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Embracing Failure:

Baseball as a Catalyst for Self-Reflection in Don DeLillo's Underworld

Mizuki NAKAMURA

1. Introduction

At the Polo Grounds on October 3, 1951, the third game of the World Series playoff between Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants was played. The Giants' batter, Bobby Thomson, dramatically ended the game with a game- and pennant-winning home run, remembered as a "Shot Heard 'Round the World." Jules Tygiel points out: "The feat instantly entered the nation's folklore as a symbolic signpost for a generation of Americans. . . . Anyone alive then and vaguely interested can answer with tedious exactitude the question, 'Where were you when you heard it?'" (170). The characters in Don DeLillo's mega-novel *Underworld* (1997) can answer this question. Marvin Lundy, for example, was "racing through a mountain in the Alps," when he heard it (313). The protagonist, Nick Shay, was listening to the radio on the roof when his favorite Dodgers lost (93). Thomson's home run is so memorable that it is somehow relevant to the lives of the individuals in this novel.

The novel starts with the description of this playoff game and later introduces numerous historical events that happened in the United States and the world in the second half of the 20th century. Also, the novel includes the stories of American citizens who lived in that era. One of the novel's main plots is to follow various

owners of Thomson's home run ball. In other words, the ball is the central object that goes through the narrative of this novel as Matthew Mullins states:

It is truly the baseball itself that acts as the central object around which the inoperative community of the entire novel [*Underworld*] is formed. . . . There is not a single character or narrative left unconnected to the ball, but none of the connections seem to be made through work. (287)

Other critics also agree that baseball unites the narrative threads of *Underworld*. Robert Elias asserts that baseball is the very and only factor that enables DeLillo to incorporate so many American elements, both social and personal, into this massive novel ("A Fit" 24). David Thomas Holmberg says, "By the time he writes *Underworld*, DeLillo has developed sports into a larger metaphor for American pop-mythology - in which baseball serves more appropriately than football" (66). As these quotations show, baseball references in the novel undoubtedly contribute to introducing various elements and topics to the story.

While the significance of baseball in this novel has been pointed out, thorough investigation of baseball references has not yet been made so far. The main aim of this paper is, therefore, to pay close attention to the baseball-related references in *Underworld* to reveal baseball's tremendous appeal to Americans, which can weave together so many aspects of American society and Americans' personal histories. After briefly outlining the relationship between baseball and American ideologies in the first section, this paper focuses on the stories of an African-American boy Cotter Martin and the protagonist Nick Shay, who are the first and the current owner of Thomson's home run ball, respectively. The home run ball, in fact, functions as a catalyst for self-reflection in this novel. By analyzing the stories of these two characters, especially Nick's monologues, the roles the home run ball plays in this novel are extensively explored.

2. American Ideologies and Baseball in *Underworld*

As the national pastime of the United States, baseball has fascinated Americans for a long time. It has also served as a metaphor for American ideologies and the American dream. This section summarizes how these facts about baseball are profoundly reflected in *Underworld*.

The front page of the *New York Times* on October 4, 1951, the day after Thomson's home run, inspired Don DeLillo. It featured two juxtaposed news items: Thomson's "Shot" and the success of the Soviet nuclear experiment (McCrum). This makes October 3, 1951 significant in American history. John N. Duvall points out:

This day is crucial, then, to the construction of the Cold War because now the United States has an adversary large enough to sustain postwar paranoia about threats to America's sovereignty. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that on this day the Cold War becomes fully viable. Yet if October 3, 1951, exists as part of American consciousness, it is for Bobby Thomson's heroics, not Russia's atomic bomb. (294)

Although the Soviet's experiment made Americans afraid of the arrival of an apocalyptic moment, as Duvall states, American people still remember the day October 3, 1951 for Thomson's home run, not for the success of the Russian atomic experiment. Here, the most impressive scene in that game, Thomson's home run, can be regarded as a metaphor for the country's strength. It can be said that the magnificence of Thomson's home run has led to the American way of thinking that the country can hit back a "ball" such as an atomic bomb, as if baseball players hit a home run.

