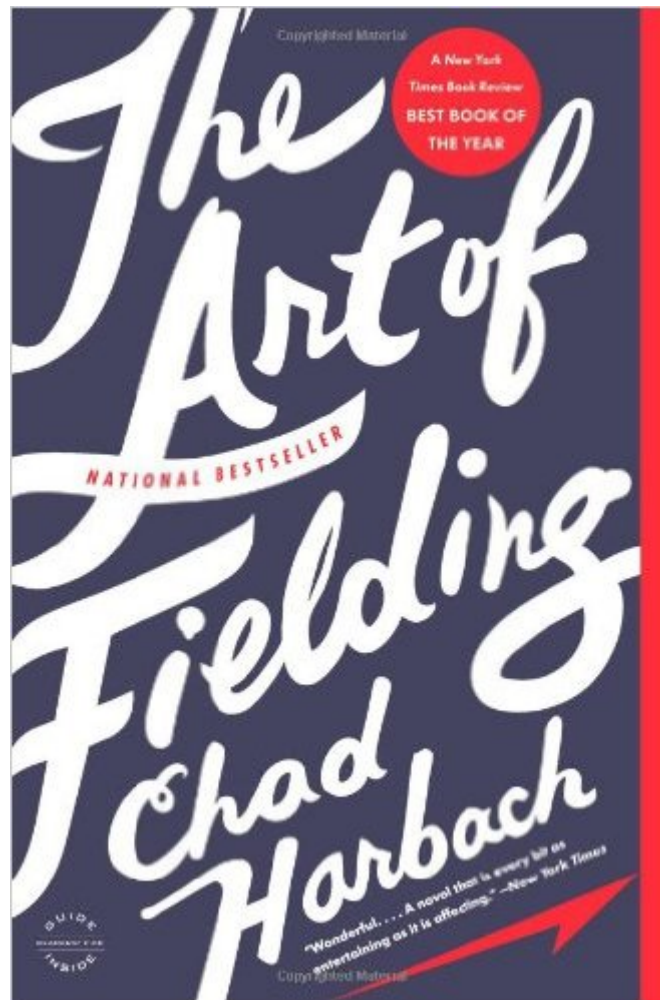


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The Art Of Fielding: A Novel



Synopsis

At Westish College, baseball star Henry Skrimshander seems destined for big league until a routine throw goes disastrously off course. In the aftermath of his error, the fates of five people are upended. Henry's fight against self-doubt threatens to ruin his future. College president Guert Affenlight has fallen unexpectedly and helplessly in love. Owen Dunne becomes caught up in a dangerous affair. Mike Schwartz realizes he has guided Henry's career at the expense of his own. And Pella Affenlight 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. Written with boundless intelligence and filled with the tenderness of youth, "The Art of Fielding is mere baseball fiction the way Moby Dick is just a fish story" (Nicholas Dawidoff). It is an expansive, warmhearted novel about ambition and its limits, about family and friendship and love, and about commitment--to oneself and to others.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I really liked the first 300 pages of Chad Harbach's debut novel, *The Art of Fielding*. As I was reading that 3/5 of the book, I probably would have told you that I loved it. But a funny thing happened between that point and turning the final page. The novel drifted, and tried to do things it hadn't before, and ultimately even diluted its own strengths a bit. Harbach's players are all deserving of praise. They're authentic, human, unique yet relatable - his biggest misstep in their creation is probably their names (another instance where a strong editor maybe could have said, you know,

this is distracting). The plot & themes are fairly standard liberal arts college/transitioning to adulthood stuff. The authorial voice is entertaining enough and the various avenues the characters use to avoid or delay their maturation are grounds for meaningful insight, enough that the somewhat cliché elements are just the field on which Harbach's particular game is played. The third act drag can mostly be attributed to one thing: in ordering this book, I was anxious about it being a "baseball book". I love baseball and have enjoyed a few fictional journeys into the sport, but generally the game is adequately dramatic and attempts to tell "important" stories in its world fall easily into melodrama. For most of *The Art of Fielding*, Harbach deftly avoids those traps and temptations. And then, for long stretches of the second half of the novel, it becomes the prose equivalent of underdog sports movies like "Hoosiers". Unfortunately, this is not only distracting, but it's time that could have been spent on resolving and exploring the impact of the interpersonal conflicts that were so well developed in the beginning and middle of the book.

First thing I'll admit: I purchased this not so much because I was hankering to read a baseball-themed bromance about self-discovery in the dregs of a protein shake, but more because the dollar figure of writer Chad Harbach's advance was leaked to the press and legions of curious had to know if the writing warranted that giant \$650,000 figure. As if any of us know what "warranted" looks like in this case, as if we had anything to compare that against. I just knew that was a lot of money, and if a first time novelist could command that dollar figure (in this era of declining advances and tightened publishing company purse strings), I needed to find out what he was doing right. I finished it in 3 sittings. Worth mentioning, because I slog through most books in a single evening so there's no petty internal struggle over "WHY" I'm picking the book back up and whether I'm GENUINELY compelled to turn the next page or whether I'm simply reading out of some rote sense of duty to complete the project I've begun. With this book, that internal struggle was strong each time I hefted the book up onto my lap. Mr Wonderful would ask me, "Is it any good?" and I would say, "I'll wait until I'm done to answer that. I don't know yet." Which was my opinion up until the final pages. "I don't know yet." I was trying to separate my envy over the publicity and the giant advance check from my enjoyment of *The Novel* in its own right and finding that separation very difficult. And, as many reviews I read prior to dead lifting the novel warned, this was not a plot-driven baseball story, this was a character-driven baseball story. And it's not a baseball story at all, not really, because there's not really all that much baseball actually played out on the pages.

Set in the world of college baseball, this is a book about aspiration, failure, and recovery. Failure is

the crux of it, an important theme that Harbach handles beautifully, especially through his intimate understanding of baseball. Where he fails is in developing the theme of aspiration in a non-superficial way, reaching a resolution that is worthy of the preceding crisis, and in creating rounded characters to motivate his action. As the excellent cover blurb will tell you, there are five major characters. Henry Skrimshander is a phenom, a shortstop with the accuracy of a laser and grace of an angel. Mike Schwartz, as huge as Henry is light, is the team captain, the man who first spotted Henry and recruited him, and remains his personal coach and mentor. Owen Dunne, Henry's roommate, is brilliant, beautiful, and gay; he plays baseball almost as an afterthought, spending most of his time in the dugout reading until called in as a pinch-hitter. Add to these Guert Affenlight, 60 years old, the charismatic president of Westish College on the shore of Lake Michigan, and his beautiful daughter Pella, in flight from a high-school marriage, who will become involved with each of the others in different ways. It's an attractive cast; what's not to like? Nothing, except that their likability results in a lack of depth when it really begins to count. The crux of the story, as the blurb also mentions, comes during a crucial game in Henry's junior year. Now the most famous player on the team and already being scouted by the major leagues, he makes a single disastrous throw, the first error of his college career. His world falls apart, and the lives of his friends with it. This is certainly a worthy theme for a novel, both literally as it applies to baseball, and as a parallel for life.

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