Emily Nemens, *The Cactus League*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020, 278 pages, hardbound.

Reviewed by Scott D. Peterson

University of Missouri—St. Louis

            Reading this sun-filled novel-in-stories during the shortest days of December is a treat. The narrative of “carnival and community,” as the author described it, chronicles events from the 2011 pre-season of the Los Angeles Lions, who belong to the American League. The team comes by its moniker honestly through an association with MGM, though the reflexive response to the name is the football team from Detroit, and there have been very few—if any—fictional baseball teams so named in my wide reading. The book nonetheless achieves a high level of actuality with this narrative foundation. Baseball literature readers will feel right at home with the nine connected tales that make up the novel, and they will be familiar with the narrative voice of the wizened, well-traveled sportswriter who frames and sets up each of the pieces. A colleague and *Aethlon* contributor told me, “There isn’t much baseball in that one,” and he was right if he was seeking the usual formula of play-by-play, the progress of a season, and the crowning of a world champion. When Emily Nemens spoke of her book at the Key West Literary Seminary last January, she recognized this element herself when she characterized her work as “an un-baseball baseball book,” adding that she went in this direction because “a lot happens in the parking lot”—even if that stretch of concrete acts as a griddle on a hot Arizona afternoon. Baseball is also baked into the DNA of *The Cactus League* (TCL) to the degree that it meets Michael Oriard’s definition of sport literature because swapping in another sport would do irreparable harm to the fabric of a story arc that blends *Winesburg, OH* with Eliot Asinof’s *Man on Spikes* while tossing in a little *Love Actually*.

            Encompassing what Nemens described as a “whole eco-system of sport culture—men on the field; women interested and involved,” nearly everyone present for spring training gets their turn in the rejuvenating March sun: the people preparing concessions through the ballpark organist, forty-something baseball Annies, players’ wives, agents, overwhelmed first round draft picks, comeback players, stars, and partial team owners all have cameos and/or whole stories woven around them. As someone who has been to Arizona for spring training, I was transported back to the Valley of the Sun and immersed into the experience all over again—and that’s not just the COVID isolation talking! I was drawn into the web of characters, wondering who would appear next and how he or she might be tied back into the overall web of the tales.

            Along with the major league milieu, Nemens makes use of numerous actual details to add the sort of verisimilitude readers of baseball literature have been expecting since Ring Lardner used the same technique more than a hundred years ago in the six linked short stories that became *You Know Me Al*.  In the opening tale, the Yankee Clipper gets a central role as a spirit guide: a WWJDD tattoo translating to “What Would Joe DiMaggio Do?” directs the actions of the Lions’ AAA batting coach, who, as a player went to the 1974 World Series and lost to the Cardinals. While this detail is a departure from our universe where the A’s beat the Dodgers for their third straight championship that year, the narrative does seem to offer some comfort to the boys in blue by recognizing that LA is a Dodger town (254). The book’s main setting is the actual spring training facility built in 2011 at Talking Stick, which is shared by the Diamondbacks and the Rockies. The actuality of this setting grounds the narrative in the geological and anthropological histories of Arizona as the local rocks, fossils, and native peoples all factor integrally—if somewhat incongruously and unexpectedly—into the sportswriter’s between-the-tale interludes.

*The Cactus League* is more than a baseball book, as is the case for all sports literature. The novel-in-stories grew out of Nemens’ MFA work and it shows in the quality of the writing. There are a number of nuanced moments and turns of phrase in every tale. From the stool softeners as the only medicine left behind by squatters in the opening story to the parallels drawn between uniform stirrups and sweatbands favored by female baseball and basketball fans to the players’ wives being described as a “necessary sorority” (172), textual highlights abound. The plot weaving is also impressive: Jason Goodyear, the star left fielder who appears in some way in all of the tales, is the book’s George Willard (with a nod to Sherwood Anderson). In another nice touch, Goodyear reveals at the end of the book that he already knows the rumors that were being repeated about him and his ex-wife throughout the book. Another effective piece of plotting has the first-round draft pick being played off the field by the ballpark organist in the tale shared by the two.

            The inevitable quibbles are minor and not numerous. As hinted at already, the narrator’s focus on the history of Arizona feels a bit like a forced throwback to James Michener’s novels: even if the Hohokam did have ballparks, no anthropologists or archaeologists that I know of have gone so far as to call them the “Masters of the Desert”—unless this is just our narrator momentarily giving into the over-the-top style of a sportswriter. For the novel’s primary—and recurring—baseball Annie to be a fan of Frank Lloyd Wright as part of a larger thematic concern with architecture is equally jarring—and perhaps refreshing. And in one tale, the three African American characters seem to be over-tasked with carrying much of the book’s commentary on contemporary issues of race, class, *and* sexuality. Upon further reflection, however, the representation strikes me as a reflection of these exact issues within our larger cultural conversation.

            As noted above, *The Cactus League* will appeal equally to fans of the game and fans of good writing. A 2011 article in *The Atlantic* had Reeves Wiedeman asking why great sports novels are so rare. SLA members would most likely argue that high quality sport literature is more common and more substantial than most anti-sports critics would have it. Whether she read Wiedeman or not, Nemens does seem to be making a conscious effort to move her book away from charges that it might be “unsubstantial” or “frivolous.” By making only sporadic use of the century-old baseball fiction formula and expanding her cast beyond just the men in uniforms, Nemens might avoid such charges and perhaps reach a wider audience if the women who buy the book for the men in their lives—or better yet, acquire and read it for themselves—realize it is not just another baseball book filled with stats and scores and a race to the World Series. The stats and a few scores are present in TCL, but there are also plenty of other elements to push back at the literary snobs who would disqualify the book upon seeing the baseball on the cover. Even without giving us a strong sense of whether or not the Lions had a successful spring training, Nemens’ character-driven book, baseball or un-, might just bring us some sun until the start of 2021’s Cactus League in a few months.