

ity of his adult memory. Central to the book is a brutal longing for perfection, achieved briefly in a star-crossed relationship so ferocious it retains its influence for life—an intense experience turbulently adrift in a sea of transience.

Elio is a scholarly, sensitive 17-year-old boy; Oliver is a 24-year-old charming, worldly professor of philosophy and summer houseguest of Elio's father in their lush Italian seaside villa. The first half of the novel is a tour de force account of the tortuous on-and-off dance between the two, beginning when Elio serves as tour guide for Oliver and ending 132 pages later in bed. Each advance between them writes a new page in a thesaurus of approach-avoidance; their lurches apart, fueled by uncertainty and danger, are reversed by the relentless magnetism of their attractions.

The thrill of someone new, the promise of so much bliss hovering a fingertip away. Fumbling...in desperation to be wanted, I put up screens between me and the world, not just one, but like layers of rice paper, sliding doors embossed on every sight, sound and smell I'd grown up with, suddenly turned to acquire an inflection forever colored by the events of the summer Oliver came into our house. (p. 10)

Oliver is by turns charming and diffident—fire to ice and back, “but when his kinder gaze fell on me it came like the miracle of the resurrection” (p. 9). The two run together on the beach each morning: “Our feet were aligned, left with left, and struck the ground at the same time, leaving footprints on the shore that I wished to return to and, in secret, place my foot where his had left its mark” (p. 11). After the first casual touch Elio panics “like a virgin touched for the first time, stirring nerves they never knew existed.... I hoped he wouldn't notice my overreaction, but was certain that my struggle to conceal would expose me. I needed to stare at him, but could never stare long enough to find out why I couldn't” (p. 16). Elio's reluctance is finally undone by their symmetry in taste, wit, and intelligence. Their minds seem to travel in parallel, exchanging affirmations with a private glance. The recurrent incarnations of fire and ice progress until they finally bed each other in the last week of summer, aware in retrospect that each had misread the other's shyness. Elio feared rejection, uncertainty, and making a fool of himself; Oliver feared abusing the influence of his seniority. Both are traversing forbidden terrain, capped by three Bacchanalian days in Rome celebrating denial in grand hypomanic style. The intimacy that is over in one realm becomes indelibly engraved on another.

Other villa residents reflect various prisms of the romance. Mafalda, cook and housekeeper, hears all, washes the bed sheets, and knows everything. The theme of loss is poignantly introduced by Vimini, the ten-year-old girl next door, who conveys with precocious maturity that she has leukemia and a foreshortened life expectancy. She charms Oliver and they walk the beach daily. Her impending death foreshadows the end of summer. Another chord in the story is the reality of a double life, spoken of to Elio by his father after Oliver's departure. “You had a beautiful friendship. Maybe more than a friendship. In my place, my parents would hope the whole thing goes away, but I am not such a parent. We rip out too much of ourselves to be cured of things faster than we should, but our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once. Most

of us can't help but live as though we've got two lives, one is the mockup, the other the finished version. But there's only one” (p. 224). He advises Elio that to hurry sorrow away “wears out the heart.”

Aciman considers a different aspect of transience in an earlier essay on his love for the sea in which he wrestles with the question, “What do you do with so much blue once you've seen it?” (1). The aura of that question haunts this novel: how do you go on with your life when you possess what you've wanted more than anything else in the world and must let go of it? No one fails to suffer the urge to stop time, but each must settle instead for the archives of memory. If the intensity of the memory matches Elio's, a return to the villa is a mistake, and it is one he makes.

There is a reunion at Christmas, and when Elio's plea of “one last time” is refused, his loss is revisited. The next summer Oliver marries and much of the rest of Elio's life is filled with “what ifs” and relationships marked “before” and “after” Oliver. Their second reunion occurs 15 years later, filled with ragged acceptance of the life lived.

Did I want to be like him? Or did I just want to have him? Or are “being” and “having” thoroughly inaccurate verbs in the twisted skein of desire, where having someone's body to touch and being that someone we're longing to touch are one and the same, just opposite banks of a river that passes from us to them, back to us and over to them again in this perpetual circuit where the chambers of the heart, like the false-bottomed drawer we call identity, share a beguiling logic according to which the shortest distance between real life and the life un-lived, between who we are and what we want, is a twisted staircase designed with the impish cruelty of M. C. Escher. (p. 67)

This book may complicate our concepts of intimacy, identity, and a few other things, but it describes some aspects of relationships and the workings of memory better than any textbook. Such are the humbling contributions of novelists.

Reference

1. Aciman A: In search of blue, in *False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000, p 28

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***The Entitled: A Tale of Modern Baseball*, by Frank Deford. Naperville, Ill., Sourcebooks, 2007, 352 pp, \$24.95.**

The aptly named Howie Traveler is a baseball manager who, after bouncing around the farmtowns and milltowns that populate baseball's minor leagues, has finally gotten his call-up to “The Show” as manager of the Cleveland Indians. Unfortunately for Howie, the book begins at the point that his life as a big league manager seems about to end.

As he prepares his underachieving team, including underperforming superstar Jay Alcazar, to play a series against the Orioles, Howie is certain he is about to be fired. More precisely, that he “won't get outta Baltimore alive.”

