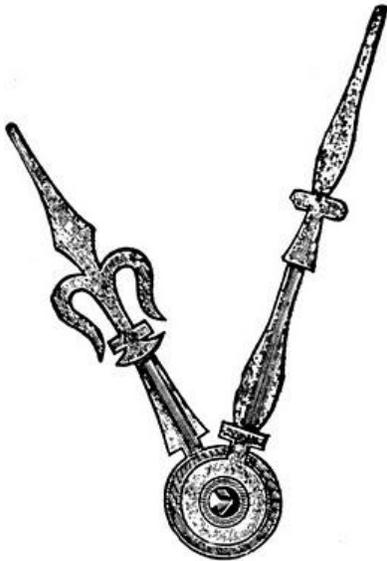


BASEBALL



AND



TIME TRAVEL

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BASEBALL



AND



TIME TRAVEL

Despite some recent discussions in *Sporadic* and other SFPA zines and my glowing reviews of the Connie Willis books, I am not obsessed with time travel as a science fiction theme. However, the following piece surfaced recently and I thought some of you might find it of interest.

First a little background.

While I was on staff at the University of Montevallo in 1980s, handling publication relations and teaching journalism, a colleague, Sidney Vance, and I developed a course in sport literature and team-taught it for several semesters. This was when the sports sub-genre of literature and film was gaining great impetus from the publication of W. P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe*, which was filmed as *Field of Dreams*, and the resurrection of Bernard Malamud's novel *The Natural*, which was a filmed with Robert Redford. Suddenly, there was a boom in this field. Baseball was the linchpin but books in other subjects such as boxing, hockey and football emerged also.

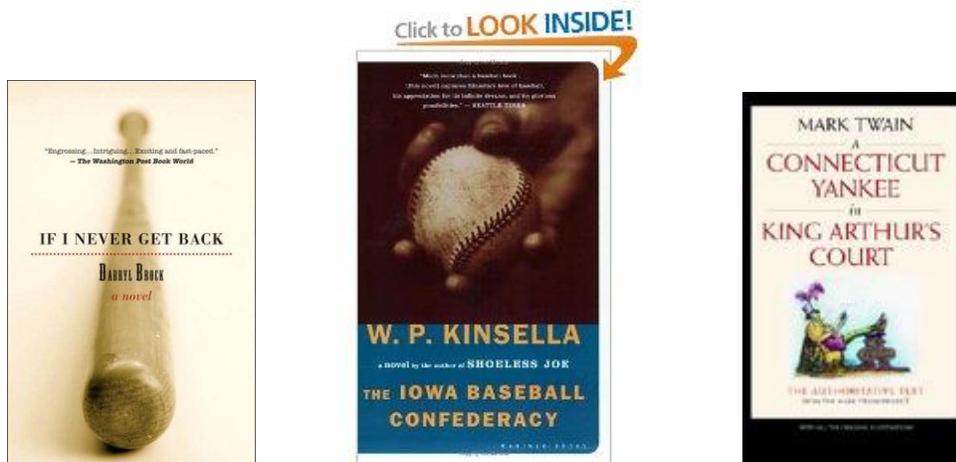
English Professor Vance, a major sports fan, and I also joined a newly-formed academic organization group called the Sport Literature Association. I like to loosely described it as an organization for English profs that like sports and Physical Education teachers that like poetry. SLA was founded by a great guy named Lyle Olsen. A large, congenial man of Swedish descent, Lyle had played a little minor league ball. In fact, he logged some time as a first baseman in the old Southern Association. Sid and I arranged for the late Jimmy Bragan, president of the modern day Southern League, to give us a ball and baseball cap. We presented them to Lyle at one of the conferences.

