Butterfly Winter: A Novel
by W.P. Kinsella

Reviewed by Ronald Charles Epstein

Alberta-born writer W.P. Kinsella is one of Canada’s most internationally successful authors. His 1982 novel Shoeless Joe is the source material for the acclaimed 1989 Kevin Costner fantasy Field of Dreams. Unfortunately, a head injury, along with general discouragement over the realities of a market that no longer welcomed acclaimed mid-list authors like himself, effectively sidelined Kinsella for years.

This hiatus ended after he entered Enfield & Wizenty’s writing contest and won their 2011 Colophon Prize for best unpublished manuscript. Cynics might view this triumph as the literary equivalent of Gordon Lightfoot winning Canadian Idol, but it is still a comeback.

Some people like “fantasy baseball”; Kinsella constructs “baseball fantasies.” In the real world, young Dominican men advance by playing American Major League baseball. In his novel’s fictional universe, Julio and Esteban Pimental, two boys from the Dominican Republic’s non-existent neighbour Courteguay, follow the same career path.

This plot description deceptively simplifies the novel. The story is advanced mainly through the actions of two protagonists, “the Wizard” (11) and “the Gringo Journalist” (11). The plot is followed through 78 chapters named after them and other principal characters.

This device may be employed to create the illusion that certain characters are revealing the Piments’ story to the reader. The concept is maintained in the third and final section; the title page quotes Kinsella as if he were an authoritative icon from the past, like Brooklyn Dodgers manager Casey Stengel.

Some might classify Butterfly Winter as an exercise in magic realism, a style associated with Latin American literature. Perhaps Kinsella uses it to evoke its exotic foreign atmosphere.

Cynics might rightly view the use of that literary concept as an excuse to graft absurd and excessive fantasies onto the narrative with a straight face. In this world, fetuses play baseball and panthers work as porters. In the past, Kinsella used his imagination to create a memorable tale of the triumph of faith. Now he throws the kitchen sink at . . . no, he turns it into a super-heroic heron and sets it on his long-suffering audience.

The reader’s patience may be tried by the narrative’s non-linear progression. Fortunately, the Wizard issues a fair warning by stating that “The word chronological is not in the Courteguayan language, neither is sequence. Things happen. That is all there is to it” (10). This raises the question: can people keep track of Courteguayan time?

Fantasy should not be confused with fairy tales. This caution applies especially to those who merely know this author as the one who inspired Field of Dreams, which is family oriented. His realism means that Central America’s brutal realities are acknowledged in the plot. Dr. Noir, the Haitian-born dictator who is obviously inspired by real-life despot Dr. François Duvalier, runs a torture chamber called “The Wound Factory” (197).
Courteguayan sexuality is also very raw. When Fernadella, the twins’ mother, meets Hector, their father, she impresses him by using her thighs to crush a rock into gravel. Guess what he uses to stir his campfire?

Sex and violence may be important elements in this novel, but they are not as crucial as sport. Our country’s most important baseball novelist previously honoured the game. This time he goes further by introducing the ultimate player and most devoted fans, Julio Pimental is a prenatal pitcher. His fellow citizens take their admiration to unheard-of limits. When Dr. Noir bans the national pastime, boys play it surreptitiously, facing raids by soldiers assigned to repress these underground activities at any cost. Those who are killed by the troops are known as “the baseball martyrs” (229). The novelist combines a fan’s love with an observer’s detachment.

Some of the fantasy passes for political satire. For example, before Dr. Noir’s coup, El Presidente and General Bravura, the two major leaders, frequently overthrow each other in guerrilla uprisings. The Wizard, quoting the tabloids, claims that “a retired President of the United States receives a tidy pension, [and] the Secret Service, CIA, FBI, and the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders guard him constantly” (32). Such jibes are merely political cartoons, presenting stale, exaggerated stereotypes.

Perhaps this collection of overwrought ideas is the writer’s attempt to surpass his previous achievements. He may have wanted to write the baseball fantasy novel to end all baseball fantasy novels. What he offers is a sports story that ends one’s desire to read one. Some may view the “Gringo Journalist” as Kinsella’s literary proxy. That may be true – as evidenced in this book, the man is certainly no Wizard.

Ronald Charles Epstein has appeared in Videoscope and Jerry Jazz Musician.

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