Similarly, baseball has something to do with the American exceptionalism;

America is unique and strong because it has baseball but the Eastern countries do not have anything parallel to the said sport. When Marvin Lundy, who has “confidence in the righteousness of the Western system” (Mraović-O’Hare 220), goes on a trip to Russia to find his lost and communist brother Avram Lubarsky, he tries in vain to look for baseball scores in local newspapers in the Eastern countries (310, 312). Interestingly, Marvin finds “[t]he deeper into communist country, the more foul his BMs [bowel movements]” (311), and “on the way back to Western Europe his system slowly returned to normal, branny BMs, healthful and mild” (313). His bowel movements worsen as he goes deeper into communist countries and loses the connection with baseball. Contrarily, it gets better as he approaches the Western countries where baseball is accessible. While he cannot get information about baseball in the Eastern countries, he happens to hear the live broadcast of the Dodgers-Giants playoff game in Switzerland on his way back to America (313). As this shows, baseball, along with Marvin’s bowel movements, helps establish the binary opposition of West and East and helps affirm the superiority of the Western system.

Not only can baseball symbolize America’s relationship with the Soviet Union, or the Eastern countries, it can also symbolize America’s diplomatic relations with other countries:

the very sport [baseball] that is supposed to insure the stability of the status quo - of America as a world superpower, of middle-class hegemony at home and of the subjection of the racial other (the Japanese, the African American) - also is supposed to teach courage, independence, and risk-taking. (Duvall 299)

Baseball proclaims to other countries not only the strength of America but also the positive values related to it. By teaching these values, America can maintain its hegemony over the world. This exemplifies how appropriate and powerful baseball is

as a metaphor for American strength and exceptionalism.

As if to illustrate this notion, the novel features a conversation among three Americans, including the protagonist Nick, and the BBC's female producer, Jane Farish. In this conversation, they talk about baseball in the Stadium Club in Dodger Stadium in California:

The Englishwoman said, "Now as I understand it the pitcher gets a signal from the catcher. This pitch or that pitch. Fast or slow, up or down. But what happens if he ardently opposes the catcher's selection?"

"He shakes off the sign," Glassic said.

"Oh I see." (92)

As mentioned earlier, baseball symbolizes American exceptionalism, so discussing the sport with the Englishwoman is equivalent to discussing with her America's specialties. Farish does not know anything about baseball, so the men can Americanize her. At the end of the conversation, the men teach her the rule of the infield fly: "Farish had some questions about the infield fly rule. Sims and Glassic were able to get together on this by the time we got out to the car. It was an unexpected boon for the BBC" (100). As "unexpected boon for the BBC" suggests, learning about the rules of baseball is regarded as valuable to foreigners.

During the conversation above, another issue is also revealed. They talk about the difference between two pitchers, Ralph Branca, from whom Bobby Thomson hit the homer, and an African American pitcher, Donnie Moore:

[Moore] gave up a crucial home run in a play-off game and ended up shooting his wife. Donnie Moore was black and the player who hit the home run was black. And then he shot and killed himself. . . . Sims told this story to the Englishwoman but it was completely new to me [Nick] and I could tell that

Classic barely remembered. . . . Donnie Moore was not allowed to outlive his failure. (98)

Both of the two aforementioned professional pitchers became losers in similar situations, but Moore is not remembered as clearly as Branca is. Simeon Biggs, nicknamed “Big Sims,” an African American, explains the reason for this:

“Branca was given every chance to survive this game and we all know why. . . . Because he’s white,” Sims said. “Because the whole thing is white. Because you can survive and endure and prosper if they let you. But you have to be white before they let you.” (98)

He argues that Moore should have been white to be a part of baseball history. The other Americans in the conversation do not know about his story, which may indicate American society’s indifference to black-related events.