Lyle loved sports but had a passion for literature. He founded SLA while at San Diego State University. Later he moved to East Tennessee State University in Johnson City and that

became the de facto headquarters for the organization even after his death. Over the years Sid and I attended together and separately a number of SLA conferences, making various kinds of presentations. In 1995 at the University of North Carolina, we did together a dramatic reading of William Packard's poem on Ty Cobb. Sid occasionally presented some literary criticism papers, standard fare for these kinds of gatherings. My presentations tended to be somewhat less academic. I did one on sports cartooning, another on slang in sports writing, yet another on 19th century baseball poetry in newspapers. The one paper I presented that was in the literary criticism vein was this one. I have misplaced programs from some of the SLA meetings so I can only say that the "Baseball and Time Travel" paper was presented either in Albuquerque in 1993 or at Ithaca College in 1997. I think it was the former.

Both the Kinsella and Malamud novels contain mystical elements that might serve as SF preludes, perhaps, for the novels examined in the paper. In the early 1990s I had just finished reading *If I Never Get Back* and *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy*. Both involved baseball and time travel. That reminded me of how Hank Morgan, tired of jousting, introduces the game in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Thus, this paper, which is as close to serious literary criticism as I ever came in SLA gatherings.

To set it up, here are brief descriptions of the three novels:



If I Never Get Back by Darryl Brock (1990) – Sam Fowler, a San Francisco journalist is stuck in a failing marriage and a job that he doesn't like. One day he steps off of an Amtrak train and finds himself in 1869. After the expected wrenching discovery of where he is, Fowler settles in, joins Cincinnati Red Stockings, the first recognized professional baseball team. His travels include meeting Mark Twain and falling in love with a 19th century girl. It was followed by a sequel, *Two in the Field*, which came out after this presentation and is not included.

The Iowa Baseball Confederacy by W. P. Kinsella (1986) – Gideon Clark, infused with a love for baseball by his father, is obsessed with the belief that the Chicago Cubs traveled to

Onamata, Iowa in 1908 to play the Iowa All-Stars in game that was played in a continuous downpour for 40 days and nights. Somehow all records of the game have been erased. He and his semipro ball player friend Stan Rogalski find themselves transported back to 1908 by a rift in time. Famous persons they encounter include Theodore Roosevelt and Leonard de Vinci.

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court by Mark Twain (1889) – Engineer Hank Morgan is accidentally transported back in time to court of King Arthur. There is no concern here for warping the fabric of time. Hank persuades the inhabitants of that time that he is a gifted magician and develops a following as “Boss” Hank. Among the modern thing he happily introduces to that world is baseball because he finds jousting offensive after a time.

Baseball and Time Travel

The *Back to the Future* movies (1985, 1989 and 1990) introduced a mainstream audience to the notion of time travel and its attendant concepts of can the past be changed and should it be changed? Although entertaining fare, it was ho-hum stuff theoretically to science fiction fans who cut their teeth on H.G.Wells, Ray Bradbury, Jack Finney, Chad Oliver, Wilson Tucker and countless other writers.

At least three writers – W. P. Kinsella, Darryl Brock and Mark Twain – have involved baseball in their exploration of the time travel theme. This paper examines three common threads in their respective novels, *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy*, *If I Never Get Back*, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Indeed, the threads are probably common to practically all time travel novels. They are:

- The shock of waking up back there.
- The concern with changing history and the agony of foreknowledge.
- The return to the present.

WAKING UP BACK THERE/OVER THERE

Of the three time travelers examined here, only Gideon Clark knowingly and willingly crosses the line. With his friend Stan Rogalski in tow, he approaches a suspected crack in time to go back and learn the truth about the Iowa Baseball Confederacy and vindicate his father, long thought eccentric if not outright mad.

They stand on the old ball field and slowly find themselves absorbed into 1908. Their clothes are changing, Gideon's watch vanishes and Stan's baseball glove changes from a “huge orange scoop shovel” to “a black glove, thin and limp, not much larger than a quality ski mitt.” Only, inexplicably, Gideon's trumpet and his Orkin baseball cap make

the transition unchanged. And, of course, their memories.

Sam Fowler's journey is caused by an alcoholic stupor-caused fall on an Amtrak depot platform and Hank Morgan's is precipitated by a crowbar to the head.

