

Stealing First and Other Stories

Cynthia Drew

Joan Golden

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In Stealing First and Other Stories, everyday folks are charged up by their fervor for baseball.

In Cynthia Drew and Joan Golden's engaging *Stealing First and Other Stories*, a talented but undersung baseball team deals with their town's backroom politics.

In 1950s Louisiana, Ronnie plays for a ragtag team, the Redbirds. When their coach is injured, the American legion recommends Scoot, a former player in the Negro League. A self-involved banker, Bo, takes an interest in the rival Bayou Braves; he's promised a mayoral position if he can get the Chicago Cubs to recruit one of the Braves.

The sections of "Stealing First" alternate between details of exciting games and scenes in Ronnie's home, where he's pulled between desire and duty. His luckless family is vibrant, and their in-progress home, which lacks interior walls, is a masterstroke addition that evokes the family's impoverishment and life in flux.

Other Redbird team members are developed just enough to hint at tense group dynamics. They regard Ronnie as an ambitious leader who is sometimes too harsh. Scoot is underused in his coach's role, and his desires are unclear; he's present most to advise Ronnie, and so he becomes a trope. Instances of racial violence, including a petrol bomb and a beating, result in a realistic picture of the South, while timely interventions keep Scoot from harm. Details specific to the Redbirds showcase how important they are to the town, despite their misfortunes. The strange, humorous chant that helps the team rev up their bus is an element of magic within the sweltering setting, while the outcome of the final game makes for a satisfying finish.

Entertaining scenarios and honed prose make "Stealing First" appealing, as when Bo's son is chucked from the Braves and joins the Redbirds instead. He becomes the novella's quiet linchpin: he sets its events into motion and concludes them from the future, recounting what became of everyone else.

Beyond the novella, the book's highlights are "Dying for a Faith," a dark comedy in which a gravedigger marries a snake-handling woman to his detriment; and "Beauty Rise," an account of a man's lechery and absurdity that culminate in a bad date involving a hearse. These and other stories are linked through their rural settings and barbed humor, which is directed at men who expect too much from those around them. A few stories have sudden, twist endings, while the final entry is a more serious, haunting tale about a restless married woman.

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KAREN RIGBY (May 15, 2020)

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