

FICTION

Kinsella hits one deep

**Japanese Baseball
and Other Stories**

By W. P. Kinsella

Thistledown, 218 pages, \$18.50

REVIEWED BY PETER O'BRIEN

Still basking in fame for penning *Shoeless Joe* (which became the movie *Field of Dreams*), W. P. Kinsella continues to write delightful and imaginative stories centred on baseball.

Any one of the 11 stories collected here is the perfect antidote to all the recent blabber about Alex Rodriguez's money grab or Darryl Strawberry's endless drug woes.

They are all endearing, and they are all told in such an effortless manner that even the moments of didacticism or sentimentality that sneak into them can be forgiven.

The whole story and history of baseball is here, from towns getting their own franchises to kids dreaming about playing in the bigs to men leaning on canes reminiscing about those great, crystallized-in-memory plays of so long ago.

Among the strongest stories,

and one that would make a great movie, is *Fred Noonan's Flying Services*. Noonan was Amelia Earhart's navigator on her last, mysterious flight. The story, about an aging pro baseball player and a publicity photographer, weaves together romance of the body and of the imagination. Its magical possibilities leave the reader bathed in "the wild throes of first romance" while at the same time wondering about those "other dimensions chittering all about us."

The Arbiter, which follows the rather sad life of an umpire, includes a great little scene, complete with dirt-kicking and arm-waving, about a feigned argument between an umpire and a manager.

And *The First and Last Annual Six Towns Area Old-Timers' Game*, about a group of old-timers coming together for one more rekindling of past glories, follows the meandering team known as Brother Pettigrew's Divine Light Baseball Mission from small-town United States and on up through small-town Canada.

The team, it was said, combined "the two Gods of rural North

America: the mysterious and sometimes troubling one in the sky and the one of baseball."

Although the book is not saturated in baseball trivia, there are a lot of references to the game. You don't necessarily have to know who Leo Durocher or George Brett or Andres Galarraga are, but it will help — not unlike knowing your Chaucer or T. S. Eliot in a particularly allusive contemporary work of literary fiction.

The great strength of *Japanese Baseball* is that the stories are no more and no less than exactly what I assume Kinsella wants them to be: thoughtful, charmed stories about the everyday magic of desire. Their scaffolding may be the game of baseball, but there is just as much in them about love searched for and lost as there is about turning that perfect double play or smacking a high fastball deep over the centre-field fence.

Peter O'Brien's most recent book, co-written with Harold Heft, is Build a Better Book Club. He lives in Toronto where he coaches softball at the Bishop Strachan School.