The best baseball novels are not only – or even mostly – about baseball. Bernard Malamud's "The Natural" is a dark parable about ability, ambition and self-absorption. "The Great American Novel" is Philip Roth's riff on politics, history and literature. And "The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh Prop." is Robert Coover's meditation on creativity, chance and predestination.

With his first novel, Chad Harbach demonstrates that he can play with these big leaguers. It is set in Westish College, a small school on the shore of Lake Michigan, which cultivated a connection with Herman Melville following the discovery that the author of "Moby-Dick" had paid a visit to the campus in 1880.

"The Art of Fielding" explores the relationships among five people: Guert Affenlight, the author of "The Sperm-Squeezers" and the president of Westish; his daughter Pella; star shortstop Henry Skrimshander; catcher Mike Schwartz, Henry's mentor and best friend; and Owen Dunne, Henry's gay roommate.

By turns side-splitting, sad, sympathetic and suspenseful, "The Art of Fielding" presents a whale of a baseball tale. A pro prospect, likely to get a huge signing bonus, Henry makes his first error of the season and is suddenly unable to do what he has always done: throw the ball accurately.

No matter how much "he chattered or cheered or bounced around," he now walks onto the diamond "with a rising undercurrent of terror." His teammates, including the formidable Mike Schwartz, don't know what to do to help.

Without ever losing sight of his baseball narrative (or becoming pompous), Harbach manages to draw arresting, and at times profound, lessons from it.

An "extravagantly harrowing game," baseball, he writes, is a "series of isolated contests. Batter versus pitcher, fielder versus ball." Henry cannot think or relax his way out the box he is in - and trying harder makes things worse.

Somehow, he has to internalize the Zen philosophy of his idol, St. Louis Cardinals shortstop Aparicio Rodriguez: "There are three stages. Thoughtless being. Thought. Return to thoughtless being." Stage One is attained by everyone; Stage Three "by a very few."

Rodriguez points out that 1973, the year that Pittsburgh Pirates pitcher Steve Blass lost the plate and his self-confidence, was the first documented case of this affliction. Since Thomas Pynchon's "Gravity's Rainbow" was published that same year, Affenlight wonders whether it might mark the beginning of postmodern Prufrockian paralysis - "Do I dare and do I dare?"

Always subtle and smart, Harbach also risks sentimentality. "A soul isn't something a person is born with," Owen Dunne tells his friends, "but something that must be built by effort and error, study and love," for you and for those you care about. When life yields no whys and very few hows, President Affenlight, the Melville scholar, affirms, such not-so-self-evident truths are worth remembering.

"The Art of Fielding" loads the bases with them.

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