

REVIEWS OF  
FIELDER'S CHOICE

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Funny, touching, and memorable.

W.P. Kinsella

It has earned that spot on my bookshelf reserved for the most memorable baseball books, right next to the likes of Mark Harris' classic Bang the Drum Slowly.

Amorak Huey, Southern Living

This is one of the few, special books that makes a reader long to be able to take credit for it.

Cleveland Plain Dealer

Norman, helped along by the country dialect in which he writes, gives us a character who is humble by nature, who accepts his mistakes and moves on. We should all be so lucky.

New Orleans Times-Picayune

From the opening pitch, rookie novelist Rick Norman sits you down and charms you with the ramblings of a master storyteller.

USA Today

Spare, clear and true as bright water.

Bill Littlefield - WBUR-FM, Boston

An original and engaging addition to baseball literature.

Publishers Weekly

Much of what this author shows is a gift that cannot be learned - it's a love for storytelling, an ear for dialogue and a voice that carries the story.

Baton Rouge State Times

A debut novel with the charm of a Ring Lardner tale.

Kirkus Reviews

His story is both funny and touching. Recommended.

Library Journal

# Publishers Weekly®

## FIELDER'S CHOICE

Rick Norman. August, \$17.95 ISBN 0-87483-172-5

Norman's accomplished first novel is full of historical detail and rich with an understanding of baseball and the game's importance in pre-WWII America—prior to the proliferation of TV sports events, when baseball was truly the national sport and played a bigger role than it does now in tying communities together. We follow "Gooseball" Fielder, small-town Arkansas boy, as he makes his way to the major leagues as a pitcher for the 1941 St. Louis Browns. But the rookie pitcher's short career will eventually founder in humiliating failure: he "chokes," balking in the winning run and losing the pennant on the last day of the season. He joins the Air Force as the war begins and, after a failed bombing raid, is imprisoned in a nightmarish Japanese POW camp. Near death, and half a world away from home, he is sustained by his memories of baseball. He's rescued and befriended by a U.S.-trained Japanese officer who recognizes him as a former major leaguer, a development that spurs charges of treason when Fielder returns to the U.S. Reminiscent of Mark Harris's wonderful fictional major leaguer, Henry Wiggen, *Gooseball* is in his own right an original and engaging addition to baseball literature. (Apr.)

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY / MARCH 1, 1991



Norman, Rick  
FIELDER'S CHOICE  
August House \$17.95  
4/? SBN: 87483-172-5

## LIBRARY JOURNAL REVIEWS

Norman, Rick. *Fielder's Choice*.

August House. Apr. 1991. c.192p.

ISBN 0-87483-172-5. \$17.95.

Andrew Jackson Fielder is a decent pitcher with a great gooseball. He blows his chances in the majors during a pennant race in 1941 when his chronic inability to make decisions costs the St. Louis Browns the game on a balk. When his brother is killed in the South Pacific, Jax enlists. His rescue from a POW camp by a Japanese admiral who admires his pitching leads to a charge of treason. This book is Jax's account, to army investigators, of what he did and did not do. This is less a story of baseball than a story of growing up in difficult times. Jax is a decent, simple man, and his story is both funny and touching. Recommended.—Marylaine Block, St. Ambrose Univ. Lib., Davenport, Ia.

LIBRARY JOURNAL/FEBRUARY 15, 1991

A debut novel with the charm of a Ring Lardner tale—the story of a backwoods boy who has a briefly notorious career as a major-leaguer before becoming a prisoner of war in Japan.

Andrew Jackson "Gooseball" Fielder grows up in Smackover, Arkansas, with

brothers Jugs and Jude. He "lived and breathed sports from can-see-to can't-see." Along with instances of coming-of-age in the oil patch, we see Jackson developing his "gooseball" in a local pipeyard with his brother Jugs—who, however, joins the Navy and, before being shipped out, marries Dixie, a woman all three brothers are sweet on. After Paw takes sick and wastes away, Jackson is discovered by the St. Louis Browns. Then, following a stint in the minors, he's brought up, in 1941, to pitch against the Yankees in a pennant-deciding game. An inveterate worrier who "fears being the goat," Jackson balks home the winning run, falls apart, and joins the Army Air Corps. Later, Jugs is killed, whereupon Jude makes his move on Dixie, and Jackson—in gunnery school and helpless to interfere—eventually gets sent on a mission over downtown Tokyo. Captured, he lives through a hideous physical ordeal in a pipe before a Japanese admiral, whose son wants to play ball, rescues him for a life of relative ease until the war ends. After the war, Jackson plays ball again, but Dixie is already married, and his wartime involvement with the Admiral—as well as other incidents while he was a prisoner—cause the Army to accuse him of treason. He beats the charge, but the big leagues blacklist him; he also has a final victorious showdown with Jude, who turns out to be an abusive animal.

The voice is credible, and the humor just hard-edged enough to give the story a little spin. Ball fans will enjoy it, as will devotees of southern backwoods fiction.

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appeared in China and then expanded their range by dispersal into North America.

