

*The Art of Fielding*

By Chad Harbach

When I told out book discussion group about the new book I just finished called *The Art of Fielding* they laughed and asked if it is a baseball book and yes, I would have to say it is. The game of baseball figures prominently in the book since three of the five main characters are all members of the Westish College's baseball team. Mike Schwartz serves as the team captain, Owen Dunne is most often reading in the dugout, and Henry Skrimshander seems destined to be one of the best shortstops in baseball. On the surface it seems unlikely that Dr. Affenlight, the college president, and his daughter, Pella, would be caught up in the best baseball season that Westish has ever seen. However, an errant throw by Henry, which smacks Owen in the face and sends him to the hospital, seems to be the catalyst for the intersection of all five of these lives.

Mike Schwartz first notices Henry at a summer league game – a scrawny kid who didn't do well with the bat. But after the game when the coach hits ball after ball to Henry, Mike sees the grace with which he fields and throws the ball, a skill that he knows Westish College can use. So Mike arranges for Henry to be accepted at Westish where he rooms with Owen Dunne, a self-described gay mulatto.

Pella Affenlight returns to Westish during a separation from her husband, David, whose controlling attitude once seemed charming but now seems stifling. At the same time her dad, a long-time bachelor whose own career started as a student at Westish, is falling in love with a student and is all consumed with this new relationship.

These five lives cross in both predictable and unpredictable ways. Nothing is going as they had planned and each of them is now forced to re-evaluate both where they are going and where they have been. As a reader you often want to counsel the characters because you know they are heading down a path that could lead to heartbreak or worse. Yet, these are characters that I liked even with all their flaws and missteps which lead us to an unexpected yet satisfying conclusion.

*The Art of Fielding*, a debut novel by Chad Harbach, is published by Little Brown in hardcover and retails for \$25.99.