

## WOLF AND MCGEE IN THE OUTFIELD

*a review by Shelby Hans*

Ryan McGee. *Welcome to the Circus of Baseball: A Story of the Perfect Summer, at the Perfect Ballpark, at the Perfect Time*. Doubleday, 2023.

Thomas Wolf. *The Called Shot: Babe Ruth, the Chicago Cubs, and the Unforgettable Major League Baseball Season of 1932*. University of Nebraska Press, 2023.

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North Carolina native **RYAN MCGEE** serves as a senior writer for ESPN and cohosts *Marty and McGee* on ESPN Radio. He has been featured on *College Gameday*, for which he has won two of his five Sport Emmys. He is the co-author (with Dale Earnhart, Jr.) of *Racing to the Finish* (Thomas Nelson, 2018).

Despite never having a Major League Baseball team, North Carolina has been home to numerous minor league teams, collegiate summer leagues, and college teams for years. The love for baseball here is strong, as demonstrated by authors Thomas Wolf and Ryan McGee. Wolf, an expert on baseball history, gives readers an introduction to the world of baseball in *The Called Shot: Babe Ruth, the Chicago Cubs, and the Unforgettable Major League Baseball Season of 1932*. Ryan McGee dives deep into what it takes to work for one of our many minor league teams in his memoir *Welcome to the Circus of Baseball: A Story of the Perfect Summer, at the Perfect Ballpark, at the Perfect Time*.

The thing about baseball is that its history and culture are so furiously intertwined with that of the United States that it is difficult to study one without the other – a daunting task and North Carolina writer **Thomas Wolf** gives baseball fans an overview of both with his book *The Called Shot: Babe Ruth, the Chicago Cubs, and the Unforgettable Major League Baseball Season of 1932*. In spite of the specificity of the title, Wolf's book is about more than baseball, it's a book about America and its people during one of the country's greatest challenges, the Great Depression, and the lives of those who lived and breathed baseball.

*The Called Shot* provides historical context, from politics to culture, to set the stage for the full story of the 1932 season. Thomas Wolf begins with a recounting of the 1918 Major League Baseball season, which was greatly affected by World War I, and on through the seasons of the 1920s. Babe Ruth and Rogers Hornsby, as well as a few other key players in the future of baseball are introduced early in their careers. Among these background chapters, Wolf also talks of the bombing of Chicago's Federal Building, providing a tidbit that would catch just about anyone's attention: "A sixteen-year-old postal worker, Walt Disney, was in the lobby of the building when the blast occurred and barely escaped serious injury" (6).

Of course, a history of the 1932 season must include William Wrigley, owner of a chewing gum production company that eventually financed his majority ownership stake in the Chicago Cubs. Wolf builds the businessman up as being heavily involved with the team before the emotional blow of his death in January 1932. As the team arrives in California for Spring Training, Wolf writes, "It was the first time in eleven years that it rained on the day the Cubs arrived. It was also the first year that William Wrigley had not accompanied the team to Catalina" (49). Here, Wolf highlights just one devastating twist of the season. Later on, the

**THOMAS WOLF** is the author of numerous articles on baseball and a frequent attendee of The Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture. He holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He resides in Chapel Hill with his wife, Patricia Bryan, with whom he co-authored *Midnight Assassin: A Murder in America's Heartland* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2005) and *The Plea: The True Story of Young Wesley Elkins and His Struggle for Redemption* (University of Iowa Press, 2022). Wolf is a two-time winner of the 2007 and 2011 Doris Betts Fiction Prize and his winning stories "Distance" and "Boundaries" were published in *NCLR* in 2008 and 2012, respectively.

COURTESY OF THOMAS WOLF



Violet Popovich. Malamud's first novel, *The Natural* (1952), is said to be inspired by this event. In addition, Wolf draws the reader into the world of America's prison reform movement and baseball's unconventional fans with his stories of prison baseball leagues. The most notable of these being Anamosa Men's Reformatory team the Snappers and Harry "Snap" Hortman, a long-time inmate on the team.

Cubs would release their player-manager Robert Hornsby from his contract and lose their star shortstop, Billy Jurgens, for much of their Pennant run. Despite their challenges, the Cubs make it to the 1932 World Series, but previous events did not bode well for the outcome of that final series.

In addition to those involved directly in the 1932 season, Wolf writes of those indirectly involved – the fans. Wolf calls them the Boys of Summer, most likely a reference to Roger Kahn's nonfiction baseball book *The Boys of Summer* (1974). Wolf also gives a shout out to fellow writer, Bernard Malamud, who was, at the time of the 1932 season, a young boy and Brooklyn Dodger fan. One of the most notable occurrences off the diamond in 1932 was the shooting of Cubs shortstop Billy Jurgens by then ex-girlfriend

Hortman would eventually be allowed to attend Games 3 and 4 of the 1932 World Series with warden Charlie Ireland. Following the never-ending dramatics of the season, Wolf's book culminates with Game 3 between the Chicago Cubs and the New York Yankees. Coming full circle, Wolf once again describes Babe Ruth on a train to Chicago to play a World Series game against the Cubs, just as he had in 1918 as a member of the Boston Red Sox – this time as one of the most notable hitters in baseball, rather than as a pitcher. Wolf sets up the day with the arrival of many significant attendees: Charlie Ireland and Harry Hortman from Anamosa Men's Reformatory; Lincoln and Charlie Landis, sons of Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis; Lowell Blaisdell and Irving Boim, young Chicago natives who would later give retellings

of the day; and even presidential candidate and New York Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

By the top of the fifth inning, the game was tied 4–4. Wolf gives the reader two things to consider: "Ruth was in the batter's box with fifty thousand people watching him and fixated on what was going to happen next" (255) and "the Cubs in their dugout were doing everything possible to disturb Ruth's frame of mind" (256). With two strikes, Babe Ruth pointed toward the deepest section of the ballpark, and what happened next elicited one of the longest debates in sports: Did Babe Ruth really call his final World Series home run? An admirable distinction of Wolf's *The Called Shot* is that, in spite of his book's title, he doesn't offer an opinion on the debate, leaving it up to his readers to form their own. Rather, Wolf has given the reader the detailed history they need to truly understand the events and culture of the season, culminating in this legendary incident.