Other paleontologists—White among them—interpret the available evidence differently. They say the subfamily Lepo-

scientifically valuable fossil material on federal land under a special permit that has been annually renewed for the past five years by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. □

**Fielder's Choice**  
RICK NORMAN  
*August House, \$17.95 cloth,*  
*ISBN 0-87483-172-5*

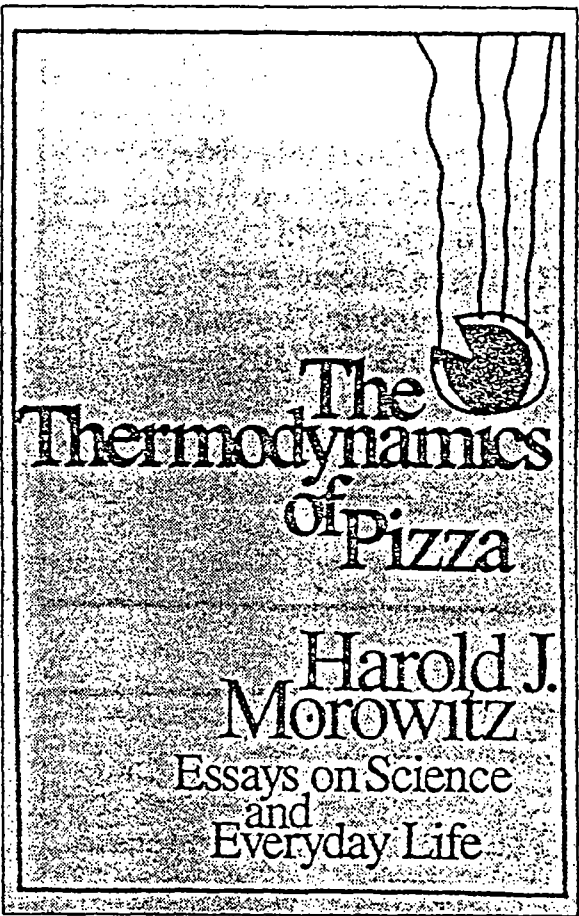
Choosing and not choosing both have consequences, and no one knows this better than Andrew Jackson Fielder. From the small town of Smackover, Arkansas, emerges "Gooseball" Fielder, so named because of his famous rising pitch—the "gooseball." *Fielder's Choice* is the tale of two brothers growing up with big dreams of the major leagues in a bush league environment. When the older of the two brothers goes into the service after planting the major league dreams in Andrew, "Gooseball" finally gets to the major leagues only to find that he misses the companionship and guidance of his older brother. He joins his brother in the Army, only to be taken prisoner by the Japanese and obliged to learn about them as a people. His baseball talents help him adjust as he becomes a baseball coach for a Japanese team that finally ends up facing the New York Yankees and losing. But Andrew Jackson Fielder ends up a winner by making a pivotal right choice along the way.

Rick Norman has done a mesmerizing job of spinning this inventive tale wherein real morals are discovered in unreal dreams. This is a book to read on the front porch on a hot afternoon, a glass of lemonade in hand, and the World Series on the radio in the background.—H.L. Oswald

**The Tornado**  
JOHN EDWARD WEEMS  
*Texas A&M University, \$10.95 paper,*  
*ISBN 0-89096-460-2*

First published in 1977, this new paperback edition describes a funnel cloud that hit Waco, Texas, on May 11, 1953, leaving 114 dead, hundreds injured, and tens of millions of dollars' worth of damage in its terrestrial wake. This gripping and detailed tale of human drama and tragedy by eyewitness newspaper reporter J.E. Weems describes automobiles rolling end over end, buildings collapsing like stacks of toy

building blocks, and a movie theatre crumbling on its terrified patrons. Royalties from the sale of this edition will benefit the book fund of the Waco-MacLennan County Public Library.—RR



**The Thermodynamics of Pizza**  
*Essays on Science and Everyday Life*  
HAROLD J. MOROWITZ  
*Rutgers University, \$21.95 cloth,*  
*ISBN 0-8135-1635-8*

In this collection of more than fifty assorted warm and witty essays, biophysicist H.J. Morowitz explains why pizzas stay hot so long, why olives are edible, how ice can carry electricity, why summer camps require health forms, as well as what drooping eyelids, electric eels, and curare have in common. Morowitz elucidates with unusual brevity the big questions that underlie seemingly trivial facts.—RR

11/10/92

Dear Rick:

I thought you might enjoy the accompanying review, which ran on WBUR-FM in Boston earlier this week. I wish I'd been able to get NPR to run it, but they already had some stuff of mine backed up.

As the review indicates, I thought your novel was very fine. I enjoyed talking with you, too.

Good luck in the courtroom and beyond.

With regards,  
Eric Fudge

3:00

Fielder's Choice

Bill Littlefield

Whenever

Each spring the grass gets green, the buds burst, and  
baseball <sup>NOVELS,</sup> ~~books~~, in ever-increasing numbers, appear in the  
bookstores...and, more to the point, on sports commentator  
Bill Littlefield's desk. Eight months after the '92 books  
began arriving, he's finally read one that's flat out great.

OQ:

TAG: Bill Littlefield comments on sports for WBUR. He REVIEWED  
FIELDER'S CHOICE, BY RICK NORMAN, PUBLISHED  
BY AUGUST HOUSE.

