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Pat Jordan. *A False Spring*. St. Paul, Minn.: Hungry Mind Press, 1998. 277 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-886913-22-6.

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## The Majesty of Failure

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Pat Jordan was a phenom, a bonus baby, a can't-miss prospect. But he missed. A pitcher with a fastball that could overpower even the most intrepid sluggers, Jordan signed a contract with the Atlanta Braves organization soon after graduating from high school and spent two years languishing in the Braves organization as he watched the one thing he had ever been able to trust, his natural-born ability as a pitcher, fail him at every stage. By the end, Jordan was a mediocre pitcher at the Braves lowest-level Class D affiliate in the Florida State league.

This is a story of failure. The reader knows this from the onset. Jordan does not pull a bait and switch. Born and raised in Connecticut, Jordan could always use his amazing fastball to overwhelm lesser athletes. He did this from Little League through high school, always under the watchful eye of his older (half) brother George, a lawyer who served as Pat's pitching coach, confidant, advisor, career planner and agent. By the time he was a junior in high school, it was clear that Jordan was going to receive a huge contract to play professional ball. He was going to be, in the quaint parlance of those pre-multimillion dollar contract times, a bonus baby.

And Jordan did in fact sign a contract with the Braves after being courted by teams such as the Baltimore Orioles, Chicago White Sox and the New York Yankees. In some ways, however, even signing a contract for a bonus of \$35,000 and monthly payments of \$500, plus \$1500 a year to pay for college was tainted with a hint of failure. Jordan and his brother had imagined that they would

be able to sign for \$100,000. When it became clear that such an offer would not be forthcoming, they continued to lower their expectation but were disappointed at every turn.

Part of this disappointment stems from the fact that by his own admission, Jordan grew to obsess about his signing bonus. After his junior year in high school he stopped worrying about anything but the strikeouts that he believed overwhelmed the scouts and drove up his future riches. He did not worry about wins and losses. He did not worry about his mechanics. He did not worry about his control. He became arrogant and difficult, a prima-donna who believed that by virtue of his supreme talent and that glorious fastball. George allowed this to happen because he was so supremely confident of his brother's abilities that he saw no way that Pat could be anything but a star all his life. As a result of this blindness, or at least selective seeing, it would take George much longer to accept the end of Pat's brief career than it took the pitcher himself.

The brunt of the book deals with Jordan's brief, disappointing minor league career. It is the most compelling and devastating part of his story. Not only do we learn about his pitching, which grew ever more erratic, even when he went through a span where he was truly dominant when he could place his fastball, we also get a glimpse of a young man coming of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In McCook, Nebraska, the first of his many out-of-the-way stopovers en route to the major league career he would never even vaguely approach, he

has an affair with a local girl named Sally. They date for a while, despite the fact that he has a girlfriend (who would become his fiancée and then wife) at home. They have some fumbling sexual encounters, and then Pat moves on in what he presumes will be the logical forward trajectory of his career. However he always felt a pang of guilt about how he mishandled this youthful affair. Before he departs McCook Sally haltingly tries to explain that she has missed her period. Jordan is flabbergasted, worried more about what this means to his career than what it means to Sally. She lets it drop. Some thirteen years later Jordan calls Sally after tracking her down. Sally is married with three kids. They have a brief, pleasant, but fairly inconsequential conversation. Then the following:

“There was nothing else to say. There was an awkward silence during which I tried to think of some way to say good-bye. Her suddenly flat voice intruded upon my thoughts. ‘We have a daughter,’ she said. She paused a moment, as if, for a second time, waiting for me to respond. I said nothing, wondered curiously why she did not mention her other children. ‘Our daughter will be 13 years old soon’ ” (p. 126).

It is a stunning moment, one that literally left me gasping ever so slightly when I read it. It ends the third chapter and is perhaps the most effective moment in this marvelous book.

It is also a moment that is representative of the fact that Jordan is not always especially likeable. He is a self-absorbed egotist in high school, someone so committed to his strikeouts and his future contract that he lets a foul pop-up drop to his feet rather than catch it so that he can record another strikeout. He is a tremendously gifted athlete who nonetheless does not realize how much it takes to succeed. In the minor leagues he can be petulant, grating, difficult, self-centered, selfish, awkward, annoying, and generally not likeable. And yet you find yourself rooting for him. Because as much as this is a baseball story, it is also a coming-of-age memoir, a cautionary tale, a lamentation, a brutal case of a man coming to grips with what was, what might have been, and what never was, and how all of these contingencies effected his life.

