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**Morgenstein, Gary. A Dugout to Peace**

Morgenstein, Gary. A Dugout to Peace. (The Dark Depths, Book 3). Plymouth, MI: BHC Press, 2023. 552 pages. Price: Hardcover $34, Softcover $22.95, Ebook $9.99.

Reviewed by Lisa Timpf

In *A Dugout to Peace*, Gary Morgenstein delivers the third and final installment in his dystopian, baseball-themed *Dark Depths* trilogy. Fans of the earlier books will be happy to welcome back familiar characters like former baseball star Puppy Nedick, Annette Ramos, Elias Kenuda, and the irrepressible Clary Santiago, among others.

Morgenstein’s *Dark Depths* trilogy, which began with *A Mound Over Hell* and *A Fastball for Freedom*, is set in the late twenty-first century. After World War III, Muslim powers have laid claim to a large chunk of the planet. In the United States, democracy has been abandoned as a failed experiment, and the country is led by The Family.

In *A Dugout to Peace,* much of the action takes place in 2099. *A Dugout to Peace* adds some new twists, with the feisty Clary Santiago taking over leadership as the Granddaughter. The disgraced Elias Kenuda and Albert Cheng, former baseball star and former leader of the Family as Grandpa, have taken up residence in a Disappointment Village, one of Morgenstein’s delightfully satirical creations. Meanwhile, retired baseball great Puppy Nedick is appointed as baseball commissioner, taking over from the synthetic versions of Mickey Mantle and Ty Cobb.

The 2099 season started with a bang, but fan interest has been declining. Whipping up enthusiasm for the game will be a challenge, particularly since Puppy suspects that the deck is being stacked against him. Many of those higher up in the Family would be happy to see baseball quietly go away. Puppy, who has a deep-seated passion for the game, isn’t willing to let it go gently. One of his strategies is to bring back features of the past world and society that have, up to now, been forbidden. Because things like fan adulation have been suppressed, there are rules against people rooting for teams, chanting, or wearing team paraphernalia. Relics from the past have gone underground, after the Baseball Hall of Fame was ostensibly destroyed. Puppy attempts to push back some of these limitations, with mixed results. As in some of Morgenstein’s earlier books in the series, baseball becomes a flash point for societal tensions. When a young man wearing red socks is killed by an overzealous ’bot enforcer, protests and acts of solidarity are triggered.

Morgenstein offers an interesting take on baseball of the future. For one thing, he portrays both male and female baseball stars. One of the greatest talents of the 21st century is a pitcher named Mooshie Lopez, who also happens to be a tremendous singer. In *A Dugout to Peace,* there are also debates about what era of baseball was “best.” *A Dugout to Peace* features contests between the 21st century stars and descendants of 20th century greats like Johnny Bench, Stan Musial, and Nolan Ryan.

*A Dugout to Peace* includes multiple references to baseball history, and characters debate some of the rule changes and amendments to the game.

Morgenstein also gives baseball a broader symbolic significance. Picking up on a thread from the earlier books in the series, Annette Ramos is on a mission to find the Pope, who escaped into hiding. The hope is that the Pope can broker peace between the warring Muslim and Western forces. Could baseball have a role to play?

While the baseball action is interesting in its own right, Morgenstein’s book is also enjoyable for its take on future society. As in the previous books in the *Dark Depths* series, Morgenstein portrays a complex and thoroughly imagined future world in which Americans, out of necessity, consume synthetic foods, and humans and robots have an uneasy co-existence. There are, for example, multiple levels of police robots. America has decided to deploy robot soldiers in an attempt to gain back some of the territory they lost to the Muslim forces. Synthetic beings perform many tasks in society, including driving public transit, and some of them also develop their own motivations and the ability to make up their own minds about certain matters. In addition, attempts to transfer human consciousness to robotic bodies have also seen some success, although Morgenstein chooses to give these constructs some limitations rather than endowing them with immortality.

Perhaps it’s just me, but *A Dugout to Peace* felt more tightly plotted than the previous two books, while at the same time continuing to deliver an intricately imagined dystopian world with unique, satirical, and often humorous quirks. Morgenstein’s humor has a way of making you grimace and laugh at the same time, but there is enough of an air of plausibility that you can half-believe some of this could come true. Those who enjoyed *A Mound Over Hell* and *A Fastball for Freedom* will find *A Dugout to Peace* a fitting conclusion to the series.

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