The narrator of Rick Norman's novel, Fielder's Choice, is a likeable hick named Jax Fielder. He sounds a little like Dizzy Dean, saying things like, "We was playing baseball like it was taught." He plays the game a little like Dizzy, too, featuring a mysterious pitch called the gooseball.

But baseball stops being the central issue fairly early in this short and marvelous novel, when Fielder's career is interrupted by the second world war. In the course of becoming a pilot, Jax sits through the standard indoctrination and hears all about how "the Japs was conniving devils who ate their young and anybody else's they could get a hold to." But some part of this good man refuses to accept the propaganda. When he flies his first mission over Japan, he notices the baseball diamonds that dot the island. He remembers that Babe Ruth ~~had~~ visited the country and played exhibition games there before the war. And he says to himself, "If they played baseball, didn't they have to be just a little bit human?"

Jax Fielder's experiences during the war are gruesome enough to turn a lesser man bitter, but Jax won't let it happen. He is shot down, captured, tortured, starved, and nearly killed. He pitches imaginary baseball games to stay sane, and when he comes out the other side of the horror, he still has the capacity to pity the Japanese for the terrible destruction the bombing of their cities has caused. Admirable? In his endurance Fielder is nearly superhuman; in his forgiveness he is nearly saintly.

For Jax Fielder's fractured syntax and the apparent ease with which author Rick Norman tells his story, Fielder's Choice has been compared to the work of Ring Lardner. It's an apt comparison, except that Lardner, for all his charm, never attempted a work as ambitious as this first novel, which has at its center a ~~brilliant~~ celebration of tolerance and mercy *in a world which conspires to kill those qualities.*

The only sad thing about Fielder's Choice is that it may be not only Rick Norman's first novel, but his last. Norman is an attorney now in Lake Charles, Louisiana. The blurb at the back of the book says he took up that work so he might be paid for exaggerating, which is ironic, because Fielder's Choice is spare, clear, and true as bright water. I called Mr. Norman to tell him how much I'd enjoyed his book and asked him, of course, whether he was at work on another. "No," he told me. "That was just a lawyer having a crack at writing a book. I've told my story now." Read Fielder's Choice and you will join me in hoping that Rick Norman will one day change his mind.

# Another Lawyer Writes Book

By Jay Allen

Contributing Writer

Rick Norman is a publicist's nightmare.

Norman's first novel, "Fielder's Choice," is in the bookstores. After an interview, he wrote a reporter: "Wish I were more interesting but I have pretty much resigned myself to a life of boredom."

Add Norman to the list of lawyers turned authors. He writes on a parttime basis and defends companies against each other when he isn't in the courtroom. "Bickering over money," as he calls it.

Norman broke from the mold of the bazillions of other lawyers who write about legal matters. His novel uses the baseball diamond instead of the courtroom as its mainstage.

He writes about "Gooseball" Fielder, a pitcher and favorite son from Smackover, Ark., who makes the pros and enjoys a brief season of glory with the St. Louis Browns.

"I hate lawyering stuff," said Norman from his Lake Charles, La., home. "I hate to do it all day everyday. I couldn't imagine writing about it in my sparetime."

Norman added that "Gooseball" took on a life of his own by novel's end. He derived his nickname from his number one pitch, the gooseball.

"I knew what would happen in the end because I knew Gooseball and what he would do," said Norman.

He began the novel after moving from the federal prosecutor's job to private practice. Characters like New Orleans crime figure Carlos Marcellos and former governor Edwin Edwards had been keeping him busy but private practice just didn't offer the same challenges as these two characters to name a few. Gooseball took the place of these two and many others.

Keeping up with "Gooseball" had to have kept him equally busy even though Norman was writing on a parttime basis trying to stay busy. "I just wanted to do something productive," Norman said. "Figured this would be a good way."

"Gooseball's" short stint of glory goes up in flames when he commits a season ending error in the American League's deciding game in 1941.

Shortly afterwards, he finds himself in the middle of World War II. He ends up a prisoner of war after the B-29 he is flying crashes over Tokyo.

One of his captors, an admiral, was a Yankees fan when he was going to school in the States before the war and pulls a few strings, as only an admiral can, and gets him out of the POW camp to teach his son the pitch.

If I tell you much more, I will be telling you how the

book ends, and that's a big no-no for reviewers.

However, voicing our opinions is ok, and I think the book is a very nice addition to a genre that has never been flooded with particularly great books. It's been received so warmly by baseball fans that the publisher, Arkansas' very own August House, had to order a second printing before the first book ever hit the stores.

However, it is about much more than baseball.

It is about how a family falls apart after its leader "moves on." Goose's father leaves his mother for another woman but continues to support the family. The family is turned topsy-turvy when the father, who continued to be a "dad" to the kids dies and the older brother is killed in WWII, the same war "Gooseball" is taken prisoner in.

It also examines the relationships that can develop between two "enemies" when thrown together.

Norman is a baseball fan but "not the kind who plays 'Rotisserie League' baseball or pores over statistics."

The former college baseball player said that he enjoys watching professional baseball but "wouldn't watch the Yankees if they were playing in his backyard."

