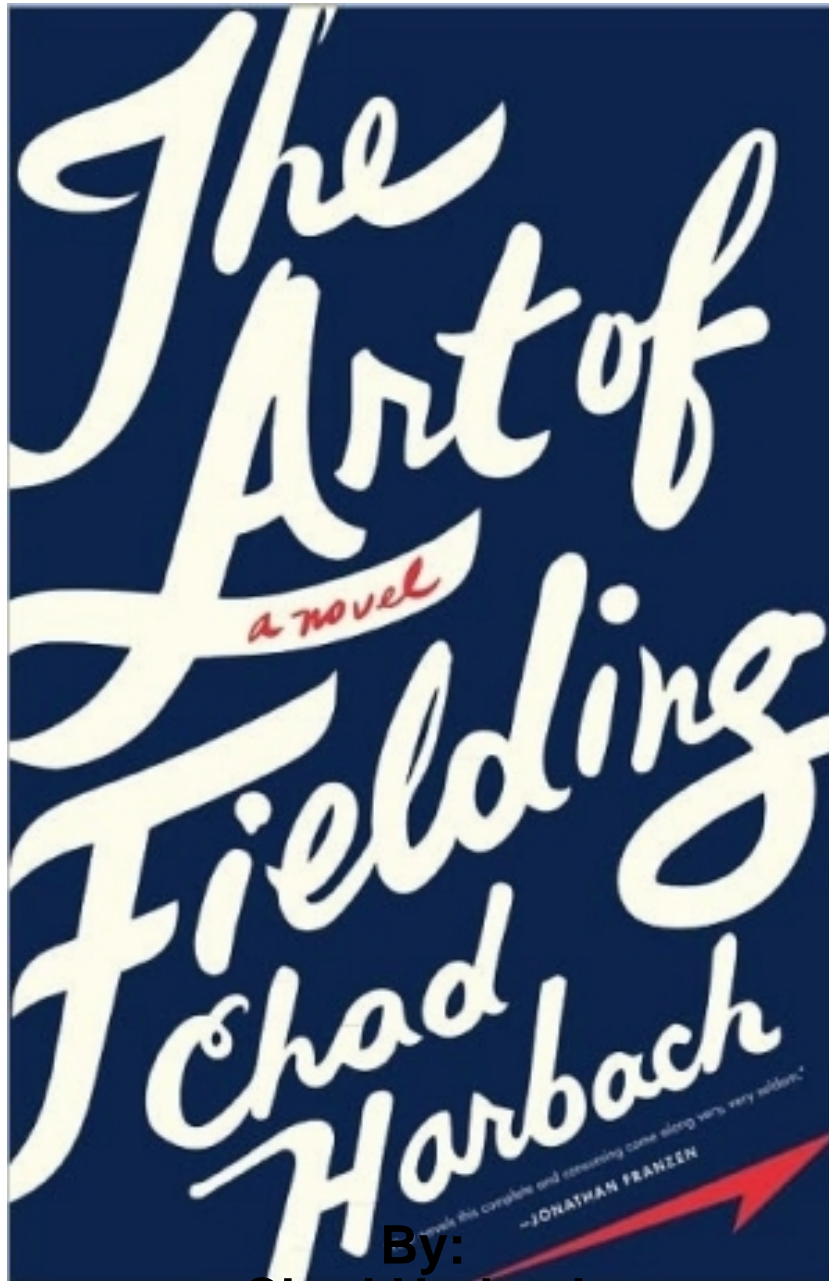


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By:
Chad Harbach

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What people Say:

RandomAnthony

Chad Harbach's

is 2/3rds strong but maybe 100 pages too long. You know that weird paradox you feel when you like a book but kind of wish it was over? I felt that around, oh, page 350 of

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The storyline revolves around five characters and readers shouldn't be misled into thinking, as the inside cover description seems to imply, that Henry is the star and the four other characters lesser lights. The five meet, collaborate, have sex, become codependent (maybe...I'm not sure what "codependent" means) and evolve over the course of a couple years on the campus of a small northeastern Wisconsin college. Water (specifically Lake Michigan) and

recur as themes that, I would bet, a grad student somewhere is analyzing in a paper right now. Harbach writes in a controlled, professional writer's workshop manner about 80% of the time. His writing is good, clean, and high-quality but, unfortunately, occasionally reads sterile. The "gay guys discovering each other" subplot was trite and predictable. Only in the last fifty pages does he passionately let loose. The novel's end is serene and satisfying. The first 460 pages are more like a clinic on how to write well. Nothing wrong with that. If you like austere, well-constructed novels, you'll like

. Franzen gives a cover blurb, by the way. He's a good reference point for Harbach; "kind of like Franzen" would describe Harbach well.

Miriam

People love to talk about the "

" books that aren't good reads. There's also the crap that people call "beach reads" but gobble up without taking seriously. But

falls under a third category: A book I didn't like so much that I wanted to keep reading it.

I wanted to like it, I did. I like books that take place in college. I like baseball. I like baseball metaphors even more. but it felt like a book that took 10 years to write and not in a good way. Characters that I imagine

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I wanted to like it, I did. I like books that take place in college. I like baseball. I like baseball metaphors even more. but it felt like a book that took 10 years to write and not in a good way. Characters that I imagine Harbach struggled with,

like he struggled with them and instead of dealing with it, he just left them hanging. He built up Henry and then had him fall apart so very quickly to such extremes AND THEN (spoiler) for no clear reason he makes amends (though I guess the extent of the amends is debatable). I think what bothered me the most though, was that this felt like a Tom Wolfe novel (the most obvious is

) but instead of creating complicated characters who have to deal with the consequences of their actions or characters who don't deserve the abundance of good luck that comes their way and know it, his characters are so one-dimensional that as much as I wanted to care about them, I couldn't. There's a benefit to realism, but if you don't create the "real," yet exciting (or at least compelling) characters to go with, why read it?