More importantly, it is implied that one has to be a white American male to remain in the world of baseball. Historically, white American males have dominated the world of baseball and have excluded others from it. This point is important in discussing individuals in *Underworld*. Intriguingly, however, not everyone sticks to this ideology. From the next section of this paper onward, the two characters in *Underworld* and their relationships with baseball are closely examined.

3. An Innocent Black Boy and the White Home Run Ball

The novel *Underworld* is unique in that some of its characters overturn the conventional ideologies surrounding baseball. One of such characters is Cotter Martin, an African American boy, who skips school and sneaks into the Polo Grounds’ stand to watch the playoff game. He may not be a part of the American

baseball world considering the foregoing discussion, but he nevertheless overturns the conventional baseball ideology, which has suppressed African Americans.

While watching the playoff game in the left stand, Cotter gets along well with a white man named Bill Waterson. Cotter then unexpectedly retrieves Thomson's home run ball and is set to bring it home but has trouble doing so because Bill insists that he, not Cotter, owns it. Bill is kind and friendly to Cotter during the game, but once they start arguing about which one of them owns the ball, his attitude suddenly changes. He even calls Cotter "goofus" (56). Bill emphasizes that Cotter is not mature enough to appreciate its actual value, let alone to own it. Bill also assumes he is more qualified to get the ball because he is a white adult male and because Cotter is just an African American child. Nevertheless, Cotter stands his ground and holds on to the ball. By doing so, Cotter shows the potential for shaking the ideology about the social statuses of adults and children and of white and black people.

Cotter finally succeeds in escaping from Bill and goes home with the ball. His father, Manx Martin, however, thinks more realistically about what should be done to the ball:

"All right. So what do we want to do? Maybe we go up to the ballpark in the morning and show them the ball . . ."

Cotter is listening to this.

"Who pays attention to us? They see two coloreds from nowhere. They gonna believe some colored boy snatch the ball out of them legions in the crowd?" (145)

Manx is very much aware of his race and what other people think about people of color. Moreover, he finds it impossible to guarantee the credibility of Cotter's assertion because Cotter did not buy a ticket to enter the stadium. As Manx entertains misgivings, there is no likelihood that their assertions will be believed.

Manx has been struggling economically, so he would rather sell the ball to

make money than keep it. Therefore, he steals the ball from his son, while he is asleep, to sell it. Although Cotter has the potential for shaking the aforementioned ideologies, his father is still stuck with the conventional ones and has no choice but to take realistic actions to make a living. Manx ends up selling the ball to Charlie Wainwright at “[t]hirty-two dollars and change” (654), an extremely low price considering how important the ball is. It may be safe to say that had he not been an African American, Manx would have been paid much more.

Christian K. Messenger states that “American sport in fiction celebrates the nation’s youth, innocence, and power while focusing on all the tragic contradictions implied in the obverse themes of death, experience, and impotence” (12). His argument can be applied to this context: while Cotter’s youth and innocence are celebrated, his father represents an African American’s impotence in the society. Cotter, a young and innocent boy, provides a sign of change in the conventional ideology, but Manx has to resort to a necessary measure to get money. The first owner of Thomson’s home run ball has given up the ownership this way. The ball has passed on to different people, and it finally reaches the protagonist, Nick Shay.

4. Branca’s Losing Ball

David Thomas Holmberg states that Nick Shay “represents the postmodern baseball fan, the baseball fan for which baseball has come to represent the failure of the prototypical American ideology” (72). Considering the previous discussion about American ideologies, the white American male Nick can enjoy advantages in society. He, however, acts differently from other ordinary white males and has a unique reason for having bought the historical ball for 34,500 dollars: “Well, I didn’t buy the object for the glory and drama attached to it. It’s not about Thomson hitting the homer. It’s about Branca making the pitch. It’s all about losing” (97). Nick does not regard the ball as “a winning ball” but “a losing ball.” Nick thinks this way because of

his unfortunate experience of accidentally killing George Manza in his adolescence. He connects his negative history with that of Ralph Branca, the loser in baseball history.