Jordan twice uses the metaphor of the “false spring” that gives the book its title. The first time comes when he describes the experience for the players who are given their release in the Braves’ minor league spring training camp at Waycross, Georgia. Jordan is at his best when describing the basic uncertainty and cruel reality inherent in a minor-league ballplayer’s life. He provides a scenario in which a player is informed of his release

and the emotional range players might experience. Then he discusses the player returning to his hometown, the inevitable questions that everyone asks. Soon after the player receives a letter with the familiar Braves’ logo on it: “They fingered their unconditional release, stared at it, their day ruined, possibly the week, forced now to abandon the false spring of their new lives and begin again” (p. 135).

The second usage of “false spring” comes after he returns to Connecticut after a stint in the Braves Florida Fall League season in Bradenton finishes. This usage is slightly more literal. He explains how fall in Bradenton is much like spring in Connecticut. But then when the fall comes to an end, he goes back to his home town. “It was winter in Connecticut, and would remain so for months. This fact confused me then and for a long time after, until one day I realized that what I had experienced in Bradenton had been a false spring” (p. 194).

*A False Spring* owes a great deal to Jim Bouton’s *Ball Four*.<sup>[1]</sup> This might seem an odd comparison at first. But in fact it holds. Although Bouton had tasted major league glory with the New York Yankees, by the time he penned the diary that made up *Ball Four* he was a journeyman knuckleballer for the hapless Seattle Pilots expansion team. The book is compelling in large part because Bouton struggled as a Pilot, no longer a star in a system with a strict hierarchy based on stardom. Indeed at one point Bouton is sent back to the minors. Furthermore, *A False Spring* was first published in 1975, and Jordan tells many ribald tales of minor league life. Had he written the book much sooner, he surely would not have been emboldened by Bouton’s then-controversial (hard as that is to conceive now) inside look at ballplayers’ lives, and thus his story would have suffered tremendously. Although Jordan experienced baseball in an era that many like to romanticize as a golden age of innocence, the fact remains that the minor leagues threw together young men with lots of time on their hands. Even in the late 1950s and early 1960s such young men usually were as concerned with sex, booze, and having a good time as they were with their careers, even if that career happened to be playing baseball.

Jordan litters his tale with many familiar names, as well as with the names of the semi- and unfamiliar. Future major leaguers Rico Carty, Joe Torre, Lou Brock, Steve Blass (a nice irony given the throwing problems that characterize both Blass’ career and Jordan’s abbreviated tenure), Wilbur Wood, and Tom McCraw, to name just a few, appear in these most minor of minor leagues.

In fact one of the small pleasures in the book is how Jordan manages in asides and footnotes to connect the world he experienced with the larger world of organized baseball. This proves an effective way of showing both the tantalizing closeness but also the oppressive distance between the aspiring phenoms and the major league to which they hoped to gain access.

This is a welcome republication. Most readers will find this to be a book that is nearly impossible to put down. It will be fantastic beach reading. But it is far more than that. Sports fans will love it. Former athletes will probably see themselves within its pages. Scholars of American culture, sports, or journalism should read (or re-read) it. My only qualm with the book is that it would benefit from some sort of afterword. Pat Jordan has gone on to achieve prominence as a freelance writer, and surely after more than a quarter century he could

have added some insight as to where his life has since gone and what his failed baseball experience (though how many young athletes would love to have even his small taste of the professional sporting life? ) has meant to him in the intervening years since he first wrote the book. However, beyond that quibble, *A False Spring* is a lyrical rumination about coming to grips with not meeting one's expectations. So much of writing about sports deals with winning and losing in the glare of the big lights and with the solace of the fat paycheck that Pat Jordan's book reminds us of the human element involved in the games we play.

Note:

[1] Jim Bouton. *Ball Four: The Final Pitch* Campaign: Sports Publishing Inc. 2000. Previous publication dates: 1970, 1981, 1990.

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