
I Like Happy Endings. You Don't.

James M. Brewbaker

Roger and I are consummate pro-sports fans. By geographic accident, this means that anyone who bats, punts, or dribbles for an Atlanta team—for ne'er-do-well-enough losers like the Braves and Falcons, for winners like the Hawks—is likely to be the object of our scorn, admiration, consternation, or joy, depending on last night's box score. When we get going, my wife leaves the room in self-defense.

Roger is approaching fifteen like gangbusters. He's bright. He reads. Always has, in fact. Herman Wouk and James Michener are his current favorites.

I'm approaching fifty with a limp. I'm losing ten thousand brain cells daily, Roger reminds me, which may explain why my bedside table is stacked ten deep with half-read, vaguely remembered thrillers, YA novels, and professional books. Every now and then I finish one.

Recently, I reviewed Thomas J. Dygaard's new novel, *The Rookie Arrives* (1988, New York: Morrow), for *The ALAN Review*. Roger read the same book and wrote a review which he submitted to *Merlyn's Pen*, the excellent periodical featuring the writing of young people in grades 7 through 10. By design, we determined not to compare notes until done.

Dygaard's novel follows Ted Bell, a talented third baseman fresh out of high school, in his first season in the majors. Ted is *Really Good* and, for this reason, is able to land a major-league contract while skipping the minors altogether. Just like that. Not only does Ted make the Royals roster, but he leads the team to the pennant as well. Yea, Ted!

It shouldn't come as a surprise when I report that Roger and I had strikingly different responses to *The Rookie Arrives*. Roger loved it. I didn't.

Roger: "I thoroughly enjoyed *The Rookie Arrives*. Dygaard demonstrates a great knowledge of the game of baseball. He describes the feelings of a young baseball player very well. It seems to me that everyone has felt the way Ted Bell does. . . ."

Jim: "*The Rookie Arrives* is supposed to be a sports novel, but it borders on fantasy. It is harmless, unsophisticated fare [with] plenty of play-by-play footage. Its clichés are the stuff of coaches and radio color men. What [it] lacks is verisimilitude. Things are wrapped up too neatly to be interesting."

Adolescent-literature enthusiasts are sometimes puzzled by the way teenagers react to a specific YA novel or writer. It bothers us to see Newbery winners—some of them, at least—gathering dust, while junior romances or series books like *Sweet Valley High* sell big. From time to time, though, we need to stand back and remind ourselves that teenagers and adults want something different from their reading.

Pointing to four distinct stages through which developing readers pass, G. Robert Carlsen explained the differences in adolescent and adult literary tastes a generation ago in *Books and the Teenage Reader* (1980, 2nd rev. ed., New York: Harper). Roger and I, sports buffs extraordinaire, separated by thirty-five years, illustrate Carlsen's point.

Younger readers become joyously lost in fictional worlds. Reading voraciously, they experience intensely and personally the people, places, and twists of plot in adventure stories, fantasy, and historical fiction. To a reader at this stage, which Carlsen labeled *unconscious delight*, finishing a book is often accompanied by a sense of loss or letdown. Why must the story end? What would have happened if it had continued? Unanswered

questions such as these represent both the satisfactions and frustrations of readers at this stage. To them, the sheer fun of the adventure is more important than its plausibility.

To me, Ted Bell's story didn't make sense; its implausibility prevented me from enjoying it. I wanted Ted to get his comeuppance and suffer through a season or two in the minors, learning to hit a big-league curve.

To Roger, who tore through *The Rookie Arrives* after school one afternoon, making sense didn't matter. Roger, like a bright ninth grader I taught my first year in the classroom who read bushels of what I thought were dreadful Doc Savage books, read the novel for fun, not for sense.

As readers mature—sometimes in the junior-high-school years, sometimes later—they begin to look for more from fiction than escape, the hallmark of *unconscious delight*. At this stage, young readers—experiencing rapid physical, mental, and social development—begin to focus on what is happening in their own lives, good and bad, and, through reading, test out new feelings, try on more mature roles, and face believable challenges. It is this interest, labeled the *personal-problems* stage by Carlsen, which provides the deep reservoir from which YA writers from Henry Gregor Felsen and Maureen Daly to Judy Blume, Gloria D. Miklowitz, and Todd Strasser have drawn their stories.

To Roger, developing rapidly as an athlete as well as in other ways, *The Rookie Arrives* posed a delicious what-would-it-be-like context for reading. He had every reason to identify with Ted Bell, an ambitious kid who assumes that the world is his for the asking if he practices hard enough. On this basis, they're two of a kind.

I had little in common with Ted. Roger knows that "everyone has felt the way Ted Bell does." I have forgotten those feelings.

