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**Morgenstein, Gary. A Fastball for Freedom (Book 2 of the Dark Depths series). (Digital edition reviewed)**

As a long-time science fiction fan and sports enthusiast, I found the premise of Gary Morgenstein’s dystopian novel *A Fastball for Freedom* intriguing. It’s not all that often I find a book that meets two of my interests at the same time. Morgenstein’s novel delivered, providing imaginative world-building while at the same time weaving in the sport of baseball as a central pillar of the story.

At the outset of the novel, former Major League Baseball pitcher Puppy Nedick and his ex-wife Annette Ramos find themselves in London, England. But London in the late 21st century isn’t the city we’re familiar with. In a world where the Muslim forces won World War III and Britain has become part of the Caliphate farm animals roam the Christian churches, the Palace of Westminster has become the Mufti’s Throne, and Big Ben lies in ruins. These cues tell us we’re in a very different world.

Crawling with hostile forces, London is not particularly safe for Americans like Puppy and Annette. But it’s not safety the duo is after. Puppy, who is wanted for treason and murder back in America, is on a mission “to find Pope John and stop World War Four”—a tall order.

It's not just London that has changed. Back in America, things are different too. Electoral parties and elections have been replaced by a “family” system. During the time frame covered by *A Fastball for Freedom*, former Chicago Cubs shortstop Albert Cheng is at the helm of the country, having assumed the role of Grandpa. Top-ranking officials are known as “Cousins,” with the degree (First, Second, and so on) designating how high up they are in the hierarchy. Ordinary citizens are brothers and sisters, siblings if you will.

Unlike Britain and Europe, America has not fallen under the sway of the Caliphate—not yet, at least. However, people within the country have historically been divided about whether to opt for war, or to seek peace.

The novel follows a number of characters, including Puppy and Annette, a woman named Zelda and her baby Diego Junior; Fifth (formerly Third) Cousin Elias Kenuda; a young orphan girl named Clary Santiago; and a member of the Muslim rebel forces.

On the futuristic note, *A Fastball for Freedom* features androids with varying degrees of sophistication, including some that are difficult to tell from their human counterparts. Holograms are commonplace. As for the central sport of interest, Major League Baseball was suspended after homegrown terrorist attacks sparked by a group calling themselves the Blue Wigs. The Blue Wigs themselves have baseball connections as exemplified by their logo: a blue wig over crossed baseball bats.

With the world so vastly changed, it’s no wonder many Americans feel a sense of nostalgia for a happier past. Included in that is a yearning to see the sport of baseball revived. Individuals like Ernie Paicopolos hoard baseball mementos as reminders of better times. Others are so ardent to see baseball’s return that they volunteer to help out in rebuilding stadiums like New Fenway Park. The sport’s deep connection to American values is exemplified by displays put up by fans along the route to the Boston ballpark:

On the corner, a scarecrow oozing stuffing dangled from a hook above a shuttered haberdashery, a red B cap stuck atop its clown-like face. On its chest was a sign, “Give Me Baseball Or Give Me Death.”

Another scarecrow bears a sign with the slogan, “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of a Fastball.”

Albert Cheng grasps the value of baseball as a morale booster. In discussing plans to restore Major League Baseball, he states:

From this day forward, we won’t look back . . . America will only look forward to the future. We’ll rebuild the glory of our past greatness as we rebuild the glory of baseball. Because as baseball will return on January 1, so someday soon will the greatness of our nation.

*A Fastball for Freedom* contains some dark references, including mention of child sex slaves and wartime atrocities. Counterbalancing the sometimes grim sections are moments of pure levity, found, for example, in dialogue between characters (particularly Puppy and Annette), in Clary Santiago’s antics, or in Puppy’s efforts to introduce baseball to Brits. The novel offers a generous dose of satire as well.

*A Fastball for Freedom* is the second book in the Morgenstein’s Dark Depths series. I jumped right into *A Fastball for Freedom* without the benefit of having read *A Mound Over Hell*, the first of the Dark Depths books. While Morgenstein provides enough information for the uninitiated to deduce what’s going on even if they haven’t read the prequel, I had the sense that I might have gained a deeper resonance from certain events if I’d read *A Mound Over Hell* first.

That being said, I found *A Fastball for Freedom* original and entertaining, with a strong undercurrent of humor. At the same time, the novel provided food for thought on the staying power of the passion for sport.

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Morgenstein, Gary. A Fastball for Freedom (Book 2 of the Dark Depths series). Plymouth, MI: BHC Press, 2021. pp. 480.