To lose this job would mean certain death in terms of his big league dreams. The baseball barons who control the fates of their minions in the major league will not be proffering another opportunity to a former career minor leaguer who couldn't take top-rate talent to the title. Those kinds of opportunities only come once. Howie may have gotten close the previous year to collecting a championship for long-suffering Cleveland fans, but the flip side of baseball's eternal optimism ("Wait 'til next year!") is the all too grim reality that one is only as good as one's current record. And Cleveland's current record was bad.

What went wrong? His cast from the preceding year, who came ever so close to winning it all, was back essentially unchanged, and in Jay Alcazar the Indians had what all teams covet: a bona fide, top-shelf talent with transcendent athletic ability.

However, this year Howie feels somewhat betrayed by his superstar. In fact, he initially thinks Alcazar is secretly sandbagging to get him fired and a fellow Latino installed as the new manager. The truth behind the drop in Alcazar's performance is something so much more elemental to his core identity than a shared heritage.

I'm not revealing anything critical to the book by saying Howie doesn't lose his job in Baltimore that weekend. The reader learns that in the first few chapters. Howie earns a reprieve because of a crisis off the field involving, alas, Jay Alcazar.

While the narrative hook of *The Entitled* is what may or may not have occurred one weekend in Baltimore, it is Alcazar's backstory that drives the novel and makes it so much more than a simple baseball book. In what could have easily been a second novel we learn of the outfielder's childhood torn asunder in Castro's Cuba, with his semi-triumphant, albeit mostly incognito, return to the island to reconnect with his past.

The book is a work of fiction, but with all the real team names (and some real player names) peppered throughout, the fiction feels thinly veiled. One wonders whether Deford is attempting to pull back the curtain on 21st-century baseball as Jim Bouton did with *Ball Four* a generation ago. But at one point nearly midway in the book, the veil becomes thin to the point of distraction.

In a flashback recounting Alcazar's meeting with *Cleveland Plain Dealer* scribe Mickey Huey, the latter laments the waning influence that writers have on the shaping of athletes' images. The reporter points derisively to the television at the end of the bar, presumably showing ESPN's *Sportscenter* or one of its many imitators, as the cause of the demise of the sportswriter's importance in creating and chronicling the characters of the game. Deford is widely lauded as a great sportswriter, one who has appeared as a regular commentator on NPR, ESPN, and HBO, so it seems somewhat misplaced for him to assume the mantle of technology's victim on behalf of his colleagues.

However, that is but one minor quibble, since the passage itself is so engrossing you forgive the possible transparency. The book's other pitfall is the often brutal coarseness with which many characters regard and act toward women. Deford might be attempting to hold a mirror to the sport to urge improvement via self-actualization, but more often than not the scenes depicting sexual situations seem salacious rather than sermonic.

The tale ends with the reader left having to fill in some gaps in the intervening timeline, but the devil is not in the details

here. One might wish that the ending did not come so quickly, craving juicy tidbits of what transpired from point A to point B. But with Deford having provided two such richly drawn characters as Traveler and Alcazar, one can easily imagine how each would have acted in the interim.

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Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock, by Kirk Varnedoe. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2006, 304 pp, \$45.00.

Kirk Varnedoe's metaphor for modern art comes from the legendary story of William Webb Ellis, who picked up a soccer ball and ran with it at England's Rugby School in 1823. Varnedoe, himself a rugby player of considerable ability, points out that what onlookers saw as "a fine disregard for the rules" was actually the seeds of a new sport. Varnedoe sees art in a Hegelian sense, with new forms of art constantly emerging as new artists challenge the rules of those who precede them. The book's chapters were originally delivered as the Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in 2003 and were Varnedoe's final works, as he died of cancer shortly thereafter. The lectures were never rewritten for publication; thus, they carry the freshness and energy of his greatly appreciated lecturing style.

The book is marvelously illustrated, with dozens of small but high quality prints illustrating each point, all selected with the good taste and historical sense of a scholar who was Professor of History of Art at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and also a curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. For me, the book was slow and difficult to read, but only because there was so much art that I found myself returning to each paragraph and picture several times in an effort to grasp the points made by Varnedoe. To my delight, I began to see for myself what Varnedoe was attempting to convey.

What emerges first and foremost is an appreciation of the genius of Jackson Pollock. Each chapter begins by recognizing what Pollock did to make his paintings so vibrant and emotive. I turned time and again to the Pollock illustrations, seeing how truly dynamic they were and how richly they conveyed a sense of energy and movement, and I was disappointed when the artists following him could not convey the same sense of vitality. Varnedoe would intercede, however, and patiently explain that modern art is a risk and that abstractions strive to convey more with less.

I began to grasp this point when I read Varnedoe's comparison of Frank Stella and Victor Vasarely. Varnedoe was in awe of Stella, a Princeton-educated artist and the most scholarly of the abstract painters following Pollock. Using crudely painted lines and rough canvas, Stella captured the vitality that others would miss. Stella's *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II* (1959) was described by the artist as "negative Pollockism," but it is clearly an extension into geometric design of what Pollock had accomplished with paint drippings. Vasarely, on the other hand, came from a background in commercial illustration, and his slick geometric designs, produced for mass distribution, appear almost identical to