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‘The Fantastics’, or what we can learn from historical fiction

Abstract:

In this article, the author illustrates the value of a historical narrative that provides readers with a lived experience based on carefully researched fiction. In particular, this practice-based research sought to answer the question, “What would it be like to attend the 1922 World Series alongside the sports journalists who were there to cover the games?” To research this article, the author read biographies of sports journalists who covered the World Series that year, along with their reports of the games. To add further historical detail, the author made use of newspaper accounts by other sports journalists, then used practice-led research to produce a novel as a creative response to the research question. Perhaps not surprisingly, the research led to insights about the nature of practising sports journalism in the early twentieth century. Another insight generated by the research revealed uncharacteristic errors and other anomalies that allowed the author to question the integrity of some of the players in the series. Given that there were no video or audio recordings of the series, this research fills that gap by bringing the sports journalism of a century ago to life through the writers who were present at the games.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

“What would it be like to cover the 1922 World Series with Ring Lardner, Damon Runyon, and other sports journalists from the 1920s?”

Following the practice-led research guidelines of Smith and Dean (2009), the creative work that follows this research statement explores a potential answer to this research question. Responding to historical records, known baseball history, historical baseball journalism, and intricate knowledge of the game, as well as events of the ballpark atmosphere, the creative work allows for engagement with existing research and suggests ways to experience and re-imagine a moment in time.

By creating a novel that contributed to the outcomes of his research process, the author’s creative work is able to generate insights about the practice of sports journalism one hundred years ago that are historically accurate, but also allow for continued imaginings of the time and its key players in a fictional setting (Smith & Dean, 2009). Given that there were no video or audio recordings of the 1922 World Series, this research fills that gap by bringing the sports journalism of a century ago to life through the imagined voices of the writers who were present at the games. Without video or audio mediums to provide material for inspiration or historical foundations for the basis for this practice-led research, biographies of the sports journalists who would serve as the characters in the novel – Ring Lardner, Heywood Broun, and Damon Runyon – were used as source material (Elder, 1956; Yardley, 1977; O’Connor, 1975; Breslin, 1991). Archival research to find the journalistic accounts of the 1922 World Series games, including stories of the game written by Lardner himself, were also sourced. The novel was further advanced by a critical article that the author published in the journal *NINE* that examined the work of Lardner, Broun, and Jane Dixon, a special assignment sports journalist who was covering her first World Series (Peterson, 2017). In effect, the research and the writing of the *NINE* article formed some of the notes for the novel, allowing critical research and historical work to inform the fiction.

This research was also informed by other such creative works, particularly Don DeLillo’s *Pafko at the Wall*, which is the novella version of the introduction to his novel *Underworld* (1997). To take his readers on a journey to the 1951 playoff game that ended with Bobby Thomson’s pennant-clinching home run, DeLillo made use of biographies, journalistic accounts, and photos from the game to put his readers in the radio booth and in the stands with fans both real and imagined. Similarly, excerpts from the author’s novel, *The Fantastics*, included here use these methods to position the reader and transport them into an imagined scenario informed by historical data that provides insight into the environment as well as entertainment as fiction.

Consistent with practice-led research, the process of writing the novel contributed to the author’s findings even as the work was being produced. This process included making decisions about what research to use and how to tell the story of a World Series played one hundred years ago between two New York teams, the Yankees and the Giants. The author was initially drawn into the events of 1922 by two small details that came up in this research: a skit

by Lardner that Broun published in the humour tabloid *The Judge* (1922) and Willa Cather’s assertion that the world came apart in that same year (as cited in Susman, 1973, p. 105). Soon after, the author discovered that Jane Dixon covered the World Series that year. Although she is not identified as such in the excerpts below, Dixon (or “Dix” as she is nicknamed by the other writers) is the narrator of the novel, in keeping with the American tradition of young, inexperienced observers telling the tale of their educations. Damon Runyan, who began his career as a sports journalist and continued to cover sports on a special assignment basis into the 1920s, rounds out the roster of sports journalists who appear as characters in the novel.

