Casey Back at Bat by Dan Gutman

Worth Waiting For

Let's put our hands together! Now batting for Mudville... Casey

America has been waiting for this mighty ballplayer to step up to the plate and right his wrong that left Mudville in a state of gloom. Now, in this humorous, seam-splitting sequel to Ernest Lawrence Thayers Casey at the Bat: A Ballad of the Republic, award-winning author Dan Gutman offers Casey what any failed sports hero most desires—a second chance.

Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher bring fans the tense excitement of a thrilling game with their fabulous art and inventive design. All eyes will be on Casey as he comes back to bat...

Will he finally bring joy to Mudville?

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My Personal Review:
As Spring training approaches, many kids will focus on the game of baseball. Adults, nostalgic about the sport in its more pristine state, may grab a DVD of "Field of Dreams," or search for a version of Ernest Thayer's classic ballad, "Casey at the Bat." 'Casey' has been re-tooled many times, most notably by Patricia Polacco in her Little League Version, and illustrator Christopher Bing's recreation of a vintage book, complete with yellowed pages, old newspaper ads and articles, period uniforms and baseball equipment, and other ephemera.

Gutman, a longtime writer of baseball-themed books, takes the mythic Casey one step further than most. Casey is pretty much the same fellow we've come to expect, without the emphasis on his savagery or 'lip-curling' swagger. He's broad-shouldered and strong-jawed, looking like a heavily muscled Gregory Peck. Gutman doesn't focus on Casey, but rather on the mythic aspects, exploding them with fanciful exaggeration and humor:

"His arms, his legs, his neck, his lips--his teeth had muscles too."
They rippled from his little toe up to his eyes of blue.  
He sneered, he snarled at Mudville's foes, then threw the fans a smirk.  
Some ladies found him handsome. Some thought he was a jerk.

Gutman departs from the original story on the third pitch to Casey: Instead of the tragic strike three, Casey hits ("whacks" and "cracks") the ball right out of the park, and into a fantasy flight that propels the rest of the book. Casey looks rather mundane in comparison, In its gravity-defying flight, the ball "crossed the great Atlantic," and makes history.. It strikes a certain tower in Pisa, Italy, causing it to lean, takes off the nose of the Sphinx, does an Einstein-ian 4th dimensional trip back in time to the dinosaurs ("The creatures were so terrified, so underground they slinked, and now you know how dinosaurs, in fact, became extinct.") Finally, after this long, strange trip, the ball descends back to Mudville, and just as Casey tells an interviewer that 'it's all in the wrists,' it lands smack in the glove of a shortstop still on the field. The denouement (which comes and goes a little too quickly) puts Casey back in his place, for as surely as Lucy pulls away Charlie Brown's football, Casey must be out--a fly out, but still an out.

The illustrators switch to a night game for some dramatic light contrasts, but also use the newspaper ad and vintage catalogue gimmick in extremis: The ads pattern the players' uniforms and the ballpark walls (which at least makes sense). They "antique" the pages, but with more subtlety than Bing, and the poses and compositions have a nice dynamism.

"Casey Back at Bat" has tightly constructed rhymes and dramatic illustrations. Gutman writes superbly for his audience, as always, and the humor sparkles. The book distorts--rather than subverts--the Casey narrative, and so it's probably more appropriate for toddlers and early elementary school than for kids a bit older. An anti-hero `Casey' has still not been written, but perhaps some legends are just too sacrosanct to turn inside out.

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