

Mystic: A Small Town from Base Ball's Yesterday

Peter A. Lamana

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This novel is a celebration of not just America's famous pastime or military heroes, but the country's uncanny ability to synthesize and unify.

After the end of the Civil War, the men of *Mystic* return home from the blood-soaked battlefields of the South with more than just veterans' tales of woe and hardship: they return with a passion for the newly emerging game of baseball. Played by men of the Union, variations of the game existed decades before, be it called muffin ball or old cat. The era of postwar peace and prosperity brings with it a continued desire for competition, albeit friendly this time, focused on what was considered either a sport for children or a fun time for adults, but never a serious profession. Focusing on local undertaker Todd Loon, Peter A. Lamana's *Mystic* introduces a host of memorable characters during a distinct, defining time in American history as small towns, along with cities, slowly begin formulating the game we know as baseball.

Todd is a kindhearted, Christian family man devoted to baseball and bringing a structured version of his beloved sport to his town. Other members of the community—most memorably a judge of questionable legal credentials but large in personality—aren't sure that *Mystic* will take to a game in which the players are paid, some men wear gloves, and the ball can no longer be thrown at runners. Todd remains devoted to the concept, though, and builds a team for a game that he feels is not only a game of promise but one that can be played with the utmost seriousness.

Though an interesting read, there are some technical errors within *Mystic* that detract from the narrative. These are often as simple as missing commas or run-on sentences—minor details an editor could have caught and attentive readers will undoubtedly note. Dialogue, too, becomes distracting (and potentially offensive) when dialects are used. However, the intention to include them is good, and as Todd's team forms, other teams do as well; fragmented rural America is brought together to show the patchwork of a nation emerging from the toils of war to be stronger and more secure. As the *Mystic* team faces clubs composed of Jewish players or recently freed African Americans, the rich heritage of the country takes the forefront of the novel, with one central message: we are all one. Trite but true, the statement makes this novel a celebration of not just our pastime, or our military heroes, but the country's uncanny ability to synthesize and unify.

It is not the novel's events or the characters who populate it that will entrance most readers, though; it is the author's love of his subject and continual inclusion of historical detail related to both the game and life in the late 1860s. Loving a game is one thing; understanding its origins is quite another. Lamana does both, providing a narrative that is slightly familiar but set in a well-researched and fully realized past. Long after the events of the novel leave the reader's mind, the intense and truly fascinating details of the world in which they take place will remain and help provide a positive outlook regarding the United States.

ALEX FRANKS (April 6, 2015)

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