Nick's act of connecting his defeat with Branca's losing ball is not entirely arbitrary. To illustrate this, this section thoroughly investigates two of Nick's monologues where he explains what he thinks about the Branca ball. The first scene is near the end of Part I of the novel:

I had the baseball in my hand. Usually I kept the baseball on the bookshelves, wedged in a corner between straight-up books and slanted books, tented under books, unceremoniously. But now I had it in my hand. You have to know the feel of a baseball in your hand, going back a while, connecting many things, before you can understand why a man would sit in a chair at four in the morning holding such an object, clutching it You squeeze a baseball. You kind of juice it or milk it. The resistance of the packed material makes you want to press harder. . . . And the feel of raised seams across the fingertips, cloth contours like road bumps under the knuckle joints - how the whorled cotton can be seen as a magnified thumbprint, a blowup of the convoluted ridges on the pad of your thumb. The ball was a deep sepia, veneered with dirt and turf and generational sweat - it was old, bugged up, it was bashed and tobacco-juiced and stained by natural processes and by the lives behind it And it was smudged green near the Spalding trademark, it was still wearing a small green bruise where it had struck a pillar according to the history that came with it. . . . (131)

Books generally tell us stories or give us information and knowledge. The books here are plural so the bookshelf can be called a vast treasury of information. Also, the books are arranged as if they are protecting the ball, leading to the interpretation that the ball is so important to Nick that he tries to protect it in every possible way. Then it

can be said that the bookshelf represents his whole life and that the books and the ball represent the contents of his life. The ball, therefore, is the heart of Nick's life. On the bookshelf, the books are both slanted and standing straight up. This arrangement may imply the disorder in his youth, which Nick longs for after he gets old:

I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself. (810)

Considering his remark above, the bookshelf's disarray can be understood as a reflection of his nostalgia for his youth. As he thinks of his anger in his youth as "a distant mystery to [him]self," the unorganized bookshelf is a metaphor for Nick's still complicated and scattered mind.

The ball is reminiscent of the bullet with which Nick unexpectedly killed George Manza because the polysemy of the word *shot* can suggest an association between the two: the home run ball is called "the Shot Heard 'Round the World," and a shot can also refer to a bullet. These associations can reinforce the theory that the ball represents the most prominent memory in Nick's life.

Nick places the ball on the bookshelf and sometimes holds it. His act of squeezing the ball may be seen as sucking out its marrow or core, which can be likened to digging all the way to the core to find the truth: what George Manza's ambiguous grin just before Nick accidentally shoots him dead was all about. Believing George's remark that the gun is not loaded, Nick points the gun at him and pulls the trigger, when George's face is "more alive and bright than George [has] ever looked" (780). Although Nick cannot figure out why George was grinning and why he pointed the gun at his head (781), he tries to collect as much information as he can

to reconcile himself with his past by holding the baseball, whose density reflects the density of the world that Nick is trying to grasp.

Interestingly, Nick likens the ball's seams to road bumps. Roads with road bumps are not smooth, and drivers are jolted back to the reality that they are driving by the shock that they receive from road bumps. Nick, who drives through the ball's surface, sometimes stops or slows down at the "road bumps" made of red strings. Metaphorically, the road Nick has passed through in his life is not smooth; he has experienced several obstacles, in the same way that he encounters several road bumps when he drives. The seams of the ball are the points at which he realizes that he has been living his life, however "bumpy" it may have been so far.