For Gideon and Stan the adjustment to waking up over is minimal for Sam and Hank it is mind-numbing shock.

Waking up under a tree with a knight pointing a lance at his midsection, Hank is certain he is caught up in a circus or an asylum. As the knight marches him toward what will turn out to be Camelot, Hank cannot understand why bystanders stare at him instead of the guy on the horse.

It is only when Clarence the page mentions having been born in the year 513 that Hank Morgan suspects something has happened.

It made cold chills creep over me! I stopped, and said, a little faintly:

"Maybe I didn't hear you just right. Say it again – and say it slow. What year was it?"

"Five thirteen."

"Five thirteen! you don't look it! Come, my boys, I am a stranger and friendless: be honest and honorable with me. Are you in your right mind?"

He said he was.

"Are these other people in their right minds?"

He said they were.

"And this isn't an asylum? I mean, it isn't a place where they cure crazy people?"

He said it wasn't.

"Well, then," I said, "either I am a lunatic, or something just as awful has happened. Now tell me, honest and true, where am I?"

"In King Arthur's Court."

I waited a minute, to let that idea shudder its way home, and then said:

"According to your notions, what is it now?"

"Five twenty-eight – nineteenth of June."

I felt a mournful sinking at the heart, and muttered, "I shall never see my friends again – never, never again. They will not be born for more than 1300 years yet."

I seemed to believe the boy. I didn't know why. *Something* in me seemed to believe him – my consciousness, as you may say; but my reason didn't. My reason straightway began to clamor.

A date brings reality home for Sam Fowler, also:

"What's the matter?" he asked. "1869. Something wrong with that?"

1869. I looked at their clothes, the kerosene lamp, the spittoons. "Very wrong," I muttered, starting to rise. "Either with me...or..."

The thought of an asylum crosses his mind also, but not from the same perspective as Hank Morgan's.

"My fuzziness was by no means gone, and his scrutiny bothered me. For a moment I toyed with the notion of simply blurting out that I was from another century and needed their help. But what could I do? They doubtless figured I was demented anyway. And back here, I remembered, crazy people were thrown into hellhole sanatoriums."

CHANGING HISTORY

Twain's Hank Morgan, unencumbered by one of modern science fiction's "prime directives" of time travel – Thou Shalt Not Change History – plunges ahead with making the best of a situation he cannot change: "I made up my mind to two things: if it was still the 19th century and I was among lunatics and couldn't get away, I would presently boss that asylum or know the reason why; and if on the other had it was really the 6th century, all right,...I would boss the whole countryside inside of three months. For I judged I would have the start of the best-educated man in the kingdom by a matter of 1,300 years...."

"Look at the opportunities here for a man of knowledge, brains, pluck and enterprise to sail in and grow up with the field. The grandest field that ever was; and all my own; not a competitor; not a man who wasn't a baby to me in acquirements and capacities..."

Morgan, subsequently, introduces all manner of 19th century technological and sociological changes to the 6th century. Not the last of which, for our discussion here, is baseball.

He decides he will replace the gory jousting tournaments with baseball, allowing the knights to maintain their competitive spirit while entertaining the populace in a less violent manner.

"I chose my nines by rank, not capacity," says Hank. "...of course, I couldn't get these people to leave off their armor; they wouldn't do that when they bathed." The best he can do is pattern the armor to tell the teams apart. "...one of my teams wore chain-mail ulsters, and the other wore plate armor made of my new Bessemer steel...when a Bessemer was at the bat and ball hit him, it would bound 150 yards, some times. And when a man was running and threw himself on his stomach to slide...it was like an ironclad coming to port.

"At first I appointed men of no rank to act as umpires, but I had to discontinue that. These people were no easier to please than other nines. The umpire's first decision was usually his last; they broke him in two with a bat, and his friends toted him home on a shutter. When it was notice that no umpire ever survived a game, umpiring got to be unpopular. So I was obliged to appoint somebody whose rank and lofty position under the government would protect him."

