

A Single Happened Thing

Daniel Paisner

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Daniel Paisner's *A Single Happened Thing* is an engaging novel that weaves past and present with baseball and life, in a tone of surety and warm humor. Set in the last years of the 1990s, the story presents David Felb, a self-professed everyman with few illusions about his place in the world.

A book publicist in Manhattan, Felb works to promote the accomplishments of others at a job he's had for twenty years. Devoted to his wife and daughters, trite midlife crises involving mistresses or red sports cars are unthinkable to him. Nonetheless, while on a business trip to Philadelphia, lifelong baseball fan Felb takes a break and goes to a Phillies doubleheader. There he crosses paths with the spectral incarnation of Frederick Dunlap, a Philadelphia-born baseball phenomenon who, despite a remarkable career, died penniless and alone in 1902.

Dunlap's presence in Felb's life has unexpected resonance. There is his own bewilderment, particularly when Dunlap shows up for subsequent visits, and there are the aftershocks that begin to trouble his marriage. Felb's wife, Nellie, is a highly capable nurse, but in her pragmatic need to heal, she refuses to allow the possibility of other dimensions. Despite the fascinating nature of Felb's conversations with Dunlap and the tangible souvenir of Dunlap's frayed calling card in Felb's wallet, Nellie insists that her husband see a psychiatrist and start taking antianxiety medication.

Paisner deftly uses the technique of grounding otherworldly fiction in everyday reality, keeping Felb's interactions with Dunlap subtle while creating a backdrop of late-twentieth-century details like leftover Chinese food, ESPN, and dial-up Internet connections. Felb's spirited teenage daughter, Iona, also a baseball fan and softball player and "always up for a catch," becomes a willing accomplice in the Dunlap mystery, accompanying her father to the Cooperstown Hall of Fame and an old-school league game in Central Park. These elements combine to create the intriguing effect, as Paisner writes, of lives entwined "like the dovetailing waxed red threads stitched into the baseball ... tossed to me some hours earlier."

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