**Review of *Light at the Edge of the Field* by Bill Meissner**

**By Dave Buchanan, MacEwan University**

Bill Meissner has perfected a certain kind of baseball story: the setting is a small town in Minnesota or Iowa and the main character is a guy who plays or played or works adjacent to baseball and harbors romantic ideas about one or more of the following: outfield grass, batting gloves, and the art of the stolen base. The overwhelming mood is nostalgia. The themes almost always include loss and/or father-son relationships and the way that baseball connects us to people, nature, and the past.

Plus Meissner knows his way around a sentence and a simile. His phrases and images almost always land crisply, like opposite field line drives stroked cleanly over an infielder’s stabbing mitt. If this kind of W. P. Kinsella-esque baseball story is up your power alley, then you’ll probably enjoy Meissner’s latest collection of 26 short pieces, *Light at the Edge of the Field* (2021).

At his best, Meissner captures both a wistful sense of loss and the promise of a kind of calmness in the rhythms of the game. One of my favorite stories in the book is “In the Middle of a Steal,” about Dusty Sikarsky, a former MLB pitcher turned used-car salesman in small-town Kansas and who coaches little league on the side. The washed up cars he sells remind him of himself, but Dusty maintains just enough hope in youth and the game to make a grand gesture or two.

That story works beautifully, but some of the others verge on the hokey, relying a little too much on cliched plotlines (the father-son relationship, the old-timer ball player who can’t quite let go) and overwrought metaphors. Sometimes grass is just grass, isn’t it?

My main criticism of this collection, though, is the narrow male-centric scope of Meissner’s baseball universe. The protagonist in 25 of the 26 stories is a man. Women, when they appear at all in these stories, are strictly wives and girlfriends of ball players, bench roles as loyal supporters of their dreamy ball-playing man-children (though in one story, a girlfriend dumps the ballplayer for his lack of commitment, which at least made her feel like an actual person). The possibility that women might *play* baseball is only broached in one story, the shortest in the book, “Baseball Wife at the Start of the Season,” a curious dream-like vignette of the protagonist’s wife taking her first-ever batting practice.

In another story, “What’s Next: The Baseball Lovers,” the narrator is a woman. While the point of view is promising, the story is really about the man she loves, a baseball player, 27 years old, star pitcher on his amateur team, but who’s more complicated than he seems and who has trouble talking about his feelings.

Overall, Meissner’s baseball universe is, to put it politely, old-fashioned, so male-dominated as to feel like a throwback to a previous century, and in 2024 that just feels weird. I found myself wondering, who’s the audience for a book like this? Given the content of the stories, I’m thinking dudes over 60 who have childhood memories of baseball, probably involving their fathers, and who remember when baseball was pretty much a man’s world. Problem is, it just isn’t anymore and these stories—impressively written as they are—feel out of step.

Despite my misgivings about this blind spot in Meissner’s baseball world, I have to admit that the guy does have one genius writerly quality: endings, a notoriously difficult part of the writer’s job. Meissner is an elite closer, always tying things up with an elegant, satisfying flourish of ambiguity and poetry. I mean, he’s astonishingly good at this. Even the stories that I found groaningly cliche had beautiful, elegant sign offs. Almost every aspiring writer could pick up a few tricks here, and if you can live with the limitations of Meissner’s baseball universe, he’s worth reading for these final paragraphs alone.