Review of *The Resisters*

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When Gish Jen appeared on stage with Emily Nemens at the Key West Literary Seminar (KWLS) in January, the latter described *The Resisters* as an “unbaseball baseball book.” As the writer of *The Cactus League*,another baseball novel that appeared this spring, Nemens spoke with authority. Jen described herself as “not a baseball fan,” but as someone “surrounded by baseball.” Despite these descriptions that readers of sport literature might find somewhat inauspicious, Jen’s book demonstrates a thorough familiarity with the game’s history, culture, and the formula often used to tell baseball stories. Jen acknowledged the formula’s advantages (she wrote the book in a year) and drawbacks (the stigmas attached to genre fiction) while recognizing that good sport literature is about more than “just sports.” A recent mini-review in the *New Yorker* succinctly described the book as “dystopian” and “speculative” fiction set in an “authoritarian society divided between the Netted, who are privileged and fair skinned, and the Surplus, who live in swamps or on water” (March 23, 2020, p. 61). This description is accurate, but it leaves out the titular resistance, the fact that baseball has to be brought back from dissolution to play a role in that resistance, and the baseball fiction formula at the heart of the book.

Readers of dystopian fiction will recognize the outlines of the world they are dropped into when they open the book, yet they mightbe surprised when the titular dissent is enacted by the game of baseball and its players. If we like to scare ourselves with near-future fiction, Jen’s book delivers here, too: Consuming is the only job of the Surplus, the disenfranchised Resisters of her narrative. Humans have given “Aunt Nettie”—Jen’s version of Siri or Alex—everything “she” needs to co-opt many elements of their existence. Beyond mere listening in, houses in this future have become characters to the point they talk back and tell their occupants what to do. This singularity is so complete that Grant, the book’s narrator and father of the protagonist, is out of a job as a university professor (talk about hitting close to home). Perhaps scariest of all, Canada geese are *everywhere,* and no one seems to know what to do about them.

Equally disturbing is the situation where baseball has fallen out of fashion to the degree that it has to be played on the sly to avoid detection by Aunt Nettie’s omnipresent drones and be brought back to mainstream society by the coach of one of the few remaining universities. Grant becomes one of the fathers of the game when he cobbles together a device to allow his daughter Gwen and other Surplus children to participate in the Underground Baseball League instead of consuming products and services. (Somewhere, Henry Chadwick—the original Father of Baseball—is weeping.) Gwen identifies the Surplus dilemma when she says, “Either we’re makers or just made” (54). In a world where the creative impulse has been removed by the onus and imperative to consume—and then taken to its logical extremes—the urge to create a league of one’s own and bring class action lawsuits against the Auto American machine is understandable.

In this world, organized baseball “so roundly resisted Aunt Nettie it finally had to be discontinued,” the Yankees, Red Sox, and Cardinals disbanded, and Fenway, Wrigley, and Yankee Stadium all torn down (33). Talk about a “say it isn’t so” moment! As *The Resisters* progresses, there is hope that the Underground Baseball League and the movement to bring baseball back to the Olympics (yet again) will rescue the game. These developments set up Act II of Jen’s baseball drama and introduce nationalism as a theme when the Netted officials of the United States of Auto America want Gwen to “cross-over” from her Surplus status to play for the national team to improve their chances of beating ChinRussia. With some effort, Gwen is convinced to attend NetU, where Coach Link is working to bring baseball back to the Netted world.

At the KWLS in January, Jen read from her book and described her process and inspirations. In particular, she talked about the joys, restraints, and drawbacks of writing genre fiction. What I have dubbed as the mass market baseball fiction formula (MMBBFF) was perfected in the second decade of the twentieth century in the pages of *The Saturday Evening Post* (SEP) and other mass market general interest magazines. In a large portion of those stories, a young man leaves his rural hometown, puts aside his work on the farm or some other manual labor to come to the city to make his way in the world via the agency of baseball: getting a job in the minor leagues, getting ahead by reaching the major leagues, and then winning the pennant and a World Series share as a stake to get married and take his place in society as the head of a household. More than a hundred years later, the MMBBFF is still with us and Jen’s book illustrates this.

Gwen Cannon-Chastanets and her catcher Ondi are identified as “naturals” early on. They find no competition on the Surplus Fields; worse yet, their skills seem to diminish when they play there, arousing the suspicions of Gwen’s mother Eleanor, who was a civil rights lawyer before Aunt Nettie made her job obsolete and she was deemed “un-retrainable,” smells another class action suit against the all-encompassing Internet. At the same time Jen employs the MMBBFF, she proves she can break away from it when she skips ahead to the third season of the Underground Baseball League and introduces pie breaks for the players. Like Bernard Malamud in *The Natural*, Jen includes and/or references numerous elements from baseball history—invoking Jackie Mitchell, a female pitcher who struck out Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig at Chattanooga, TN, the home of the Lookouts, which is also the same name as Gwen’s team.

Jen follows the MMBBFF when she has Gwen leave her Surplus world and take Ondi with her to NetU for Act III of the book. Jen continues to offer the elements of baseball history, invoking Ida Borders (who reached AA in the minor leagues as a pitcher) as well as other female baseball players. When Gwen is identified as a “female Satchel Paige,” it is both a reference to her large arsenal of pitches and to her mixed Asian/African/Caucasian ancestry that stands in sharp opposition to her “angel fair and male” teammates (141, 98). The fact that Act IV contains a Big Game for Gwen to prove herself should come as no surprise—as well as the fact that Jen gives her own twists to the formula, which I will leave for readers to discover on their own.

My review has focused on the baseball elements of *The Resisters* and has only scratched the surface of the near-future terminology, surveillance technology, social media advances, class structures, and cultural evolutions of the world Jen created in this relatively short novel. The book easily could be expanded by two or three hundred pages, and Jen could return to this world in a sequel—which is what Stephen King is rooting for, according to the blurb he provided. Drawing on the freight baseball has carried since the nineteenth century, Jen uses her narrator to argue that the game is “more than a sport,” just as *The Resisters* is much more than a baseball novel (153). The presence of the former disenfranchised consumer citizen Gwen Cannon-Chastanets on the field in the Netted world and at the Olympics allows Jen and her narrator to argue further that “if baseball took on a hallowed meaning, it took on that meaning in our American dreams. For was this not the level playing field we envisioned? The field on which people could show what they were made of?” (153). This vision may be hard to see at this particular point in time as we live in a world mostly without baseball, or any other live sport for that matter, but here’s hoping we don’t lose sight of the game’s meanings any time soon.

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