Teresa

I loved this book! (I suppose it's appropriate that I start off my review like a fan.)

While reading it, I couldn't help but reflect upon and compare this novel to

. Both are about college-aged kids (though set in different decades); mental illness is an element in both; and while the love triangle in the Eugenides is paramount, the one here (which is sort of (though not really) a love triangle) is more subtle and more realistically portrayed. (I almost want to

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Though I've read

, it's been awhile and I'm sure I missed some of the references to it in this novel set in a fictional Wisconsin college where Melville is important to its existence. One section in the Harbach evoked (at least for me) E.M. Forster's

Peter

Man, I really didn't want to like this book. And here, quickly, are the reasons why:

Number 1) Pure jealousy. Harbach got paid like a bajillion dollars for his very first novel. I was paid slightly less than that. Okay, a lot less than that.

Number 2) I don't like n+1 magazine, of which he is the co-founder. I find it pretentious and boring. I would honestly rather read Cat Fancy.

Number 3) Harbach wrote an article about MFA vs. New York writers that was, in a word, uber-douchy. And anyone who we

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Number 3) Harbach wrote an article about MFA vs. New York writers that was, in a word, uber-douchy. And anyone who weighs in on that argument has already told you something about themselves that you'd be best off not knowing.

So, as you can see, I had all my petty reasons amassed into an army of pre-read hatred. I was ready to unleash the critical beast and be confirmed in my belief that all hyped literary things are, at heart, overrated, particularly new "it" books written by new "it" writers.

Then I read it.

Tony

I have stood there, with my knees bent, on the balls of my feet. I have watched the signs and where the catcher sets up. I have known with some sense of probability if my pitcher can throw the ball where the glove is set. I have watched the hitter's swing, listened to the sound. I have intuited. So I have moved, left or right, back or in, often before the ball leaves the bat, before life, if you will, comes my way. Another example of how Life, as the columnist Thomas Boswell once mused, imitates

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Now the ball is safely in my glove, but having bounced first, it can not stay there. I must throw to first. Having already successfully intuited, I must now correctly calculate. For the hitter is now a runner, and I must gauge his speed. I see him, a moving picture in my peripheral vision, flying down the line. I see the first baseman too, but less so. It is partially faith which makes me think he will be there at the terminus of my throw. I grip the laces, hoping it comes clean from my glove, doesn't snag on the webbing. I am off-balance, but I have done this before, which makes it both good and bad. Because I have done this and I have not done this. I have, as they say, hurried a throw. So I have been there, assigned a ticket in life, between Second and Third, when everything can end well, or not. It is not a good thing to be a thinking-man's shortstop and to experience Doubt.

Henry, the shortstop in this readable but cliched novel, is placed in that moment in Prufrockian terms by the author. When muscle memory should once again get the ball safely to first, and on time, the

Love Song rears its head and asks

You would be hard-pressed to write a better movement of Steve Blass Disease than Chad Harbach did. However, well, the rest of the book sucked.

The story flies by, as if that's a good thing. But it's Writing 101. Dialogue, shallow to begin with, ends in mid-exchange so, you know, you will want to get to the next chapter to find out what happened. The foreshadowing is so obvious that it almost spoils the plot. (What do you think will happen by the end of the book to the guy smoking cigarettes who is having chest pains in the first 100 pages?). The characters are from central casting. I know, I know, I know. Baseball fiction often tends to magic realism, like when long-dead ballplayers come in from the cornfield. But there's nothing magical here and it's not real. Maybe I'm just a guy who doesn't like liberties taken with my favorite sport. I mean, they could have gotten a better actor than Ray Liotta to play Shoeless Joe, maybe even one who hit left-handed. Here, Harbach has a college team playing back-to-back doubleheaders on consecutive days. That would never happen; don't have enough arms.

Annoyingly, Harbach insists on infusing his characters with ethnic or gender identity, as if that will do in place of character development. So we have the all-time great retired shortstop, Aparicio Rodriguez (winced). The beautiful gay boy who makes a 60 year-old straight man lose his mind. (Not exactly

or

but Harbach woulda if he coulda). The Jewish catcher. There was no reason to make him Jewish except to check another ethnic group off the roster. This college catcher, by the way, decides to go to law school, so he applies to the top six law schools in the country (Yale, Harvard, Stanford, etc). But just those. While Henry the shortstop jumps from Freshman to Junior year in one sentence, the catcher takes a chapter to hold the last letter of rejection or acceptance in his hands, finally letting it open from the steam of the whirlpool. How's that for an existential moment? Hamlet in a steam bath. But we, of course, don't learn whether he was accepted for another several chapters, such is the writing device at play. And of course, if you can't get into the top six law schools, then you can't go to law school. (In my defense, I was trapped on an airplane and down to my last book, so I had no choice but to read on).

Most grating was Harbach's insistence in making sure that everyone knows he's a card-carrying feminist. So, he will write about the best professor on campus but only use the first initial, so the reader will assume it's a man, when, of course, it's not.