As shown above, the words in Nick's monologue are connected with his life, especially with his regrettable past. The ball may be small, but it nonetheless helps Nick tell his own long stories, which implies that it has a special charm that enables it to elicit life stories from people. Marvin Lundy, from whom Nick bought the home run ball, recognizes this power of the ball. He frantically attempts to trace the people from whose hands the ball has passed. To achieve his goal, he collects as much information as possible:

The baseball was wrapped in tissue paper inside an old red-and-white Spalding box. There were deep stacks of photographs and correspondence and other material related to the search. Birth certificates, passports, affidavits, handwritten wills, detailed list of people's possessions, there were bloodstained garments in Ziploc bags. (177)

Marvin treats the ball as if it were a museum specimen. Like an archeologist, he keeps the historically important ball. To recapitulate the whole history of the ball, he even collects materials that are seemingly irrelevant. The wide range of the materials indicates that the ball can be linked to anything. Besides the variety of the materials,

Marvin encounters several personal histories during his search for the baseball's history:

The ball brought no luck, good or bad. It was an object passing through. But it inspired people to tell him things, to entrust family secrets and unbreathable personal tales, emit heartfelt sobs onto his shoulder. Because they knew he was their what, their medium of release. Their stories would be exalted, absorbed by something larger, the long arching journey of the baseball itself and his own cockeyed march through the decades. (318)

The people who talk with Marvin are inspired by the ball's aura and tell him their stories. Marvin is also tempted to tell someone his story. When Nick's friend, Brian Grassic, visits Marvin's basement, Marvin tells Brian about his search for three hours (174). Nick also talks about his own history with the help of the ball. The home run ball motivates people to tell their stories as a catalyst for self-reflection, and that is why Nick puts great value to the ball.

5. Beauty in the Smudges

This section discusses the second scene where Nick talks about the ball at the very end of the novel. Interestingly, what he says here is almost the same as what he says in his first monologue. The two monologues are about 600 pages apart, so their close resemblance is hard to detect. Nevertheless, given the importance of repetitions or recycles of the materials in this novel (Boxall 196-7), the repetition of this monologue is the concrete evidence for the significance of this part of the novel:

This is how I came across the baseball, rearranging books on the selves. I look at it and squeeze it hard and put it back on the shelf, wedged between a slanted

book and a straight-up book, an expensive and beautiful object that I keep half hidden, maybe because I tend to forget why I bought it. Sometimes I know exactly why I bought it and other times I don't, a beautiful thing smudged green near the Spalding trademark and bronzed with nearly half a century of earth and sweat and chemical change, and I put it back and forget it until next time. (809)

Nick repeats the action of squeezing the ball and putting it back on the shelf. What is different from his first monologue is that he describes the ball as “an expensive and beautiful object,” although the ball has decayed and become dirty. Considering the remark above, it can be said that the ball does not remain to be merely the commemoration of his failure but has become the object that evokes much more interpretations.

As Damjana Mraović-O'Hare states that “[h]is obsession with the ball from the historical Dodgers-Giants game . . . is an attempt to preserve the nostalgic notion of that past: a piece of his history” (217), the home run ball indeed reminds Nick of his traumatic past. However, as he “tend[s] to forget why [he] bought it,” he is evidently no longer suffering from the trauma that he had before. As he has grown up, his regrettable past and irreconcilable feelings of defeat have become trivial to him, which has enabled him to live without the ball. Nevertheless, he is still charmed by it and has started giving new interpretations to it other than its role as the symbol of his defeat.

Nick's second monologue is contained in the epilogue of *Underworld*, “Das Kapital.” In this section, Nick talks at random about various elements such as his occupation at Waste Containment, his memories with his parents, and about his children and grandchildren. When Nick talks in this section, he has become old enough to be “a sort of executive emeritus” at his company (804), so he can command a bird's-eye view of his life.

Among many themes in Nick's stream of consciousness, bookshelves are

frequently mentioned, as in the first sentence of the second monologue quoted above. The previous section dealt with the relationship between Nick and the bookshelves, but this section further explores the relationship, focusing on the impact of his mother's death on Nick.