Sometime in high school a third stage of reading development typically becomes evident, coinciding with a shift of attention on the part of adolescents from the self to the world. A teenager at this stage reasons something like this: "What happens to me still matters, but what it *means* is equally important." At this point, called the *philosophical problems* stage, an adolescent reader instinctively looks for answers to broad questions about human responsibility, values, and relationships. Roger, by reading *Centennial* or *The Winds of War*, deals with such adult issues. In reading *The Rookie Arrives*, he

Roger's Review

Thomas J. Dygaard. *The Rookie Arrives*. Morrow, 1988, 197pp., \$11.95. ISBN 0-688-07598-3

From start to finish in *The Rookie Arrives*, Thomas Dygaard demonstrates a great knowledge of baseball. Written in first person, the novel tells of the first major-league season of Ted Bell, an eighteen-year-old baseball player from Oklahoma. Everyone has been as frustrated as Ted is in the story.

Dygaard brilliantly conveys the inner agony that Ted endures when he arrives in Comiskey Park to join the Kansas City Royals for a game against the Chicago White Sox where he is told by Hank Quincy, the Royals' manager, that he is definitely not the replacement for veteran Lou Mills. Rejection is a common feeling of many teenagers; Ted also knows this feeling. Ted is rejected by all of his teammates. Eventually, Cal Hanley, an older pitcher, convinces Ted that things will change and become better in the future. Ted plays little until the All-Star game. However, during the All-Star game, Lou Mills is hit by a pitch, and his finger is broken. Ted has a hard time deciding whether to be happy or sad over Lou's injury.

After the All-Star break, Ted stars at third base. He seems to do everything right and even appears on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and other magazines. When Lou's finger recovers, the veteran is inserted into the lineup. Cal tells Ted that the manager is only trying to prove to the league that Lou is a good quality third baseman for trading purposes. Finally, Lou is traded, and Ted leads the Royals to the pennant.

Any sports fan will thoroughly enjoy *The Rookie Arrives*.

keeps one sneakered foot in the egocentric world of adolescents.

As readers mature further, they may enter a fourth and more sophisticated stage, that of *aesthetic delight*. Now their interest in a good yarn, their concern for personal problems lived out vicariously in books, and their quest for significant perspectives on philosophical issues may continue, but the books they read must render these things well to be palatable. With these readers, Michener gives way to Herman Melville, and Danielle Steele to Willa Cather.

Roger and I illustrate the fact that a great majority of readers, whether developing or mature, do not function at the aesthetic delight stage, at least not consistently. As we responded honestly to *The Rookie Arrives*, aesthetics was low on both of our totem poles. Roger valued the novel's sports lore (he credits Dygaard with "a great knowledge of the game of baseball"), while I fretted a bit over

its occasional clichés, “the stuff of coaches and radio color men.” To him, the fun of watching an eighteen-year-old succeed against the big boys mattered most. To me, the fact that Ted’s success came too easily overwhelmed other considerations. Neither of us appears to have responded substantively to the writer’s craft.

Responding to *The Rookie Arrives* as we did, Roger and I illustrate the cumulative quality of reading development. In the case of Dygaard’s novel, Roger responded at the first (unconscious delight and personal problems) stages. Reading different kinds of works, he may focus on philosophical issues. Reading adolescent fiction for review, I tune in my stage-one and -two antennae yet respond most favorably when a gifted YA writer soars artistically. Reading contemporary writers such as Tom Wolfe or Alice Walker, though, I instinctively focus on the well-turned phrase or apt metaphor more than I do plot.

Regrettably, English teachers once rushed kids past earlier developmental stages of reading or ignored them outright. Their students learned that aesthetic delight was the curricular be-all and end-all the first time a teacher said or implied, “Okay, boys and girls, you’ve had your fun with kiddy books. Now we’re going to study literature,” suggesting by tone of voice that fun is foreign to mature reading in general and that classroom in particular.

Today, good teachers know better. They grasp the importance of Roger’s delight in a good read, whether for escape or for a flight of “what-if.” They may enjoy the latest pop novel for the same reasons. Furthermore, they know that bright kids

who read need to do so like kids, not English majors, and that the early stages of reading development are bridges to the world of mature, adult experience with books. They introduce aesthetics—matters of style and form—carefully, in fairly small doses, and never let a reading enthusiast conclude that the English classroom is a place where literature, not reading, is important, as if they were elementally different.

A few minutes ago, Roger read my review of *The Rookie Arrives*. When he was finished, I asked him why he thought he and I saw the book so differently. “Dad,” he said in his superior, slightly condescending way, “I know a great deal more about baseball than you do.”

True enough, I thought, if that means knowing who plays for which team and whether or not they hit above .280 last season. I can’t ever remember that stuff. But I also know that high-school kids don’t make the big leagues anymore without paying their dues first.

Roger’s answer seemed off the mark, but I couldn’t really disagree with him.

“Anything else?” I asked.

“Sure. I like happy endings. You don’t.”

Thomas Dygaard, a skillful writer of sports novels for adolescents, knows what he is doing. In his free reading, Roger wants believable play-by-play, the sort of narrative that sounds as if the writer knows well both athletes and the games they play.

And he wants a happy ending.

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