Most, if not all, of the events from the games are real, along with the details incorporated from other journalistic accounts of the series. Many of the biographical details from the lives of the sports journalists are also authentic, for example, Broun’s rumpled appearance, Dixon’s coverage of the Dempsey v. Willard title boxing match in 1919, and the comic strip Lardner started writing the continuity for in 1922. Other details are taken from the journalistic accounts of the writers who serve as characters in the novel, such as Broun’s support of Babe Ruth as a cultural force, the comedy routines of Nick Altrock and Al Schacht, and Lardner’s running gag about winning enough money from betting on the series to buy a fur coat for his wife. One of the creative liberties the author took was to include Dorothy Parker in the press box mix, which is a move similar to DeLillo’s decision to put J. Edgar Hoover in the same party as Frank Sinatra and Jackie Gleason in *Pafko at the Wall*. Given that Parker knew Broun and Lardner from the infamous Algonquin Round Table lunches and the group’s “Thanatopsis Literary Poker Society” and had quit *Vanity Fair* magazine in the fall of 1922, it was a small leap to imagine her joining the group to cover the series on a freelance basis. Having the game details and a knowledge of the speaking and writing styles of the sports journalists helped address the creative liberties required to imagine dialogue between the writers.

In the process of attempting to put the readers of *The Fantastics* into the press box of the Polo Grounds to watch the games of the 1922 World Series and enjoy the commentary of the writers in a manner akin to *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (Hodgson, 1988-1999), several insights were generated. Writing the novel illustrated just how long the day was for early twentieth century sports journalists. They arrive at the park at noon for batting practice, sit through the game (which required just two hours compared to the three- or four-hour contests of today), and travel from upper Manhattan to Newspaper Row in the southern part of the city to write and file their stories. Lardner, who lived in Long Island, cut down his travel by taking a room at the Algonquin for the week, a detail the author incorporated into the novel for more than one scene. Perhaps more significantly, delving into the play-by-play of the games allowed the author access to the press box and the games themselves. As a result of this immersion, the author was able to point to a number of specific plays where baserunners made uncharacteristic mistakes and dominant pitchers suddenly lost their “stuff” just long enough to allow the winning runs to be scored.

As observers have known since the earliest days of professional sport, it is unreasonable to assume that any game where a lot of money is in play rests on a foundation of moral certitude – this practice-based project illustrates just that. In exploring historical records, personal

biographies and, in the case of sports, the records of the on-field performance, researchers can find creative ways to give voice to counter narratives, portray the voices of the characters history ignored, and explore the complications that perhaps history did not want us to see.

From a remove of more than a hundred years, it is not possible to determine whether the 1922 World Series was fixed in the same way as the 1919 Series, but the close examination of the games allowed the author to glean insights that corroborated the suspicions of contemporary observers and historians alike (see Pietrusza, 1998, p. 307; Huhn, 2008, p. 241; Mayer, 2010, p. 3). From this method to the detailed investigation of the research materials and practice-led writing, the contribution of the novel illustrates the process by which sports journalists covered a World Series one hundred years ago and got close enough to the "inside baseball" action to detect plays that went against the prevailing notion of the times that America's pastime was a "clean game".

Excerpts from "The Fantastics", a historical novel in-progress

October 4, 1922: Game 1, Part I ***Polo Grounds, New York City***

Say what you want: Heywood Broun knows how to make a fantastic entrance.

First pitch is 2 p.m., but the gang wants to watch batting practice, so they plan to meet outside the Polo Grounds at noon. No one is surprised when Hey's driver forges his way up to the curb at half past the hour and disgorges the columnist onto the sidewalk. Hey gets up and tries to smooth down his hair and straighten his suit, but he only makes his appearance look more rumpled. As Hey jogs up to the waiting trio, he is juggling three books, two notepads, and a paper bag that moves so much it might contain live squirrels. Before pulling away, Hey's driver tosses a crushed fedora onto the sidewalk. It lies there until Hey follows Ring Lardner's gaze and then rushes to retrieve it, losing his grip on two of the volumes and one of the notebooks. An apple pops out of the paper bag when he bends to pick up the hat. Just before the fruit hits the pavement, Hey's big left-hand flashes out and catches it.

