

REVIEW ESSAY

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Shoeless Joe by W.P. Kinsella. Houghton Mifflin, 1982, 265 pages.

EVERY COUPLE OF years a major commercial publisher tosses a nod toward the more obscure and less blockbusting strains of contemporary fiction, by publishing a wildly unusual novel whose most touted feature is its oddity. These “designated weirdo” books are usually accompanied by a lot of brouhaha, as publishers and critics take the opportunity to point out their alertness to progressive literature, before they go back to pushing books about killer bees attacking major cities and maidens falling in love with rebs and feds in the Civil War. Unfortunately, designated weirdo books often do not quite deserve their publicity over many more challenging and artful experiments. Usually, in fact, they are a lot more fun to talk about than to read; ultimately, some of them are simply not very good. William Wharton’s *Birdy* was such a book three years ago—great idea, great ad copy, nifty cover expressing all kinds of weird potential, but flat prose droning out a story whose peculiar promise never took wing with its title character. In 1982, the touted oddity was W.P. Kinsella’s *Shoeless Joe*. Kinsella, a former UI Writer’s Workshop student, originally spun his tale over twenty pages in “Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa,” a short story published in an anthology of Canadian fiction a few years ago. The story told of an Iowa farmer (named Ray, er, Kinsella) who receives a visitation from a heavenly voice telling him that if he builds a baseball park in his cornfield, Shoeless Joe Jackson and his disgraced Chicago White Sox teammates (they threw the 1919 World Series) will come to play there. He builds, they come, and magic wins the day. An editor at Houghton Mifflin saw the story and asked Kinsella to expand it into a novel. The author was given a \$10,000 award by the publisher as encouragement, and he set about turning twenty pages of rhapsodic wackiness into two hundred and sixty-five pages of rhapsodic wackiness. It has not been a happy expansion. *Shoeless Joe* might serve as a lesson to people who believe that the novel form is the apotheosis of all open-ended stories, and should join Leonard Michaels’ *The Men’s Club* in showing that wonderful story writers are not always equally wonderful

novelists. If there is a publisher out there waiting to tempt Raymond Carver into a “full-length manuscript” (as novels are haughtily called at the expense of stories) then let him take heed. Kinsella’s license to expand has tempted him into all kinds of indulgence and very little magic. The story’s strange potential dies a plodding, overwritten, underthought death over the course of its new length. It’s quite a shame. Kinsella’s new plot devices and characters are not in themselves particularly bad: Farmer Ray, after building his park, receives another visitation encouraging him to go to New England to kidnap J.D. Salinger and “ease his pain,” which he does by hauling him back to Iowa to check out Shoeless Joe and the boys in ghostly action. At the same time, Ray’s brother-in-law is foreclosing on Ray’s farm, while Ray’s adored wife (who does nothing but call him “hon,” wear tight jeans, fornicate impishly, and smell like sunshine) and adored daughter (a precocious tyke of true charm) watch merrily. Fine. But what can Kinsella make of all of this richly assembled material? Not much. There are nice moments here and there, usually moments of rapture and sentiment—over Iowa, over the crinkle-nosed wife, and most of all over baseball, Kinsella’s favorite subject for rhapsody and symbolic homily. (The baseball business is critical. One feels definitely that Kinsella loves the game, and more than anything wanted to write a novel in which this most intriguing of sports could dash and shine and ache and sing and generally reflect grace without the restraints other baseball fiction—usually far more linear—imposes on its magic. The ineffable wholeness of baseball, and the ineffable love of it, should be the soul of this book, as Kinsella would be the first to proclaim. But the baseball of *Shoeless Joe*, for all its liberation from programmatic plotting and its devotion to essence, never bounces, never flies; one is struck by how much more powerfully the mysteries of the game come through in books as mechanically plotted as Mark Harris’s *Bang the Drum Slowly* and Ring Lardner’s *You Know Me, Al.*)

Rapture is simply not enough, especially when a writer ambitiously challenges mainstream conventions with his wits. Where novelists such as Kurt Vonnegut and Richard Brautigan make necessary interior dramas out of self-referential craziness (as in *Sirens of Titan* or *The Hawkline Monster*) and storytellers such as Michaels establish new realities through a weird focus, Kinsella builds only heaps of scenic drivel and diffusion. The marvel of an idea from which the novel drew its potential strength is unmarshalled, as heavy as a dose of Dreiser on a jag. Kinsella hammers at us ponderously, and ultimately the fact that the material is wacky does not mitigate the dullness of the blows.

Many of the experimental works of fiction to which *Shoeless Joe* can be compared do *not* possess greater ideas, however. These other stories and novels become superior through the genius of their language—the tricks and textures of the word-by-word writing. Alas, here too the expansion of the story has worked against Kinsella. In order to go the distance, he has had

to exaggerate his prose through a mind-boggling use of similes. Almost everything that Kinsella describes is immediately compared to something else, sometimes to two or three things. The relentlessness of this device led me to conduct a quick survey. I counted the similes on thirty pages, took a per-page average, and found that there are just over six similes a page. That's about forty extra pages of text, and more repetitions of the word "like" than you'll hear in even the most beat hip-talk of a Jack Kerouac novel. Are forty pages of similes the difference between a dandy, magical story and a plodding, perplexed novel? Well, they do their part.

It is a shame *Shoeless Joe* is not a better novel. Anytime a writer experiments and a publisher makes an effort to solicit fiction out of the mainstream, they deserve appreciation and support. But experimental writers deserve more and better representation than Kinsella provides, and readers deserve a more intriguing look at the magic of progressive fiction than *Shoeless Joe*.