'Calico Joe' review: Grisham swings, misses with a baseball tale of redemption

Great baseball novels are not only -- or mostly -- about baseball.

Bernard Malamud's "The Natural" deconstructed the American Dream. Mark Harris' "Bang the Drum Slowly" illuminated the relationship between death and a good life. God, free will and madness got their innings in Robert Coover's "The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop." And, recently, Chad Harbach's "The Art of Fielding" was a Melvillian meditation on friendship and love.

"Calico Joe," the new book by John Grisham, is not a great baseball novel. But it, too, uses America's national pastime to search for moral and cultural truths.

At age 11, in the summer of 1973, Paul Tracey, the narrator of "Calico Joe," witnesses an on-field confrontation between Warren Tracey, his father, a bottom of the rotation pitcher for the New York Mets, and Joe Castle, a rookie sensation for the Chicago Cubs, who has gotten a hit in his first 16 plate appearances in the major leagues.

In its wake, Paul becomes permanently estranged from Warren and does not watch another baseball game for 30 years --until he learns that his dad is dying and designs a scheme to ignite "the restorative powers of forgiveness."
"Calico Joe" is a melodrama. As a ballplayer and as a person, Joe Castle is too good to be true. He distributes the money from his signing bonus to his church, his high school, his Little League park, and to buy Hank Thatcher's Ford pickup truck from Hank's widow, who doesn't want it. Equally virtuous are the folks in Calico Rock, Ark., who tell Paul "we take care of each other. Especially Joe."

Warren Tracey, by contrast, is too bad to be interesting. A drunk and a womanizer, he smacks Paul around when the boy refuses to throw bean balls at batters who dig in against him. And although he has compiled a losing record with a high earned run average, Warren thinks he merits consideration for the 1973 All-Star team.

The finale of "Calico Joe," a reconciliation of sorts between Warren Tracey and Joe Castle, isn't all that credible. And, it seems to me, Grisham undercuts his tale of redemption by having Paul declare that Warren can't "begin to repair our troubled history with a few eleventh hour apologies ... I am not sure he wants to try, but I am certain I do not want to hear it."

Nonetheless, Paul, as they say, has done the right thing -- and he done good. Thanks to him, Joe Castle has come to terms with his fate -- and his life.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

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