"Soft hands!" Hey cries, looking back at Lard, Dot Parker and Jane Dixon. "Still got 'em".

One second later, he loses his grip on six sharpened pencils, three gum erasers and a pack of Wrigley's.

"There is," Lard says, "such a thing as a satchel".

Jane and Dot pick up Hey's fallen supplies and Dot stuffs them in his jacket pocket. Hey and Lard met Jane Dixon three years earlier while covering the Dempsey-Willard fight in Jane's home state of Ohio. Hey, Dot, and sometimes Lard, know each other from the Algonquin Round Table and the Thanatopsis Literary Poker Society. Dot and Jane are meeting for the first

time, except Hey and Lard forget to introduce them. With those two, such omissions are more the rule and Dot is used to them. Despite being in New York the whole time since that hot and doubly dry week in Toledo, Jane has been confined to the women's page of the *Evening Telegram* and has not encountered Hey, Run or Lard much around the city.

"I know," Hey says, "but I lost both of mine somewhere".

"Including the one you got from Ruth at Christmas?" Dot asks.

"Now you've done it," Lard says. "And we aren't even in the park yet".

Jane Dixon, bless her heart, is so surprised she can't keep from blurting, "Babe Ruth got you a Christmas present?"

"No," Hey says, pocketing the apple so that he can take Jane's elbow as they start toward the gate, "it was from my wife, Ruth Hale, but let's consider Babe Ruth for a moment".

From the flight of the freckles on her scrunched nose, it is clear Jane is still trying to process Hey's marital status. Broun takes her silence as interest and plunges ahead with one of his favourite topics.

"Let's consider the power of George Herman Ruth, Jr. to advance American culture," Hey says, offering a nearly *verbatim* quotation from his New York *World* column, "It Seems to Me". "The Babe has showed us how to stand in the box, let our pulse slow as we study the pitcher, even as we keep our gaze soft, our thoughts light as we look, look, look, and then swing with all our might, all without a care for the count. What's another strike out when we can reach the seats? Even if we guess, we might guess right and connect so sweet and soft, just a whisper really, so light we hardly feel it in our hands, as if we're scooping the ball aloft before we tip toe out of the box, still soft, still watching, still hearing only the steady pulse in our ears as we glide around the bases. Isn't that a philosophy we all could, should adopt?"

Following behind, Dot looks up to Lard, and he completes her eye roll. Dot snickers softly and squeezes Lard's arm tighter.

"In short," Hey continues, "we need Babe Ruth. We need him to succeed here at the Polo Grounds this year after he had such a poor performance in last year's World's Series. He might strike out, sure, but we need him to make good and show us how to give our all at every moment and not be afraid of something so small, so mundane as striking out. In teaching us to reach for the fences to get the most of every opportunity, he's proving himself as a force for cultural progress, and he'll be more important in the future than all the flappers, the strikers, the suppressors of strikes, the bucketeers, bootleggers and bootlicking politicians".

"Wait," Jane says, "how is she your wife if her name is Ruth Hale?"

"If you're going to spend any time around Hey," Dot says, "you need to know –"

"In addition to the fact that he press-agents for Babe Ruth at every opportunity –" Lard cuts in.

"– that his wife helped found an organisation for women who have kept their maiden name," Dot finishes.

Hey shakes his head. "Somehow, Mrs. Parker, you never tire of springing that line on the uninitiated".

"You should thank me for recruiting Miss Dixon," Dot says. "She's a professional journalist writing under her own by-line, after all".

Jane stops and turns so she can address them both. "I do not need to be initiated or recruited. And I have read about Ruth Hale and the Lucy Stone League. I just did not connect her to Heywood".

"Well," Lard says, "that proves someone's point. As Kid Gleason once said, 'The war is over, leave us go to a ball game'".