His college career at Southeastern Louisiana was cut short when "it was repeatedly proven that I couldn't hit a good curve."

Although it may have been repeatedly proven that he couldn't hit a good curve, he did prove that a first time author can write a very good book. The book is recommended reading for everyone, homemakers as well as rotisserie league buffs.

Not a bad first book for a pretty interesting guy.

(Writer's note: This is the last review during the next three months of a book written by a lawyer. Nothing personal against lawyers, they are just writing too many books.

To refresh the wonderful readers' memories, we have reviewed books by Scott Turow, John Grisham, Grif Stockley and now this, another fine book, but it is by a lawyer.

Clause: If Scott Turow personally calls and asks us to review his book, which isn't due out for quite a while anyway or Dan Ritchey writes a book, we will reconsider.)

Another pretty good book.

I must admit a little personal bias in this case. Micheal Fedo, author of "One Shining Season," is a former community college instructor of mine from North Hennepin Community College in Brooklyn Park, Minn.

I probably wouldn't have looked twice at this one otherwise but when I saw that he had written another book, it was a must read for me.

Disappointingly, that is not a category it will fall into for all readers. Not because it isn't well written, it's a very well-crafted book.

It would be a baseball fan's dream to write. Fedo simply traveled the country during summer break one year and interviewed 11 baseball players who had one great season.

He gets into what made the seasons great and lets them describe what it was like to play baseball during the years of 1945 to 1970. Days when they didn't play on plastic grass under artificial lights and got paid a million dollars per breath.

Fedo is an excellent writer who tells you about sitting down in players' apartments and farmhouses and then lets the players tell you where their lives have gone since their "One Shining Season."

Some of the players he talked to are Bob "Hurricane" Hazle, who in 1957 batted .403 over the final two months to help lead the Milwaukee Braves to the pennant; Walt Dropo, the Red Sox power hitter who had his best season as a rookie; and Ned Garver, who won 20 games for a last-place team, the 1951 St. Louis Browns. (wonder if he played with Gooseball).

The introduction is by Ira Berkow, one of America's greatest baseball writers, who also gives the book high marks.

The book was very enjoyable reading as Fedo took you back into these players' lives through a time machine at the way baseball was. My biggest problem was that the youngest player's shining season was two years before I was born.

If he writes a book 30 years from now, about players like Tom Brunansky and Glenn Davis, it would be much more interesting to me. Then again, today's players and yesterday's players are two different breeds.

Maybe I'd better settle for the time machine. Who'd really want to sit down with a 60-year-old Jose Canseco.

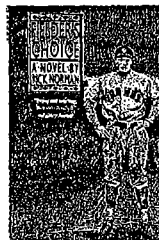
Rivers of Difference: The James and Rio Grande

# Southern Living®

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Catchy  
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Flavorful  
Fish



**Fielder's Choice** by  
Rick Norman (Au-  
gust House,  
\$17.95)

Its Arkansas publishers are high on this first-time novelist's book. I know why. It has earned that spot on my bookshelf reserved for the most memorable baseball books, right next to the likes of Mark Harris's classic *Bang the Drum Slowly*.

Rick Norman's *Fielder's Choice*, though, is more than a story of baseball. It is a story of war, of small-town life, of life and death, of family relationships, and most of all, of Jackson "Gooseball" Fielder.

Norman tells his story in well-crafted prose, clear and convincing. We follow Gooseball from his youth in Smackover, Arkansas, to the big break when he is drafted by the St. Louis Browns in 1941. After Pearl Harbor, Jackson joins the Army Air Corps. Shot down, he is taken as a POW and later rescued by a Japanese admiral who recognizes him as a former major leaguer. Jackson becomes the admiral's gardener and even teaches the admiral's son his famous gooseball pitch. Because of this relationship, the Army charges him with treason.

*Fielder's Choice* offers a moving account of Gooseball's side of the story. We listen as he tells why he made the decisions he did. In *Gooseball*, Rick Norman creates a simple, powerful character, and in the end, we know Gooseball has found the strength to make the right choice. *Amorak Huey*



Fall Means Football:  
Our All-South Section

# BOOKS

❑ FICTION

## Novelist pairs baseball with war

By BOB ANDERSON  
Advocate writer

**B**aseball, a team sport that systematically turns the spotlight from one player to the next, has a history of evoking good literature.

And war — despite its horrors, or maybe because of them — also has provided fodder for great books.