For Sam Fowler, wafted unwillingly back to 1869 when the original Cincinnati Red Stockings are barnstorming the country, altering history is a very real concern. After singing verses from "Red River Valley" and "Home on the Range," he realizes nobody has ever heard them before.

"You warble like a bullfrog in heat, but those are prize ballads. We'd make a pile if we printed them," says one of the players.

Fowler, taken aback, says the songs aren't original but has to acknowledge that they are not copyrighted either – at least, not yet.

“I could use some cash,” he said, “but stealing songs isn’t my idea of how to get it.”
“How’s it stealing if nobody’s laid claim?” asks the player.

Fowler’s dilemma:

“I didn’t have a ready answer. Viewed from his standpoint, the future glittered like a treasure vault. By tapping my foreknowledge, wouldn’t I merely be nudging things along predestine channels? In this Darwinistic age would a Vanderbilt or Rockefeller or Carnegie hesitate in my shoes? Was the Gilded Age ready for Scott Joplin? Gershwin? The Beatles?

“S. C. Fowler, Sheet Music Czar.

“It had a certain ring.

“But actually, wouldn’t I be changing the past instead or merely retracing it?

“Should I try to warn Custer? Use any argument that might spare all those lives? Would he listen? Did I have the right to interfere with events? Minding my own business suited my temperament and seemed more sensible, but even doing nothing I risked altering history. My presence here was doubtless an alteration in itself.

“Had I asked for any of this?”

Well, Fowler resists stealing the songs at that point, but later he violates the premise anyway by introducing hot dogs, hamburgers and French fries to the ball park concessions. He puts the first scoreboard up in the Cincinnati ball park. He also invents the bunt and the intentional walk to the consternation of those who view such strategies as unmanly.

Fowler and Clark are both caught up in this conundrum.

Although he knows he is involved in some cosmic scheme beyond his control, Gideon Clark, too, wonders about changing history:

“Should I participate any more than I already have? I’ve resisted predicting history, so far. But it’s tempting. The Democratic nominating convention is upcoming, has been several times over dinner and even here, I have volunteered that William Howard Taft will win but have refrained from insisting on it as fact.”

Asked to join in with the band at a social, he considers playing “Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White.”

“I’m sure ‘Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White’ won’t be written for another 45 years. Will it matter if I play it? Will it change history? If I change history, will be for the better or for worse?”

Gideon plays it safe and opts for “Greensleeves.”

FOREKNOWLEDGE

With the decision to use the foreknowledge to one’s advantage, though, comes the obvious tradeoff. Foreknowledge is not limited to technology, but also people and their affairs.

Encountering his 1978 friend Johnny Baron and Johnny’s younger brother Davey Baron in 1908, Kinsella’s protagonist says to himself: “Johnny Baron. He must be about 18. And Davey at 16 will run away, lie about his age, join the army, die in a muddy trench in France. Now I really know more than I want to, but there is no turning back.”

Sam Fowler, thinking on his newfound friend Mark Twain and the tribulations that the author will face in his life, admits that foreknowledge makes him (Sam) “feel old and weary.”

All three ultimately face stressful mood swings over the possibility of having to remain in

the past or having to return to the present. If they choice becomes theirs, what will they do?

Ultimately Stan Rogalski decides he wants to return to 1978 even though in 1908 Frank Chance seems like to sign him to a contract to play for the Chicago Cubs, thus fulfilling his lifelong dream.

Hank Morgan, mortally wounded, returns to the future to die, again in his own time.

But Sam Fowler and Gideon Clark, both jerked around by cosmic forces beyond their control and thrust again into their own time, end their narratives with eyes on the past.

“I don’t know when, but I know I’m going back. I can feel it,” says Fowler at the end of *If I Never Get Back*.

Clark senses he will return to the past, also:

“I’m going to take one thing with me this time,” he shouts. “A passport. A copy of *The Baseball Encyclopedia*.”