The four Fantastics approach the team secretary of the Giants, who is stationed in one of the ticket windows. Recognising Hey and Lard right off, the secretary hands over their press pins without delay, but claims he can't find Jane Dixon's name on his list. While Hey and Lard have been writing about the World Series for more than a decade, Dixon is about to cover her first fall classic. Lard approaches the window and rises closer to his full height with each shake of the secretary's head. Lard is just about to say something when the team official finds Jane's name, slides a pin across to her slowly and turns to Dot. "I thought you were a theatre critic, Mrs. Parker".

Dot, of course, needs no one to come to her rescue. "Are you telling me there will be no drama during this World's Series? Has the outcome already been –"

Before she can complete her second question, the secretary hands her a pin and waves her toward the field.

"We'll keep Dot in line," Lard says, "because we know baseball is a clean game".

"He always promises that," Dot says, "but I'm here because I told his wife that I would keep *him* out of trouble".

The last Giants are taking their batting practice when the four reach the field. A few clumps of regular players stand in the outfield, gabbing and joking and pretending to shag the few fly balls sent their way by the players from the bullpen. Then the Giants leave the field and are replaced by the Yankees. When the top five hitters in the line-up start taking their swings, a man with slightly close-set eyes and a downturned mouth moves behind the batting screen to study the hitters and talk to the waiting players. Seeing that Jane is watching the recent arrival, Hey says, "That's Damon Runyon. I'm not sure why he's here because someone else is

covering the series for Hearst. If you ask me, he's trying to get some dope for his gambling friends". Then he lowers his voice even more. "And you know who his gambling friends are, don't you, Miss Dixon?"

Jane nods. "I was born at night, but not last night".

Undeterred, Hey presses on. "Good. Some say the Yankees are the favourites because they have both the hitting and the pitching. The Giants can hit, but they only have one reliable starter. After that, their pitching staff is made up of journeymen and cast-offs".

"And that promising young newcomer, Claude Jonnard," Jane adds.

"One of the biggest local commissioners for those who are of the speculative turn of mind, as they say in the papers," Hey continues, "told me on the basis of the two teams playing 30 games, the Yankees have 24 chances to win and the Giants 6. Doing the math, that makes the proper odds 4 to 1 in the favour of the Yankees. The Giants have more experience, perhaps, but everyone is saying it's Ruth's year because he is finally healthy. That's probably what the Babe is telling Runyon right now".

Runyon doffs his fedora with a flourish that brings a laugh from the Yankees.

"Or maybe he's telling them a joke," Jane says.

"Runyon is fairly –" Hey cuts himself off as soon as the Babe enters the cage. "Watch. You'll see what I was talking about earlier".

Ruth starts with his legs together, his back slightly hunched, his hands at his waist and his elbows tight. Then he throws his hips forward, committing his weight fully to the swing. In short, it *is* the opposite of staying back and playing it safe. With maximum momentum and complete commitment, the Babe catches himself with his front foot just as he starts to whip his bat forward while his shoulders are compressed and coiled like a spring-loaded catapult. Pitch after pitch, swing after swing, the balls fly out into the right field stands – just like a machine as he loads and fires, loads and fires, transferring the power of his six-foot-two-inch, two-hundred-pound frame with a smooth, quiet precision.

Jane hears Hey whisper, "Atta-boy, Babe. Atta-boy".

By the time the four writers start the climb up to the press box, the sun is about as high as it is going to get in the October sky, and the early chill is being turned back enough that they all feel a touch of summer. After reaching the second deck behind home plate, they walk to the front of the grandstand, and then descend a short stairway into the horseshoe of seats that perch just below the front edge of the upper deck. A number of the wooden chairs are already filled and they have to go the end of the first base side to find four places together. Because the press box hangs over the field, the Fantastics seem to loom just above Nick Altrock and Al Schacht as they go through their pregame comedy routine.

Dot squeezes Lard's arm. "You should be writing third person stories," she says.

Lard does not look up from his scorecard. "I'm not writing anything but the Bell column, the comic strip and the pieces for the Series".

Wearing an over-sized mitt, Nick winds up with an exaggerated turn-of-the-century motion, reminding long-time fans in the audience of his days as a dominant left-handed pitcher for the White Sox in the early years of the American League.

