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**Morgenstein, Gary. A Mound Over Hell (Book 1 of the Dark Depths series).**

Reviewed by Lisa Timpf

In *A Mound Over Hell,* Book 1 of the Dark Depths series, Gary Morgenstein weaves together a story about baseball, politics, and a changed society while presenting an interesting and engaging cast of characters. Chief among the latter is Puppy Nedick, a former college pitching star now turned baseball historian.

In the early chapters of the novel*,* which is set in 2098, Puppy’s friends Zelda Jones and Pablo Diaz are bugging him about the need to get a new job. After all, the current season is slated to be the last for major league baseball. Once that’s over, there won’t be much need for Puppy’s role.

But baseball is Puppy’s passion, and he isn’t ready to move on yet. If this is going to be the final season, he’s determined to see his beloved sport go out with a bang. It’s clear that he’ll have a long way to go. Only eight listless fans grace the stands of Amazon Stadium (formerly Yankee Stadium) as the Bronx Hawks and the Bronx Falcons clash in the first match of the year. Most of the heavy lifting in the game is done by holograms, as the human players only go up to bat. The athletes are out of shape and dispassionate about the game.

Things change after supposedly-dead baseball stars Ty Cobb, Mickey Mantle, and Mooshie Lopez show up, one by one, in Puppy’s apartment. Puppy doesn’t understand how they’ve come back to life, but he doesn’t really care. Seeing his opportunity to breathe some life back into the game, Puppy ditches the holograms. Assisted by Ty and Mickey, he slowly whips the flesh-and-blood players into shape while cultivating a growing following for the sport.

Puppy also hits reboot on his own pitching career. Back when he was young enough not to know better, he injured his pitching arm by pushing too hard to break a record. Now, faced with pain and lack of function in his arm, he needs to employ different strategies to be successful. At the same time, his will to win compels him to push the boundaries. His experiences, along with those of Ty and Mickey, illustrate the difficulties aging athletes have when trying to make a comeback. When Mickey and Ty first take to the field, Puppy finds “some poignant familiarity to the way they tried to throw and hit. As if Mick and Ty were putting on their wedding suits, knowing it didn’t fit, but didn’t matter because they still thought they were young studs on a happy day.” (p. 59)

As the season progresses, Puppy appears to be making gains, both with pitching and with boosting baseball’s profile. But not everyone is a fan, and the race is on to see whether Puppy’s aspirations will be fulfilled, or dashed.

The America of the future which serves as the backdrop for Puppy’s endeavors is dramatically different from the one we’re familiar with. After losing World War Three to the Islamic Empire, with 13 million casualties suffered, America surrendered in 2073. Democracy has been replaced by a “family” system, and America is led by Lenore Chin, better known as Grandma. Citizens are guided by “Grandma’s Insights,” a list of precepts that all are expected to take to heart.

Because of the lingering effects of radiation, even the food supply has changed. Most items for consumption are synthetic. Robots, performing in various capacities, abound. Most of these are faceless, though they do have some degree of emotion, including a capacity for feeling affronted when humans don’t show them respect.

The novel includes speculations about the future of sport, envisioning a time when fans might be transported into the football huddle via Virtual Reality. As for baseball, reference is made to a robot arm pitching scandal in the 2050s. In the aftermath of that, Major League Baseball shrank to 12 teams. The sport fell into further disgrace after being used by dissidents as a focal point for terrorist acts.

Even without these issues, baseball would have had its struggles. Many sports fans had lost interest, attracted by higher-action sports like football and basketball. By 2098, “Just the diehards, the real fans, wanted the laconic baseball from a distant past, an America which no longer existed, an America few wanted to be reminded of.” (p. 59) But Puppy suspects that an undercurrent of love for the sport remains, and he does his best to tap into that.

Given its dystopian setting, it’s not surprising that the novel contains some dark moments. Despite this, many of the situations and the interchanges between characters are humorous, albeit often with a sarcastic or satirical bite. Morgenstein also does a masterful job of building suspense on a number of fronts. For example, Pablo stumbles upon a strange anomaly with a restaurant that seems to be frozen in time. Zelda’s boyfriend disappears. Then there is the question of how three former baseball stars have managed to come back to life. The sense of mystery simmering beneath the surface serves to draw the reader forward.

Published in 2018, *A Mound Over Hell* is the initial book in the Dark Depths series. It delivers on what one might hope from a series-opening novel, with a unique and thoroughly-developed setting, interesting characters, and high stakes. The second novel in the Dark Depths series, *A Fastball for Freedom,* was published in 2021.

Morgenstein, Gary. A Mound Over Hell (Book 1 of the Dark Depths series). Plymouth, MI: BHC Press, 2018. pp. 520.