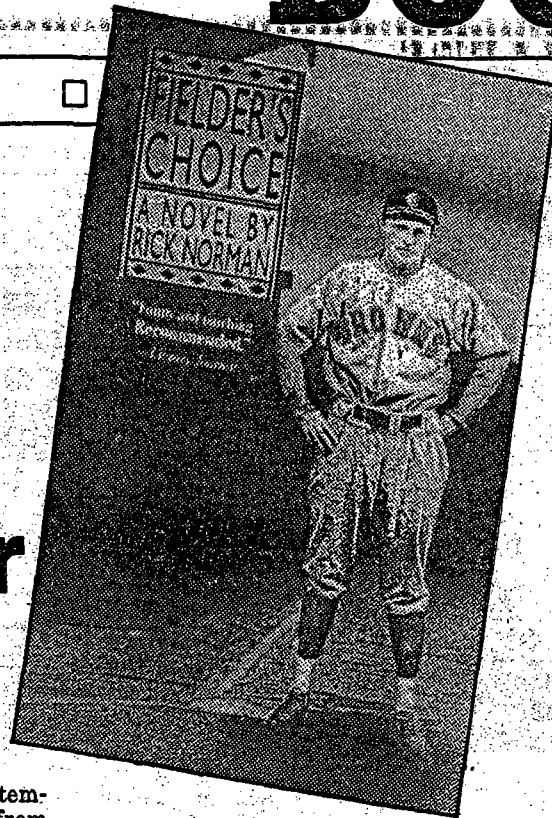
Rick Norman, who has an appreciation for the threads of folklore from both that have woven themselves into the American experience, has melded the two topics into a compelling novel that has sent its publishers immediately into a second printing. The book is *Fielder's Choice* (August House, \$17.95).

"I wrote about the two things I liked to read about best," Norman said in an interview after returning to Tara High School — where he once studied and played baseball — to discuss literature with students.

Written in a naturally flowing first-person, *Fielder's Choice* is the story of an Arkansas country boy in the late 1930s and early '40s who develops a pitch — the gooseball — effective enough to get him out of the family furniture store in Smackover to the big leagues with the St. Louis Browns.

His big league career is haunted by a single moment. Before he has a chance to drive the ghosts away he finds himself over Japan descending in a parachute to a far greater nightmare — a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.

The inhumanity of the camp and the mutual disdain of Andrew Jackson Fielder and his tormentors is transcended by the shared love of baseball by Fielder, a Japanese officer and the officer's talented son. Baseball becomes the catalyst for cutting through the stereotypes and revealing the people behind the flags.



Through research Norman constructs his character's wartime experiences and some of the history of the Browns, but he uses personal experience to talk about baseball, which he played in college.

With a laugh Norman recalls an editor's attempt to get him to change the title of the book, recounting their failure to communicate until Norman discovered that the editor didn't realize that "fielder's choice" is a baseball term. Despite such help from editors, the book, unlike many about baseball, manages not to bean students of the game with misinformation.

Norman also has a feel for country life in Arkansas, where he has ancestral roots, masterfully handling the dialect and providing an enduring portrait of an Arkansas family.

Though a relatively short novel that can be quickly read, *Fielder's Choice* took five years to write. Norman smiled when he said he undertook the project not out of some great compulsion to write but because "it was better than watching television."

"Sometimes I feel guilty," he said of his success in getting his first book published, after talking to so many writers who have tried so hard and failed.

But much of what this first-time author shows in *Fielder's Choice* is a gift that cannot be learned — it's a love for storytelling, an ear for dialogue and a voice that carries the story. Hopefully this noteworthy Louisiana writer (he lives in Lake Charles) will keep his eyes off the TV and his fingers on the keyboard. ■

❑ BIOGRAPHY

## Park rangers Poe didn't use

By CHARLES HILLINGER  
Los Angeles Times

**P**HILADELPHIA — Despite the popular notion that Edgar Allan Poe was an opium addict, rangers at America's memorial to the author-poet are vigorously campaigning to restore his reputation.

"The myth continues to this day that Poe was a drug addict, a despicable character. It's a reputation undeserved," said National Park Service ranger-researcher Christopher Eckard.

Eckard said that he and Ranger David Blackburn produced a traveling exhibit "to prove there is no hard evidence that Poe used drugs, how the myth originated and why it persists." Since October, the exhibit has been on display in schools and libraries, as well as at the park service's regional headquarters in Philadelphia.

"The myth was perpetrated by Rufus W. Griswold," said Eckard, 26. "Poe criticized the anthology *The Poets and Poetry of America*, authored by Griswold, who was furious with Poe and never forgave him. Griswold was Poe's literary executor and first biographer and took advantage of that position to ruin Poe's reputation after his death."

He added: "Griswold has been a prime source of information about Poe the man, even to this day. Schoolteachers in English literature classes all over America leave the impression with students that Poe was a drug addict."

Thus, said Blackburn, 27, "young kids get the idea from schools that this guy was on drugs. . . . We're trying to break that cycle. We say, 'No, Poe did not use drugs to become inspired to write his tales. He used his creativity and imagination. You can do the same.'"

The rangers concede that a number of Poe's stories, including "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Tale of Ragged Mountains" do refer to opium — but they maintain that readers should not confuse the author's work with the author's life.