Dot squeezes Lard's arm again. "You should quit that comic strip and you should be sending your stories to the *Smart Set*. Mencken already admires your work".

Nick holds up a finger and then runs high-kneed to the plate, where he gets into a catcher's crouch behind tall, gaunt and craggy Al, who stands in the batter's box, holding a pantomime bat with fully extended arms.

"Mencken doesn't pay much," Lard says, "three hundred tops versus as much as twelve hundred at the *Post*. The comic strip pays me seventeen thousand per annum, which goes a long way to supporting my family".

Nick receives his own pitch with a backwards somersault that brings a loud, long laugh from the entire stadium. When Nick gets up and starts to throw the ball to the mound, Al takes a great big looping left-handed swing that sends Nick into a forward summersault.

Dot pokes Lard in the chest three times. "A trio of stories in the *Smart Set* would do a world of good for your reputation as a serious writer".

Another laugh races around the stands as Al starts toward first base with slow steps while Nick does two more rolls before coming up with the imaginary ball and racing Al to the bag with the same wading-through-cement motion.

Jane takes out her notebook and starts to write. Hey looks over her shoulder and reads, "Scoh cawd! Get yer scoh cawd here!" Next, Hey reads aloud as the words emerge on Jane's page. "The beauteous maiden with the feathers in her hair and the basket of red checked apples under her arm came to the pow-wow yesterday. Miss Indian Summer linger yet awhile". Whispering in Jane's ear, Hey says, "Add one more line of description to that second sentence and you'll have your lead". While Jane is thinking, Tammany Young comes out with his megaphone to announce the starting line-ups. Without looking at Hey, Jane adds, "and gave the near forty thousand baseball fans there assembled a genial smile".

"That's it," Hey says, "put us in a seat and let the game come to us".

"Who says women can't write baseball?" a voice asks as a cloud of hair tonic and aftershave wafts past them. A writer in a snap brim and an overcoat takes the last seat. He sets down a large wax cup of coffee, shakes out a Murad and offers Jane one, which she accepts. Is it her imagination or does that whole side of the press box – along with the sections above and

way below them – draw in a breath deep enough to attempt to prevent the newcomer from snapping a match on the steel beam to his right? But the match lights anyway. When both Turkish cigarettes are burning, the fragrant writer waves the match, throws it over the side without making sure it is extinguished, extends his right hand and fixes his close-set eyes on Jane before declaring, "Damon Runyon, *New York American*".

Jane gets her first name out and Runyon's dark eyes go wide even though his mouth remains slightly downturned. He continues to hold her hand and then shakes his left pointer finger.

"You're the girl sports reporter from *The Evening Telegram*, aren't you?"

"I am also the same one who met you three years ago in Toledo when we were there to cover the Dempsey-Willard fight".

"That's right. You're the sporting girl who got her start on Harding's paper and learned to play golf with him and the missus at their country club". Without waiting for Jane to confirm or deny, Runyon asks, "Why do you want to play around with sports? You could be using your connections to write politics".

When Jane is slow to reply, Run rushes on.

"And what's wrong with Harding that he's not here to throw out the first pitch? If baseball's good enough for Judge Taft and Professor Wilson, then it should be good enough for Editor Warren. Does his missus hate baseball? Is that it? Does she think our game is beneath him and his office because it is low class and filled with ruffians and gamblers and cheats? Well, she's right; it is. But so is politics. Fifteen minutes in any committee meeting will tell you that. You've got to pick your poison in this country".

"I did," Jane says, "and I picked sports because I happen to be good at them".

Jane watches as Run removes a large pill vial from his jacket pocket and pours out seven sugar cubes into his coffee.

"So, what *is* the President's wife like when she's in the office or at the club?" Run asks.

"Well," Jane says without waiting, "she's very supportive of me".

"I'm sure she is – as far as that goes. But I want to know how ambitious she is. I've heard her husband speak and it seemed to me that he had no drive whatsoever".

"I suppose she is no more ambitious than any woman is in support of her husband," Jane answers. "Mr. Harding says her help was always invaluable with the *Star*".

