

Springtime hopes

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 13, 2012](#) issue



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The Cubs last won the National League pennant in 1945 and a World Series championship 104 seasons ago in 1908. I have learned to put it all in a theological context and comfort myself with Christian verities such as steadfastness, suffering that builds character, and the hope that always shines like light in the darkness.

There's a rich literature of losing teams suddenly becoming winners when a superstar emerges unexpectedly and lifts his team to new heights. I was introduced to this literature when my mother handed me a copy of *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant*, a 1954 novel by Douglass Wallop that became the smash Broadway musical *Damn Yankees*. Joe Boyd, a long-suffering fan of the Washington Senators, makes a Faustian deal with the devil, becomes a superb player and lifts the lowly Senators to a championship.

Two new books are variations on the theme. In *The Art of Fielding*, by Chad Harbach, Henry Skrimshander is an almost supernaturally gifted shortstop who plays for a small Wisconsin college that's famous for a long-ago relationship with Herman Melville. Harbach has created interesting and peculiar names for his characters and weaves the Melville relationship into the story. The Westish College baseball team is

known as the Harpooners and the main character's name, Skrimshander, is a play on *scrimshaw*, the art of carving intricate designs on whale ivory or whalebone. And how can a reader not love a college president with the name Guert Affenlight and a daughter named Pella?

Henry lifts the hapless Harpooners to lofty heights and attracts the attention of scouts from his beloved St. Louis Cardinals. Then crisis strikes. In a conversation with a psychiatrist, the talk turns to sacrifice bunting, one of the finer points of the game. The psychiatrist asks about the concept of sacrifice and tells Henry: "I found it interesting that you chose to say *Laying down a bunt* the way a person might say *Laying down my life*. You're familiar with this passage from the Gospel of John? *Greater love hath no man . . .*"

In John Grisham's *Calico Joe*, a superstar transforms the 1973 Cubs into an almost-champion team before encountering tragedy. The author tells the story in the voice of a young boy who idolizes Calico Joe and has a troubled relationship with his own father—who happens to be a major league player, as well as the one responsible for Calico Joe's misfortune. It's a good story, with themes of forgiveness and redemption.

This year the real Cubs began dismally in April but are showing signs of improvement. New management has inserted young players in the lineup, and interesting things are beginning to happen. Theo Epstein, the Cubs' new head of baseball operations, was hired away from the Boston Red Sox, which under Epstein won two world championships after decades of futility. Epstein has kindled hope in Chicago. As one of my baseball-loving sons asked recently, "Dad, a young Jewish man coming to Chicago from the East, rumored to be a miracle worker—could he be the savior?"