But so much more than a history book, *The Called Shot* is a captivating story of the 1932 Major League Baseball season and American culture, which Thomas Wolf delivers with astounding detail and obvious passion for the sport. A 2021 Seymour Medal Finalist – an award presented to the best book of baseball history published in the preceding year – *The Called Shot* is a must read for devoted baseball fans and an entertaining read for others.

Much like Wolf, **Ryan McGee** is no stranger to the sports world. He currently serves as a senior writer for ESPN, has won five Sports Emmys, and has authored several books, including *Racing to the Finish* (2018) with Dale Earnhardt Jr. However, before he could garner such writing credits, he had to get his foot in the door. *Welcome to the Circus of Baseball* details McGee's first summer in the professional sports world, working as an intern for a minor league baseball team, the Asheville Tourists, in 1994. McGee's memoir digs deep behind the scenes to show what it takes to run a minor league team and showcases a community of baseball-minded people like those Wolf praises in his book.

For the most part, *Welcome to the Circus of Baseball* follows the chronological timeline of McGee's summer; however, he starts with a short prologue about gameday entertainer Captain Dynamite. The hilarity of the memoir is cemented from the very beginning as the chaotic act of Captain Dynamite and his Exploding Coffin of Death is used as an introduction to McGee's beloved Asheville Tourists and McCormick Field. Intermingled with a story of wild explosions, McGee provides the hallowed history of McCormick Field, with visitors like Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson, the iconic broadcasting voice of Sam Zurich, and a quick cameo of future Major League pitcher John Thompson.

McGee's story actually starts the December before his intern-

ship, at the 1993 Baseball Winter Meetings. A recent college graduate, McGee is headed to Atlanta for a job fair in hopes of securing a job in radio broadcasting. Having overslept and then wrecking his car that morning, his day is not off to a good start. He makes it to Atlanta and spends several days waiting and hoping for any of the hundreds of teams present to read his resume and schedule him for an interview. Ultimately, he ends up with two interviews: one with the New Britain Red Sox working with an iconic broadcasting duo but without a guaranteed salary, the other with his childhood favorites, the Asheville Tourists as an intern with a guaranteed one hundred dollars a week. McGee, being a fresh college graduate with no other income source, obviously goes for the guaranteed income.

What follows is a story of what might be called a found family, brought together by their love of baseball. There's McGee and his college friend Carlton, who share an apartment in a senior community; Jane Lentz, concession manager and office receptionist; R. J. Martino, account representative; Gary Saunders, assistant general manager and his wife, Eileen, director of merchandising; Carolyn McKee, business manager; and finally,

Ron McKee, one of the most influential general managers in minor league history. McKee turned the Tourists around when he took over in 1980 and changed the fan experience at McCormick Field. As McGee writes, "No matter who they were, how long they stayed, or what planet they came from, they were all part of the family. Guests in Ron McKee's four-thousand-seat living room, just as he'd promised" (103).

McGee's memoir relies on an easy conversational tone, as he speaks directly to his readers on multiple occasions, cracking jokes and anticipating questions. It makes the stories of McGee's experiences even funnier, including those of a Dairy Queen ice cream machine mishap, suiting up as Ted. E. Tourist on picture day when their usual mascot overslept, and even auditioning for Richie Rich, starring Macaulay Culkin, which was filming at Biltmore that summer.

Woven in with these hilarious stories, McGee explains how the minor league farm systems

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ABOVE Thomas Wolf at home in Chapel Hill, June 2024

ABOVE Ryan McGee during North Carolina Humanities' North Carolina Reads program, "Welcome to the Discussion of Baseball," 26 June 2024: [web](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...).

work, making his memoir more accessible for those who might not have a lot of baseball knowledge. McGee also includes some history from both the years before and from 1994, including Michael Jordan's brief foray into baseball. What truly sticks out in McGee's brief history lessons, as a fan of North Carolina writers, is the story of Thomas Wolfe's childhood in Asheville, where Wolfe (the Thomas Wolfe with an e) was a Tourists fan, even serving as a batboy for the team, just like general manager McKee. When Wolfe returned home twenty years after leaving for college at sixteen-years-old, he found solace from prying eyes at McCormick Field. Similarly, his friend F. Scott Fitzgerald found a similar calming presence at McCormick when his wife Zelda was admitted to a hospital just outside of Asheville.

All in all, McGee's *Welcome to the Circus of Baseball* is a charming story of exactly what Wolf demonstrated in *The Call of the Wild*: the people who love baseball are the ones who truly make the game. Ryan McGee took a chance on a small internship job with a team he grew up loving, despite having another offer in broadcasting, and in doing so, built himself a family and memories that would last him through his entire career. Anyone, minor league baseball fan or not, will find this memoir to be heartwarming, nostalgic, and most of all, just plain funny. ■