Run takes a sip of his coffee and points past her with his thumb. "If you are going to be spending any time around us, you need a nickname. How about 'Dix'?"

"Sounds good to me," Jane says.

"I hope you've got your bets down, boys and girls". Run says, before using the side of his mouth to add, "You better pray for a mild winter, Lard, if you are really hoping to win that fur coat by betting on the Yankees again this year".

Oct. 4, 1922: Game 1, Part II
Polo Grounds, New York City

Let's peek inside the mind of a Fantastic at the start of the World Series.

Hey Broun shuts it all out, starting with Run's stupid questions, General Black Jack Pershing occupying the commissioner's box, the former ballplayers shooing away the photographers mobbing Christy Mathewson in the overflow press box, and boxing champ Jack Dempsey coming to the Polo Grounds to share his many profound insights on Our Game. Hey focuses instead on the man kneeling at the top step of the Yankee dugout. Even if we don't know it yet, Hey thinks, we – all of us here in the Polo Grounds, all of us listening to Grantland Rice as he broadcasts as far away as Boston, Buffalo and Baltimore through his boot-sized radiophone, all of us who tell ourselves we are Americans – we, even if we don't know it yet, all need the Babe to *see* Art Nehf and start the series with a bang. We all need Ruth to be himself. We all *will* him to be himself. On top of that, we all will the lead-off hitter to get on base ahead of the Babe, but the lead-off hitter lines out to centre. Then we call for the number two hitter to get on base, but the number two hitter grounds easily to third. Then we all wish we hadn't eaten that third frank when the crowd claps and cheers and stomps and whistles and yells as Ruth approaches the plate. We all feel ill when Ruth swings wildly at a curve way off the plate, but we all say, "it's nerves, just nerves".

And then Hey moves from first person plural of his column in the New York *World* to Fantastic mode and begins to feel worse when he *sees* Ruth miss the same pitch by the same amount twice before the Giants ace makes any more deliveries. Just like that, Hey knows the outcome in his toes and especially his fingers, like in those moments at the typewriter when the end of the column comes to him fully formed and he can read it as clearly as if he's already hunted and pecked it onto the page.

After the first half of the vision proves true when Ruth misses the second pitch, Hey still tries to console himself that the Babe is a good two-strike hitter. Hey lies to himself that the Babe will somehow sucker Arty Nehf into throwing him something he can hit a long way for the first run of the game. And then Hey wants to throw up in his fedora when Ruth misses again on the third slow curve way off the plate.

There is sweat on Heywood Broun's brow when Lard reaches around Mrs. Parker to pat him on the back. Run is lecturing Dix about Ruth's strikeouts. Hey is looking at his scorecard and replaying Ruth's at-bat.

"No one who strikes out as much as Ruth does can be effective," Run says, mostly to Dix, but clearly with some venom for Hey.

"You just proved my point," Hey says. "The Babe is a force for cultural good *when* he strikes out – or *especially* when he strikes out".

"Ruth looked anxious and over-eager and totally outclassed just now," Run says. "Arty Nehf owned him".

"But the Babe is in no way afraid of failing," Hey says. "We all benefit from such a philosophy".

"That's no philosophy," Run says. "That's just bad plate discipline. If Ruth would just promise to Jesus and God and Mary and Joseph to only swing at strikes, he would hit .500 and be *the* force for good. Period. Full stop".

"The Babe doesn't have to make any deals with any higher powers," Hey says. "He *is* the higher power".

"I am not fielding that blasphemy," Run says. "You better not go to your maker any time soon".

Hey makes a clucking sound. "The former is only momentary for you; the latter doesn't concern me in the least".

After the Yankees starter strands Giants at second and third to end the first, Nehf induces a pop up and then Hey sees the number five hitter for the Yankees flail wildly at three curve balls. Hey blinks once, twice, three times. He taps Dix on the shoulder and asks, "Did Silent Bob just strike out on three slow curves?"

Dix consults her scorecard and says, "Yes, I believe that is the case".

"By chance," Hey asks, "could you see if his eyes were open on any of the swings?"

