thought. Return to thoughtless being." He adds: "Thoughtless being is attained by everyone, the return to thoughtless being by a very few." What do you think this means? How does it relate to Chad Harbach's book?

14. It has been said that baseball is a metaphor for life. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Readalikes

All Is Forgotten, Nothing Is Lost by Lan

Samantha Chang

At a prestigious writing school, Miranda Sturgis is a tough but respected teacher whose passion inspires two male students and forever influences their lives.

Bernard Blithe is a focused, talented poet who hopes to gain Miranda's professional and personal affections.

Meanwhile, Roman Morris, a wildly gifted but undisciplined poet, harbors an interest in Miranda that is more sensual and spiritual than his classmate's. The

two men set out to win Miranda's heart--even as her presence begins to erode their lives.

The Ask by Sam Lipsyte

An unemployed donations collector is entangled in a strange mystery in *The Ask*. Milo Burke spends his days hunting down Asks--wealthy alumni who might donate to Milo's alma mater and current employer. When the pressure of his job becomes too much for the father and husband, Milo unleashes his anger on an undergrad student. After the university lets him go, Milo learns that a powerful Ask has requested his services. Purdy Stuart was Milo's classmate who made millions during the Internet boom. Now he's willing to donate a large amount of cash to the college, as long as Milo helps him with a delicate task. Will Milo be able to suspend his hate for Purdy long enough to get his job back.

Bang the Drum Slowly by Mark Harris

While this book is considered one of the classic baseball novels, it also works just as well as a novel of male bonding and death. Henry Wiggen, a pitcher for the fictional New York Mammoths, learns that his friend and teammate Bruce Pearson is dying of Hodgkin's disease. The two face the problem together while trying to maintain the rigorous pace of their baseball season. The situation often tests the strength of their friendship, but

ultimately good humor and a positive outlook help them deal with it while trying to win ballgames. This is the second Harris novel featuring Wigger, the first being *The Southpaw*.

Calico Joe by John Grisham

The story begins in 1973 when "Calico Joe" Castle is called up from the minor leagues to play for the Cubs. Calico Joe immediately becomes a star, destroying records and shocking everyone who watches him play. Warren Tracey, the pitcher for the Mets at the time, is an abusive alcoholic watching his life go down the drain. When the Cubs and Mets face each other on the diamond Warren's 11-year-old son, Paul, is watching from the stands. Warren throws a pitch that will ultimately change the trajectory of both Joe's life and his own. Thirty years later Paul wants to put things right and tries to get Warren and Joe to meet with each other

Jack Holmes and His Friend by Edmund White

Edmund White navigates the birth and development of the gay rights movement through the friendship of coworkers Jack Holmes and Will Wright in this novel. Jack, an editorial assistant from the Midwest, is troubled by his feelings for Will, who is an aspiring novelist. Although Will eventually marries a woman, Jack tries to have relationships with both men and

women. Jack even sees a psychiatrist for a time because of his battle to find his true identity. While Jack is trying to find himself, Will finds that he is not as happy as he once was in his marriage. In fact, Will begins cheating on his wife, and it is at this point in their lives that Will and Jack find more common ground than ever.

Lost Memory of Skin by Russell Banks

Celebrated author Russell Banks crafts a complex, sensitive tale of morality and redemption centering on a sex offender called the Kid and his unlikely mentor, a sociologist known as the Professor. After a sexual encounter with a teenager, the Kid is out on probation and living under a bridge with other sexual predators. As the Kid attempts to come to grips with his crime and his uncertain future, he is befriended by the Professor, and the two embark upon a surprising and complicated friendship. The Professor provides financial support in exchange for studying the Kid's crime as part of a research project. But when long-buried secrets from the Professor's past emerge, the roles of benefactor and outcast are suddenly reversed, and both men must contend with a life-changing moral dilemma.

Matters of Honor by Louis Begley

Begley traces a half century friendship that begins in the 1950s at Harvard, involving Sam Standish, the son

of an alcoholic banker; Archibald P. Palmer III, an army brat; and Henry White, a Jewish refugee from Poland. Sam and Archie try to help Henry fit in, and the three friends' subsequent experiences allow Begley to dramatize American class issues and anti-Semitism.

The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes

Tony Webster is retired, divorced, and reasonably happy. He is on good terms with his daughter and his former wife. He believes that he leads a respectable, if not exciting, life. But the arrival of a letter from an attorney changes everything. The unexpected piece of mail brings to Tony's conscience events from the past that he had long ago forgotten or suppressed. Though his school days are far behind him, Tony must now revisit his friendship with former classmate Adrian Finn and reconsider the catastrophic circumstances that forced Adrian down a different path



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