

Carter Meland, "Baseball is Past Time: A Review of *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story*."

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BASEBALL IS PAST TIME

Carter Meland

A Review of *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story* by LeAnne Howe; Aunt Lute Books, 2007. ISBN – 10: 1879960788; ISBN – 13: 978-1879960787.

The names told me that *Miko Kings* wasn't the baseball whose stats I grew up memorizing. Names like Babe Ruth and Willie Mays, or Rod Carew and Harmon Killebrew of my hometown Minnesota Twins are absent in this baseball story. The Ada, Oklahoma of a hundred years ago is home to a different squad, the Miko Kings. Owned by Henri Day and lead by player-manager (now, those were different days for sure!) Blip Bleen, the Miko Kings have names like Albert "Batteries" Goingsnake, Isom Joel, Lucius Mummy, and Hope Little Leader, and the stories of their games with teams like the Seventh Cavalrymen are reported in *The Ada Weekly News*, excerpts from which are scattered throughout the novel. Bleen, Goingsnake, Mummy, and the Little Leader are all Oklahoma Indians of various heritages—Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole and the story of Native baseball in the Indian and Oklahoma Territories (of pre-statehood) is, as LeAnne Howe reminds us in her "Author's Note" at the end of this lively, moving story, historical, though her book is fictional.

Hope Little Leader's story of pitching as a means of surviving boarding school and his transformation to the Miko Kings' leading pitcher, is central focus of the novel, but so are his memories sixty-plus years later, as a handless old man in a nursing home, where his companions are a spider, whose webs mimic the seemingly wayward strands of his memory, and two Indian nurses, John Lennon ("my-nurse-not-the-singer,") he reminds himself as Beatles' records spin down the hall) and the transgendered Kerwin Johnston, who protests the Vietnam War while cross-dressed. As an old man on a morphine drip, Hope's memory slides from 1969 to 1907 as seamlessly as the spider glides down the wall on her thread of silk. We learn that he can step out of time when on the pitcher's mound, and even move between worlds—such is the power of his skill. We also learn of the tragic sequence of circumstances that result in the loss of his hands.

While central to the novel, Hope Little Leader's story is not the point. A spirit named Ezol Day, a thoroughly fleshy ghost, despite her death in a fire nearly a century earlier, articulates the point. Ezol's stories, drawings, and thoughts are found by Lena Coulter during the summer of 2006, hidden in the walls of Lena's grandmother's house, and Ezol begins to manifest in the dark hours of the night so Lena can write down her thoughts on the relation of time to language and baseball to Indians, as well as learning the story of the past that her family couldn't tell. Just as she is renovating her grandmother's house, it also turns out that Lena—in learning from Ezol—is also, just like her anagrammatic author (Lena equals LeAn[ne]), renovating the story of baseball.

Ezol's story is fascinating and the shape that it takes in the novel is, as form's name originally suggested, fresh, new, even as it echoes one of its earliest forms, the story told in epistle form. Past and present join continually in the story and the form of the book itself, and, unlike the epistolary works of the eighteenth century, Howe's book

is not limited to the shapes of the lead available to the typesetter. (All this high-tech computer stuff can be bent to the service of a good old traditional written form.) We see the handwritten scrawls of the young Ezol as Lena sees them and we get to watch as her hand matures along with her thoughts. We also read the scraps of newspaper and favored bits of poetry (like Longfellow's *Evangeline*) that Ezol cuts out and comments on in her journal. Much of the hidden story of the book, its mysteries, emerge in these entries of Ezol's, but the philosophies of time and relation of Indians to baseball emerge most fully in Lena's midnight exchanges with the ghost. Ezol's theories are complex and concern the "equations," as she puts it, contained in the Choctaw words, in the relation of past tense to present, and the relation of that which is spoken to that which is experienced. Choctaw words are like the equations that "connect us to other dimensions," she says. (It's critical to note that unlike most works of fiction, where the convention is to write in the simple past tense, Ezol's story is told all in the present tense, as is Hope Little Leader's—the past is in the present tense in their stories and memories, these dimensions are not separate but pump one through the other.) Ezol also describes baseball as a sacred game, not to be confused "with the one that's been assimilated into America's consciousness." (In the interests of personal disclosure, I will mention here that while I was a co-author with Howe, Joseph Bauerkemper, and Heidi Stark of an article that included much discussion on how Native base-and-ball games informed the Euroamerican sport, neither Bauerkemper, Stark, nor I were involved in elucidating the article's thoughts on baseball. Those were, and are, Howe's domain—in that article and this book.¹)

The sacred game of Indian baseball, which Hope Little Leader touches and that Ezol Day understands, is one that links worlds and peoples. American baseball, Ezol reminds Lena, was built on the exclusion of blacks and Jews, while Indian base-and-ball games were played in order to "collaborate with other tribes, the stars, and with the great mystery." Ezol is adamant that that game which Americans consider the national pastime is, in fact, "past time." Everyone knows that unlike football, basketball, and hockey, baseball has no time limit, it works on Native time as Howe and Ezol see it, and Ezol, like Howe, wishes its message of collaboration would be recognized for the potential healing it may offer. Ezol wants to correct Lena's perceptions of the past, even if it means learning the uncomfortable truth about her grandmother, and she wants her to realize the way that baseball, in creating a timeless field, is sacred, that bringing past and present together, even if discomfiting, is better than assimilating the lies that history tells us into our collective stories.

In short, *Miko Kings* is a wonderful book about baseball players and a philosophical ghost, about a too little known segment of the past and its presence in the lives of the living and dead. It's peopled with vivid characters caught up in interesting and interpersonal struggles and dramas, and it is enlivened with intriguing ideas about time, space, and sport. Reader show enjoyed Howe's first novel, *Shell Shaker*, will find a different book here, but they will be rewarded with a similarly powerful story.

See Meland, Carter, Heidi Stark, Joseph Bauerkemper, and LeAnne Howe. "The Bases are Loaded: American Indians and American Studies." *American Studies*, 46: ¾ (Fall-Winter 2205)/*Indigenous Studies Today*, 1 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006). 391-416.