Eckard said that in researching Poe's letters and other documents, he found no mention of any drug habit. Other contemporaries of Poe, such as Dr. Thomas Dunn English, denied the author used narcotics. English, a Philadelphia physician and poet who knew

JILL IRELAND: The movie Bronson fought

MAY 20, 1991 \$1.95

# People

weekly

JASON PRIESTLEY:  
TV'S COOLEST KID

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## PICKS & PANS



### PEANUTS AND CRACKERJACK

by David Cataneo

A Boston writer salutes the best thing this side of a triple—the baseball anecdote. (Rutledge Hill, \$18.95)

### THE HOME RUN HEARD 'ROUND THE WORLD

by Ray Robinson

A New Yorker studies the dramatic 1951 Dodger-Giant playoff. (Harper-Collins, \$19.95)

### TOTAL BASEBALL

Edited by John Thorn and Pete Palmer

The *Baseball Encyclopedia* is more wieldy, but this volume is a mass of data, including such meretricious neo-statistical notions as the League-Average Replacement Player—basically a player who is more average than anyone else. (Warner, \$49.95)

### FIELDER'S CHOICE

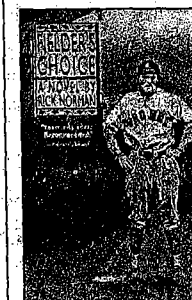
by Rick Norman

A first novel tracks a man's journey from Arkansas to the majors to World War II. (August House, \$17.95)

### THE CUBS READER

Edited by David Fulk and Dan Riley

An anthology on Chicago's beloved bumblers has a piece by the nerdiest of diamond scribes, George Will. (Houghton Mifflin, paper, \$9.95)



VIA SATELLITE

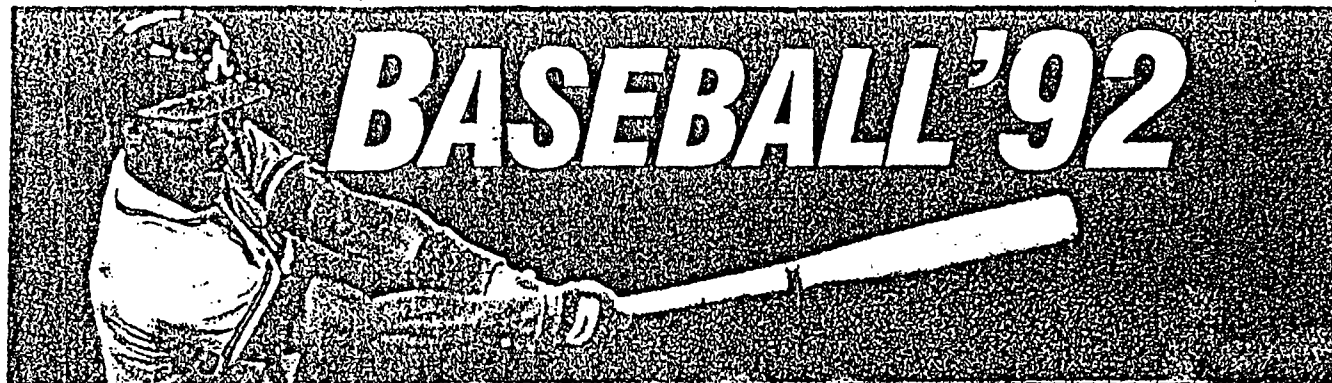
THE NATION'S NEWSPAPER

SECTION E

USA  
TODAY

BONUS  
SECTION

MONDAY, APRIL 6, 1992



## Books to read between innings

**Fielder's Choice** by Rick Norman, August House Publishers, Inc. 192 pages, paperback, \$9.95

From the opening pitch, rookie novelist Rick Norman sits you down and charms you with the ramblings of a master storyteller.

You quickly find yourself among friends and familiar folks from days gone by. With names like Jugs, Jude, Jax, Bubba and Dixie, it's hard not to have fun with this yarn about 'Gooseball' Fielder and his adventures on and off the diamond.

You certainly don't have to share his love of baseball to marvel at his ability to string together visions of childhood, family and day-to-day life.

A fun read for anyone who enjoys exaggeration and sees life as a series of choices. "... a fastball? A curve? A slider? Which one's right?"

— Eric Arneson

# BOOKS

## First baseball novel scores a home run on life

**FIELDER'S CHOICE.** By Rick Norman. August House, 192 pp., \$17.95.

By BRIAN KANTZ

In his dust jacket biographical sketch, Rick Norman admits that he played baseball until "it was discovered — and repeatedly proven — that he could not hit a good curveball."

Of course, this confession merely makes him one more blade of grass in the unending outfield of major league wannabes who have been similarly foiled.

But, like those who gave up their playing aspirations, Norman retained love for his baseball — its romanticism, theatrics and life-reflecting qualities — as a jubilant fan. And all of these endearments shine through in his debut novel, "Fielder's Choice."

Andrew Jackson (Gooseball) Fielder, a simple, unassuming farmboy from Smackover, Ark., who seems like a perfect James Stewart character, nar-

rates Norman's tale. The setting is after World War II and Jax, as Fielder is called by his family, is doling out his life story to an army major in defense of charges made against Jackson that he committed treason as a prisoner of war.

Written in a Southern accent, the charming, whimsical dialogue makes you feel as though you are actually the military representative listening to a wronged man's unnecessary confession.

Fielder starts with his early days and speaks fondly of his older brother, Jugs, with whom he discovered the gooseball, a pitch that supposedly rises. Jugs is Jax's mentor, hero, and best friend. He is the kind of brother everyone dreams of having.

But, with the good comes the bad. Jude is Jax's younger brother, a tattletale and coldhearted fellow. Reflecting on the sibling years, Jax relays all types of hilarious and interesting sagas.

