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The Might Have Been: A Novel by Joseph M. Schuster (review)

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Joseph M. Schuster. *The Might Have Been: A Novel*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2012. 329 pp. Cloth, \$25.00.

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In the opening monologue of Arthur Miller's *After the Fall* (1964), Quentin, reflecting on his decision to leave his job, says to his offstage listener, "I felt I was merely in the service of my own success. It all lost any point. Although I do wonder sometimes if I am simply trying to destroy myself." In the wake of his life's tragedies, Miller's Quentin leaves his career, only to wonder if his decision is one of self-destruction. Not so for Joseph Schuster's Edward Everett Yates. Yates, a late-blooming minor leaguer coming up for his cup of coffee with the 1976 Cardinals, falls victim to his own hubris, only to reflect upon and repeat his mistakes in a life defined by the almos, the should haves, and a string of never-agains. Earning a spot as the starting right fielder in a game against Montreal, Yates sees his future in baseball before him. Hitting for the cycle before the end of the fifth inning of a game destined for a rainout, his entire career hinges on a two-out fly ball to right. Knowing that this catch would be the final play, making the game and his place on the team official, Yates leaps to catch the ball, but gets caught in the chains and suffers a catastrophic knee injury. The injury brings the unofficial game to a close and with it Yates's cycle.

Yates's injury leaves him bedridden—first in the hospital, then in his hotel—isolated and forgotten. The Cardinals move on to their next series, leaving him in Montreal to recover. Isolated, alone, and ultimately forgotten by his team (literally), Yates invites his ex-girlfriend Julie to stay with him. The relationship develops around his vision of a new life. He can make this work this time. He can have a different life. But like Roy Hobbs before him, Yates undermines his own good intentions when he meets Estelle Herron, whose hair is, naturally, red. Thus begins Yates's fall from grace: unfortunate circumstances, poor decisions, and a pattern of questionable behavior and failed relationships. Losing Julie leads to a relationship one year later with Connie. Connie, however, is also no more than a fleeting glimpse at a life Yates almost allows himself to have. The novel jumps from 1977 to 2009, where Connie has become no more than a passing memory: a name Yates can barely recall, a love he no longer clings to.

What Schuster builds in the second half of his novel is something of a familiar story. Yates, older if not wiser, has grown into the seasoned manager of a minor-league-affiliate team whose memories are as untrustworthy as his knees. Names of players, statistics, cities, dates—all become a blur, as the collection of *Sporting News* he has assembled through the years get flooded in the

basement of his home. The past, crossed and forgotten, comes back into view, and Yates tries to accomplish for his players what he never could accomplish himself—even if only on the minor-league scale. The story of what could have been, what might have been, is compelling. In the realm of novels that use baseball as a metaphor for life, *The Might Have Been* ranks high, with familiar images woven together with the agony of watching something so precious slip away from a character who, but for the grace of God, could have been *me*. Schuster knows his audience.

Though the novel may recall many themes familiar to the seasoned baseball fiction audience, Schuster breathes new life into the genre through his use of sound. From the familiar organ sounds of the ballpark to the “slap of the ball into leather at perhaps the instant his foot [meets] the bag” (11), Schuster transports the audience into the ballpark and into Yates’s life. The more Yates learns to see things differently, the sounds that surround him are the sounds that ground him in the reality that Schuster has carefully crafted. Where the familiar sights of a ballpark become the unfamiliar world of the professional, the sounds remain the same, both to Yates and to anyone who has ever spent a summer day playing catch. To appreciate *The Might Have Been* is to appreciate the little details about life and baseball: the sights and sounds that escape if you don’t pay attention. With enough detail for a casual fan to appreciate the action on the field, yet with enough nuance for a seasoned fan of the game, Schuster’s novel is one of those rare gems that reaches out to all fans. Schuster’s novel is, ultimately, a moving testament to choice: the decisions we make, on the field as in life, can change the way things play out. The sights and sounds encountered along the way, like the people that weave in and out of our lives, become the backdrop upon which life plays out.

Dorothy Seymour Mills. *Drawing Card: A Baseball Novel*. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2012. 261 pp. Paper, \$25.00.

Tim Morris

Drawing Card: A Baseball Novel is a historical novel that asks a question for the sake of argument: if a woman signed a contract to play professional baseball, and then found her opportunity denied by a baseball commissioner solely on the grounds of her sex, how might she react? The question isn’t entirely a “what if”; two such contracts were annulled in real life, in 1931 and 1952. “I