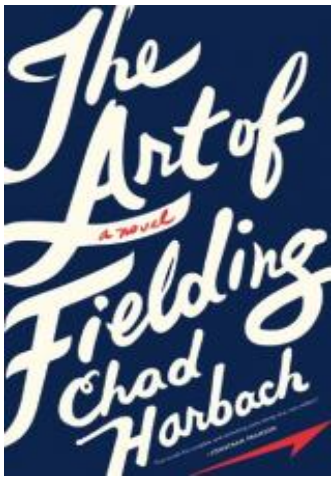
The Art of Fielding

by Chad Harbach



About the Book

At Westish College, a small school on the shore of Lake Michigan, baseball star Henry Skrimshander seems destined for big league stardom. But when a routine throw goes disastrously off course, the fates of five people are upended.

Henry's fight against self-doubt threatens to ruin his future. College president Guert Affenlight, a longtime bachelor, has fallen unexpectedly and helplessly in love. Owen Dunne, Henry's gay roommate and teammate, becomes caught up in a dangerous affair. Mike Schwartz, the Harpooners' team captain and Henry's best friend, realizes he has guided Henry's career at the expense of his own. And Pella Affenlight, Guert's daughter, returns to Westish after escaping an ill-fated marriage, determined to start a new life.

As the season counts down to its climactic final game, these five are forced to confront their deepest hopes, anxieties, and secrets. In the process they forge new bonds, and help one another find their true paths. Written with boundless intelligence and filled with the tenderness of youth, THE ART OF FIELDING is an expansive, warmhearted novel about ambition and its limits, about family and friendship and love, and about commitment --- to oneself and to others.

Discussion Guide

1. Does male friendship always involve competition? In what ways? Can men ever be just friends? Are their relationships more competitive than those between women?

2. After a long streak of errorless games, why does Henry lose his once-effortless throw? What has changed in Henry? Do you think this sort of crisis is unique to athletics? Could, say, a painter go through a similar crisis?

3. Harbach never writes from Owen?s point of view. In what ways did this affect your understanding of Owen?s character? Of his feelings toward Guert? Is their relationship one-sided, or perfectly reciprocal?

4. Mike devotes much of his time and energy to mentoring and helping Henry. Does he give Henry too much of his time and energy? Can someone give too much?

5. After hitting Owen and losing his accuracy, Henry immerses himself in grueling physical activity: running the stadium steps, racing Starblind, doing endless chin-ups, swimming in the lake. Why does he do this? Is his body to blame for his throwing problems? Discuss the relationship between the body and the mind in THE ART OF FIELDING.

6. Are Pella and Henry in love? What brings them together? Why do they stay together?

7. Guert is decades older than Mike, Henry, Owen and Pella, but in what ways is he similar to the students, despite his age?

8. ?Monomania? --- the obsessive pursuit of a single thing --- is one of the major themes of Herman Melville?s Moby-Dick. Is it also a major theme of THE ART OF FIELDING? If so, for which characters, and in what ways?

9. The athletes talk about sacrificing their bodies to get better, and the "sacrifice bunt" is a baseball term that comes up frequently. Is Henry sacrificing himself when he stops eating? Why? Is his last at bat a sacrifice?

10. Are Mike, Henry and Pella all striving for perfection? Is perfection possible? Is it worth striving for, even if it?s impossible? Why or why not? Do their desires evolve over the course of the novel? In what ways?

11. When Affenlight is confronted about his relationship with Owen, he thinks: "What kind of conversation would they be having if Owen were a girl? Bruce would be using the same legalese, the expression on his face would still be stern, but he?d be pouring himself a scotch. The gleam in his eye would say, Good for you, Guert. Still got it, eh?" Do you think this is true? Would you have seen Guert differently?

12. Why does Pella exhume her father?s body and bury it in the lake?

13. In Aparicio Rodriguez's THE ART OF FIELDING, he writes: "There are three stages: Thoughtless being. Thought. Return to thoughtless being." He adds: "Thoughtless being is attained by everyone, the return to thoughtless being by a very few." What do you think this means? How does it relate to Chad Harbach?s book?

14. It has been said that baseball is a metaphor for life. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Author Bio

Chad Harbach is the author of the novels THE BRIGHTNESS and THE ART OF FIELDING, which has been translated into more than 20 languages. He is a founding editor of *n+1* and the editor of the essay collection *MFA vs. NYC*. He lives in northern California with his son and dog.

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