"Of course, his eyes were open!" Run says. "Next thing you'll be trying to tell us that Ruth's strikeouts are somehow better than Meusel's!"

Bullet Joe Bush, the Yankees starter retires the Giants on nine pitches to end the second inning.

"Bullet Joe is setting them down now," Run says.

Hey starts to grow uneasy with the prospect that the Babe might bat in the third, but three quick outs end the frame – and his anxiety – for the moment.

"Hey, Hey," someone says.

Hey, however, is thinking that Ruth would have an RBI opportunity if the number two hitter could reach base ahead of him in the next ups for the Yankees. Further, Hey imagines, the way the Yankees starter is throwing, two runs might be enough to take the game if the Babe could reach the seats with one of his sky-scraping drives.

"Hey, Hey," someone says again, "it's not too late".

Hey knows that. Of course, it's not too late for the Babe to make his mark. At the same time, he knows Ruth needs to make good on the world stage. And soon.

The only player making his mark in this game is the Bullet Joe Bush, who strands yet another runner at third after a two-out triple that is easily the hardest hit ball of the game. No one can say that Bullet Joe isn't doing his job to keep the Giants off the scoreboard.

Hey gets his wish for an RBI opportunity in the fourth when the number two hitter singles into short left. As Ruth steps toward the plate, Hey prays silently once more for the Babe to get a hold of one – and he does. He hits the ball on a line about as hard as anyone ever could, but he hits it right at the second baseman for the Giants, who knocks it down, as he always does, and throws to the shortstop to get the force.

Then the number four hitter swings through a pitch for strike three and the Babe is out at second trying to steal. Hey thinks of offering to introduce Dix to Matty, but she seems to be content to argue the value of stolen bases with Run. Lard and Dot are locked in deep conversation about Mencken and *The Smart Set*. Hey decides that he needs to get up and take a walk. He climbs out of the press box and wanders down to the concession area where he consumes one, two, three dogs, two sodas, and a pretzel. He hears boos while he is applying the mustard and isn't the slightest bit concerned that he misses a bat flip that almost knocks some sense into Casey Stengel.

Hey returns to the press box in time to see Silent Bob Meusel beat out an infield hit and advance to second on a sacrifice by the number six hitter. When the number seven hitter works the first base on balls in the game, the possibility of a break and a Yankee rally enters Hey's thoughts. These thoughts generate the notion of Ruth coming up in this same inning, which brings on the threat of more anxiety and sickness and sweatiness.

Hey takes his seat and Dix hands him his scorecard, which she is keeping in his absence. He thanks her and completes the inning: LO9, 9-4 – a lineout picked off the shoe top of the right fielder and then a throw to double off the number five hitter to end the inning and the threat.

Hey looks past Dot to Lard, whose pencil is hovering over his scorecard, as if he is contemplating an asterisk to mark something dubious. Hey glances at Run, who sips his cold coffee. It is Dix who names the blunder that ended the inning.

"Is Hug going to let Meusel hear it on that play?"

The question hangs there in the press box of the Polo Grounds for a New York second. Not even Dot Parker wants to address it.

Finally, Run steps into the breach. "Hard to blame Silent Bob for hustling".

Hey knows that Silent Bob Meusel is usually an excellent baserunner, one who judges line drives and knows how many outs there are. Hey wonders why Run is giving Silent Bob a pass. And then Hey sees the answer, and the sliver of something else becomes something sinister, unbidden yet unavoidable, the spectre of an open secret hiding in plain sight, an open secret he does not want to believe.

Bullet Joe retires the Giants in order in the bottom of the fifth. The number one hitter for the Yankees drives one down the left field line that Irish Mizell plays into a one-out triple. The hint of a rally brings Hey onto high alert as Babe Ruth moves on deck. One second later, the Fantastic sees the Yankees lead-off hitter tagged out between third and home and writes 6-2-5-1-6 next to the lead-off hitter's triple, followed by a FC for the number two hitter. Whitey Witt, like Silent Bob, is a better, smarter baserunner than that. The nagging doubt forces its way into Hey's thoughts again. The Yankees are making too many baserunning mistakes. He looks around Dot to see the asterisk on Lard's scorecard. On the other side of Jane, Run is shaking seven sugar cubes into another large coffee as if it's just another day at the ballpark.