Finally, in 1941, under cult hero status from his mesmerizing new pitch, and with the weight of his fresh small-town hero title, Jax breaks into the

big with the St. Louis Browns. Unfortunately, his career quickly fizzles out with a late-season blunder. And in attempt to run away from baseball, he joins the Army Air Forces as a top-turret gunner in a B-29 Superfortress.

In air conflict, he is sent parachuting through the Japanese sky and lands as a POW. In his stay, Jax learns a few things about war including torture, and the fact that the so-called enemy can turn out to be a best friend.

The best thing about this novel, though, is that whether you love baseball more than life itself or would rather watch paint dry than concentrate on nine innings, you will enjoy this story simply for its amicable tone.

It is about more than baseball; it deals with relationships and thoughts in the face of death. This is one of the few, special books, that makes a reader long to be able to take credit for it. "Fielder's Choice" is yet another in the growing list of superior baseball fiction.

Kantz is a Cleveland free-lancer.

## THE PLAIN DEALER

OHIO'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

1801 SUPERIOR AVE.

CLEVELAND, OHIO 44114

## RICK NORMAN

### *Fielder's Choice*

Little Rock, August House,  
1991.

Ah, it's spring and a young man's fancy turns to baseball—what else? Just as society's analysts were declaring that baseball was dead and that professional football was the new idol of the American public, sports-minded people proved otherwise. The last few years have seen attendance at baseball games, whether the major league variety or minor league parks like our own Ray Winder Field, soar to new heights and leave little doubt as to what the national pastime is. Last year, CBS paid a few zillion dollars for major league broadcast rights. The salaries paid these days to even utility infielders are beyond my comprehension. In today's market, Brooks Robinson would have cost the Orioles a billion bucks!

On the heels of this renewed interest in baseball has come a publishing bonanza of baseball books. A few years ago, three or four titles each spring was it for baseball fans. Now there are several publishers who have that many titles each on their spring list. Recent sales reports have two baseball books among the nations' best

selling works. Biographies and other non-fiction material provide most of the topics but the genre of baseball fiction is showing new life.

Among the new baseball fiction books this season is *Fielder's Choice*, a 1940s story set in Smackover. It relates the saga of Gooseball Fielder, a major league pitcher whose career was like viewing a comet; it was bright, it was brief, but boy, was it memorable. Fielder rides his trick pitch (the "gooseball") from Arkansas to the St. Louis Browns where his

rookie season ends in heartbreak and in the national spotlight on the last day of the 1941 season.

Pearl Harbor quickly follows and soon Fielder is a bomber's gunner firing bullets instead of fastballs until his plane is shot down. Gooseball's POW experience takes an unexpected turn when a Japanese Yankees fan recognizes our hero.

Norman's book is different—which is what separates the best from the rest in baseball fiction circles. It has an unusual plot, some humor, and uses baseball's trappings to address more serious themes.

I once mentioned in this column a book that had the best preface I had ever read. *Fielder's Choice* deserves mention as well for whatever you call those little paragraphs under the author's picture on the back flyleaf of the book jacket. Usually, these little snippets all say the same thing and are forgotten before you finish reading them. About Rick Norman, however, we learn that he "played baseball in college before it was discovered—and repeatedly proven—that he could not hit a good curveball." Also, that he "has always enjoyed storytelling and became a trial lawyer so that he might be paid for exaggerating."

Put that commentary under a picture of a guy sitting in some wooden bleachers with a mischievous grin on his face and an LSU baseball cap on his head and brother, you can sell me a book.

Give Gooseball a try. You won't be disappointed.

Clyde Edgerton's *Walking Across Egypt* was my favorite novel of the 1980s. Now, in *Killer Diller* (Algonquin, \$19.95), which could be subtitled *Son of Walking Across Egypt*, Edgerton picks up the story of well-meaning delinquent Wesley Benfield and his aging mentor Mattie Rigsbee.

Wesley is in a halfway house operated by Ballard University, which is headed by twin Jerry Falwell clones. He is also in a gospel band, though he longs to play the blues. *Killer Diller* contains some fine humor, but not enough substance. Characters that were magical one novel become trivial when stretched into another.

In her final year of high school in a bleak New England town, Connie Frances LaPlante discovers the music of Brecht and Weill. Suddenly, she destroys all her identification and belongings, hitchhikes to New York, where she reinvents herself as the strange and exotic Jenny Fruehoffer, an illegal immigrant from Germany. *Pirate Jenny*, by April Bernard (Norton, \$24.95), is a first novel that takes forever to get started. But when it does, the adventures of this enig-

## W.P. KINSLEY

matic young woman show enough promise to make Bernard a writer to watch with interest.

*Fielder's Choice*, a first novel by Rick Norman (August House, \$21.95), is this spring's brightest piece of baseball fiction. A convincing down-home voice tells of Andrew Jackson "Gooseball" Fielder, who rises from Smackover, Ark., to lead the St. Louis Browns to a pennant, only to disgrace himself by choking in a critical situation and losing the World Series to the much-hated Yankees.

Gooseball ends up in the air force, then in a Japanese prison camp where he endures unbelievable hardship. *Fielder's Choice* is funny, touching and memorable.