The following quotation shows that her death has been a prominent event in Nick's life:

The long ghosts are walking the halls. When my mother died I felt expanded, slowly, durably, over time. I felt suffused with her truth, spread through, as with water, color or light. I thought she'd entered the deepest place I could provide, the animating entity, the thing, if anything, that will survive my own last breath, and she makes me larger, she amplifies my sense of what it is to be human. She is part of me now, total and consoling. And it is not a sadness to acknowledge that she had to die before I could know her fully. It is only a statement of the power of what comes after. (804; underlines mine)

After her death, Nick places bookshelves in her room and is tempted to keep rearranging the books on the shelves, as he says,

We have bookshelves built in the cool room at the back of the house, my mother's old room, and you know how time slips by when you are doing books, arranging and rearranging, the way time goes by untouched, matching and mixing inventively, and then you stand in the room and look. (806; underline mine)

In the same way as we find something new when we re-read a book, Nick tries to find something new by rearranging the books on the bookshelves. In addition, Nick stands in front of the bookshelves in his mother's room, remembering the moments

with her. Also, Nick often thinks about his missing father, who he believes has died. Considering this, the bookshelf on which the ball is placed is a place where Nick and his parents' ghosts coexist and is an alter where he prays for the repose of their souls. The ball on such a place is described as being "a deep sepia, veneered with dirt and turf and generational sweat" (131). The color sepia can be associated with black-and-white photographs and the past. Similarly, dirt and turf can be associated with a graveyard. These associations have enabled Nick to connect the ball with his memories with his deceased parents.

Nick has experienced many things in his life, so every time he holds the ball in his hand, he comes up with a new interpretation about it as he looks back on his experiences. A brand-new ball is pure white, but once it is used, its surface will be bruised and its color will gradually turn sepia over time. Although the ball's surface decays naturally, the smudges on the ball are what reflects its life. In other words, they are "texts" to be read and Nick has repeatedly made new interpretations of the texts on its surface.

Nick tells his colleagues that he bought the ball to "commemorate failure" and to "have that moment in [his] hand when Branca turned and watched the ball go into the stands" (97). Initially, for Nick, the home run ball was merely "Branca's losing ball," or the symbol of his failure. However, longing for his youth and interacting with his parents' ghosts on the bookshelves, Nick has given the ball new interpretations as he grows older. Moreover, he reads the texts on the ball's surface and appreciates the beauty of the smudges, and even the beauty of his life. As he has worked for a waste-disposal company, he appreciates the ball, which is as good as garbage once the game is over, and continues to give his own value to it. Nick has found the beauty of his life in this bruised ball, which reminds him of the memories of his regrettable past and of his parents.

While the home run ball has been the central object that goes through the linear narrative in the novel, it finally settles down in Nick's hand. Meanwhile, with the ball

in his hand, Nick can nostalgically recollect various aspects of his life in a concentric way. Once the ball settles down on the bookshelf, where Nick remembers his parents, it has become not only the epicenter of Nick's memories but also the symbol to repose their souls. The baseball is what amplifies and converges all of Nick's memories.

The memorabilia of his defeat on the bookshelf reminds him that, despite his failures, he has lived his life well. Moreover, as he gets old, Nick has experienced the inevitable human processes of birth and death. Life has a cyclical pattern, and so does baseball:

Roger Kahn has called baseball "the game of unbroken dreams, where we can watch our hopes renew themselves each spring, and dissolve (or prove) themselves each fall, to be followed by an identical cycle the next year ... the cyclical pattern ... never ends, the drama never breaks, across decades, lifetimes and generations." (qtd. in Elias 9)

When he goes back to the bookshelf sometime later and sees the ball, he can remember his past and reaffirm his life's beauty. His life goes on as baseball seasons go on in a cyclical pattern, a beautiful thought he is reminded of as he holds the token of his life's memories in his hand.

6. Conclusion: Tolerance of Failure

As we have seen in this paper, baseball in *Underworld* is not merely a metaphor for the American dream or American ideologies. With DeLillo's ingenuity, the Thomson's home run ball has become the object that has the potential for connecting everything in the novel. Importantly, *Underworld* emphasizes baseball's role as a catalyst for self-reflection. Spellbound by the ball's charm, the characters in *Underworld*, especially the protagonist, Nick Shay, can freely talk about their lives.

