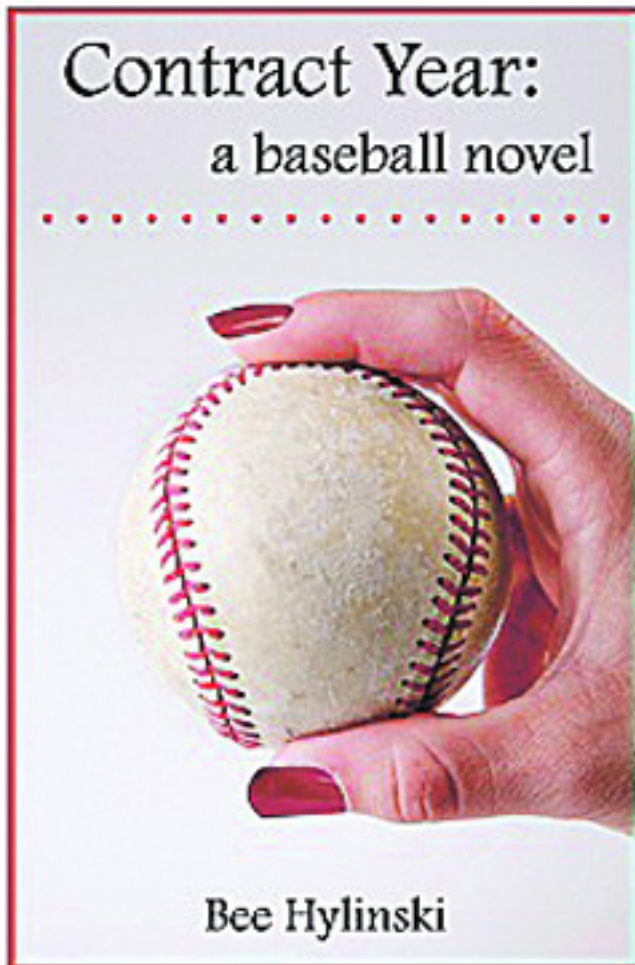


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Local Authors Baseball Novel a Swing and a Miss

By Lou Fancher



Ten pages into Bee Hylinski's "Contract Year: a baseball novel," one fact is abundantly clear: the former attorney, past mayor of Moraga, and current Alamo resident loves The Athletics. Even before the team traded cities and became tagged with "Oakland" instead of "Kansas City," the someday author was worshipping at the mound of major league pitchers like Art Ditmar and Catfish Hunter.

It's no wonder that after attending a writing workshop in which she wrote what became chapter 10 of her debut novel, Hylinski's protagonist is major league baseball pitcher Larry Gordon.

Young Gordon presents himself as more heel than hero. In his contract year, with his professional future balled up in a 9-inch, cowhide circumference, Gordon is facing a personal shut-out. He's found Gina Green, a pediatrician and the perfect companion, but managed to stray at every opportunity. Gina has picked him off base, throwing him out of her life's game. And Gordon's managed to latch onto an all-forgiving buddy, Rick Wycliffe, who overlooks Gordon's philandering foibles while offering friendly "get a clue" advice. Finally, Gordon's in a slump or rather, riding a rocket-like emotional apparatus sending his ERA shooting up or lurching down in unpredictable alternation. His agent is worried, his friend's advice is falling on deaf ears and Gina is gone.

Life happens, meaning a head blow knocks Rick into the hospital, Gina agrees to a probationary relationship, his parents appear to provide unreserved moral support at important games, and Gordon finds his arm and a new agent at key moments.

Sound too good to be true? Well, it is. As much as one admires the marvelous feat it is to write a book, "Contract Year" attempts to stretch a short story character into novel form. Within three chapters, we know Gordon has an insufferable urge to give alley cats a bad reputation by straying like one. His confessionals, looping repeatedly like

an electronic rock beat, dull the senses by the third or fourth iteration.

Still, there's a fascination at play: will a layer of depth be revealed? Will Gloria, an educated, emotionally intelligent woman step out of the box and not return to accept another unreliable pitch from Gordon? Or darker thoughts: Wycliffe will die and Gordon will be jolted into revelation. Gordon will fail to score as a free agent and will sink forever into the bottles of beer he consumes, endlessly, in great detail, throughout the book.

This is a book about professional athletes and with so many real-life stories involving fallen angels, it's not a stretch to imagine a grimly satisfying synopsis. And maybe it's taking the whole thing too seriously, but is it ok for a wandering, self-indulgent, sexually immature guy who can throw a ball at 90-plus miles per hour to get off scott free?

Ironically, "Contract Year" strides to a finish on a narrow track of cliches some will find comforting and others will define as frustratingly simplistic. While I can't recommend the book - there is a long list of baseball books I can - I did read to the end, respecting Hylinski's capable writing and hoping for depth and purpose. For those who love the game, it's your call: perhaps any read involving a ball and a bat is satisfying. For me? I'm heading through the tunnel to do my cheering within hitting distance of the Bay Area's Oakland A's.

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