Hey pushes away thoughts of a fix as he watches Babe Ruth stepping to the plate. Here is an even better chance to shine. Hey waits for the vision. Ruth swings and misses at a wide curve. There are two more strikes, he consoles himself. The Babe waves and misses another breaking ball. Hey intones more platitudes. The Giants catcher sets up outside again and then Hey sees that Arty Nehf will miss just enough with the next pitch that the Babe will reach out and yank a little humped-backed liner into short right-centre. The Giants right fielder will charge the ball, but he will be unable to make the catch. Dugan will cross the plate for the first run of the game.

Three seconds later, Ruth is standing on second base, looking as if he'd like to light up a cigar. Hey relaxes for the first time after seeing it all.

"The way Bullet Joe is working," Run says, "one run might be enough".

The Yankees starter strands a lead-off walk to start the Giants sixth. The Yankees add to their lead in the seventh and then Hey sees the Yankees catcher run into the final out at third even though there is no baserunner behind him.

"How many baserunning errors is that for the Yankees?" Jane asks.

"At least three," Hey says.

"I've got four," Lard says.

"Hard to fault Silent Bob, Whitey and Wally for trying to make their own breaks in a close game like this," Run says.

With one out in the bottom of the seventh, three Giants single back-to-back-to-back to load the bases. Johnny McGraw sends up a pinch hitter, who fouls off three pitches before working the count full. Hey writes 6-4-3 on his scorecard and the inning is over one pitch later when the pinch hitter grounds sharply into a double play.

Aware that Ruth is due to bat third in the top of the eighth, Hey focuses his remaining energy on willing the Babe to break the game open. The first two hitters make quick outs, and along comes Ruth, in so many ways. Hey has a big old "Atta Boy" ready for Ruth in anticipation of a long home run to break the back of the Giants.

Ruth looks at one strike, mighty-Casey-like. Then he looks at another slow curve that Klem judges a strike. "That ain't our style," Hey says under his breath as he crouches mentally, loading his weight on his back foot, coiling the catapult, waiting for the pitch. One second later, Hey watches one more slow curve that is – somehow – called strike three, and Hey writes a backward "K" on his scorecard.

Ruth shakes his head, drops his bat, and starts walking toward right.

In the bottom of the eighth, three Giants reach to load the bases again.

"We've been by this station before," Dot says. "Let me off here".

"Wait," Hey whispers. "Watch".

Irish Mizzel lines the first pitch he sees into centre to tie the score.

Hey points to the dugout. "And here comes Hug".

Two beats later, the Yankees manager emerges to remove Bullet Joe from the game.

"Anyone could have seen that," Run says. "Bush was gassed".

Hey doesn't agree, but he doesn't want to argue with Run. The Giants's centre fielder lifts a sacrifice fly to centre to score the go-ahead run after the heads-up baserunning by the Giants's second baseman put him to third with only one out.

The number four hitter opens the Yankees ninth with a single, but the number five hitter lines into a yet another double-play when the number four hitter wanders too far off first base. The Yankees catcher grounds out weakly to second and that's how – the way it seems to Hey, at least – the Giants are given Game 1.

Glossary of baseball jargon and specialised terms

“backwards K”: scorekeeping symbol for strikeout on a called third strike.

“break”: the moment in a game where a mistake or an exceptional play leads to one or more runs (see “rally” below).

“breaking ball”: another term for a curve ball.

“bucketeer”: numbers-running gambler.

“dope”: inside information used by gamblers.

“hump-back liner”: a soft hit into the outfield.

“journeyman”: an average player signed by and/or traded to a number of teams.

“press agent”: early term for public relations person.

“RBI”: run batted in.

“rally”: portion of a game where a number of runs are scored.

“reach the seats”/“reach the fences”: hit a home run.

“shag fly balls”: practice catching balls hit into the air.

“snap brim”: another term for a fedora.

“World’s Series”: common 1920s term for referring to the World Series.

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