What enables Nick to talk about his regrettable past is baseball's intimate relationship with failure. Nicholas Dawidoff says,

The lesson, it seems, is that baseball is interesting to writers because the game and its practitioners are as prone to fever and flaw as the real world they inhabit. . . . There is so much failure in baseball, and the good writers, like Don DeLillo, can never get enough of it. (9)

The close affinity between baseball and failure exemplifies that baseball is potentially a talisman for a loser like Nick. Although Nick can enjoy an advantage in society for being a white American male, he does not associate baseball with its positive and hopeful characteristics. Instead, he associates it with his dark past, thanks to baseball's tolerance of failure. He embraces his failure with the ball in his hand, squeezing every possible information out of it.

Moreover, the ball does not remain as the commemoration of his failure. After he gets old and has experienced the inevitable human cycle of birth and death of his family members, he looks back on his life and turns the ball into a more meaningful object. He has realized that the smudges on the ball is what emphasizes the beauty of the ball, through which he recognizes the beauty of his life. More than anything, the ball is a catalyst for his self-reflection. Enchanted with its charm, Nick has lived his bumpy life in peace.

Note

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敗北を握りしめて

—— Don DeLillo の *Underworld* における自己内省の触媒としての野球——

中村瑞樹

Don DeLillo の *Underworld* (1997) において、野球は作中の他の要素と絡み合いながら、アメリカ例外主義や人種差別、冷戦期の東西対立などのメタファーとして機能する。これらに加え、本作での野球の存在感を確固たるものにするのが、1951年10月3日のワールドシリーズプレイオフに劇的な幕切れをもたらした Bobby Thomson のサヨナラホームランのボールであり、このボールの持ち主の変遷を辿るプロットが本作を貫通している。

このボールの最初の持ち主は、黒人少年 Cotter Martin であった。彼は白人男性 Bill Watson とのホームランボールの奪い合いに勝ち、野球界における黒人のイデオロギーを転覆させる可能性を示したものの、貧困にあえぐ父 Manx はそれを安価で売り渡してしまう。その後、ボールは巡り巡って主人公 Nick Shay のもとに落ち着くことになる。彼は、そのボールをホームランボールではなく、被弾した側である投手 Ralph Branca のあの試合でのラストピッチ、いふなれば「ルージング・ボール」として保持している。これは彼が過去に暴発事故を起こし、George Manza を殺めてしまった過去に起因する。彼はその「ルージング・ボール」に殺人を犯した負の個人史を重ね合わせているのだ。

あるモノログで Nick は、このボールを握りしめながら、ボールについて細部まで語っている。彼が用いる言葉は、彼の負の歴史とリンクするものであり、彼がこのボールを敗北の象徴として捉えていることの証左となる。さらに、彼はボールを握ることで、自らの負の歴史を振り返っており、このボールが彼に自己内省を促す触媒であるとも言えるのである。

このボールに対する Nick の解釈は、彼が古い、母の死、孫の誕生などを経験するにつれ、より拡大していく。エピローグでは、彼は表面に汚れがあるボールを美しいものと捉え直している。母の死後、彼は彼女の部屋に本棚を設置し、そこにボールを置いている。そして、そのボールを握りしめながら、今は亡き両親との思い出など、これまでの生き様にまで思いを馳せている。その意味で、このボールは負の歴史の象徴にとどまることなく、彼にとって一種のお守り、さらには彼の両親の鎮魂の記号としても機能していると言える。年を重ねた Nick は、人生全体を俯瞰する視点から、傷が残るボールの表面にある「テキスト」を再解釈し、新たな意味づけを重ねている。表面に傷の残るこのボールこそ、彼に自らの人生の美しさを再確認させるものであるのだ。