Another first novel, though not nearly so successful, is *Doc-in-a-Box*, by Robert A. Burton (Soho, \$22.95). One minute Webb Smith is a successful plastic surgeon in Los Angeles, the next he has lost his licence for treating and not reporting a gunshot wound. He finds himself working illegally in a seedy 24-hour clinic. One subplot concerning an abused child is interesting. But

another about a friend dying of cancer takes up far too much space.

*Subtraction*, by Mary Robison (Random House \$24.50), is the story of Harvard poetry professor, Pidge Devereaux, who spends her year's sabbatical chasing about America trying to catch up with her drunken, worthless husband, Raf.

Raf doesn't work because "It's not easy, getting good jobs where you can drink." I am continually amazed that authors like Robison think book buyers and readers will be interested in the antics of a disgusting alcoholic. Ignore this one.

*Animal Dreams* by Barbara Kingsolver (Harper-Collins, \$29.95), is a delicious novel, full of surprises, secrets and engaging characters. Cosima Noline, failed medical student reduced to clerking at a 7-Eleven store, returns to her hometown of Grace, Ariz., where her father has been town doctor for 40 years. As Cosima comes to terms with her past in Arizona, her sister Hallie is in Nicaragua fighting for social justice. Since her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver has learned to write about social issues without being preachy. ♦

look good.

Chapel is certain he will be traded at the end of the season and the news depresses him. He has decided this final September afternoon will be his last pitching appearance.

On this final day, Chapel finds magic in his arm one more time. Between innings, Chapel looks back on his life, assessing the good and the bad, evaluating his relationship with the only woman he loved, replaying the only career he's known.

It's as if Chapel will die after this game and his life is passing before him.

At its best, "For Love of the Game" reads as economically as Hemingway. At its worst, it reads like an unbelievable Disney fable.

On the other hand, "**Fielder's Choice**" (August House, \$17.95), a first novel by trial lawyer Rick Norman, is the surprise of the young season.

I was prepared to dislike this book: Andrew Jackson Fielder, from the backwoods of Smackwater, Ark., rides his unique "gooseball" — a curve ball that rises instead of sinks — into the big leagues in 1941.

He is the bullpen phenom of the St. Louis Browns, an overnight sensation. At Yankee Stadium for the final series of the season, a pennant is riding on the outcome.

But Gooseball Fielder has a fear of failure — he knows that if he is called into the game he will choke. And Gooseball chokes. He balks in the pennant-winning run, and New York fans carry him off the field on their shoulders.

Gooseball wallows in self-pity until Pearl Harbor is attacked and he enlists. Later, he becomes a prisoner of war, but baseball keeps him alive — half dead in solitary, Gooseball's mental replays of past games maintain his sanity.

A Japanese admiral, whose son wants to be a pitcher, also recognizes Gooseball and brings him to his personal compound, where Fielder is asked to teach his pitch to the son. The involvement leads to charges of treason after the war, and though Gooseball beats the rap, he is blackballed from the sport.

Norman's novel has some of the whimsy of W.P. Kinsella's "Shoeless Joe" and "Iowa Baseball Confederacy." It is a novel about Southern ethics and the magic and mayhem of families.

And it is a novel about a kid who slung a bat over his shoulder and headed for the diamond, spending his summers falling in love with baseball.

■ Steve Kelley is a Seattle Times staff columnist.

with the company director, though she has no clue as to what makes him tick.

The reader has only murky ideas of what makes Stella tick, for that matter. Phone calls to her absent mother (who, we're told, always responds in "the usual way") offer a clue; so does Stella's "amusing" but "disconcerting" behavior. It's easy to guess the nature of the shocks that are coming — and equally great fun getting to them.

Bainbridge enjoyed a 10-year career as an actress before turning to writing, and it's tempting to see the book as a self-deprecating account of the teen ingenue she must once have been. It's soon clear, however, that this is no fond exercise in nostalgia, but another walk on the dark side as only Bainbridge can deliver it.

Michael Upchurch

■ "**Walking with the Great Apes**" by Sy Montgomery Houghton Mifflin, \$19.95



When paleontologist Louis Leakey proposed long-term, intensive studies of the orangutan, gorilla and chimpanzee to learn more about the behavior of prehistoric humans, he startled mainstream scientists. But the scientific community was completely outraged when he chose three young, relatively untrained women — Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Biruté Galdikas — to go into the wilds of Africa and Indonesia to pursue this research. "Walking with the Great Apes" profiles the courage and contradictions of these women.

Author Sy Montgomery deftly contrasts the scientific community's reluctance to accept Goodall, Fossey and Galdikas with the deep trust ultimately placed in them by the animals they set out to study. After initial frustration and failure, all three made important contributions to primate research: Goodall and Galdikas observed toolmaking among chimpanzees and orangutans, respectively, and Fossey discovered that gorillas express happiness and contentment by singing.

Ironically, these discoveries linking other species more closely to our own caused all three women to distance themselves from the establishment which had rebuffed them. In creating new methods of primate research, they devalued conventional models which forsook compassion for information. This book celebrates women who have reformed ties that almost had been forgotten.

Barbara Lloyd McMichael

Sunday, May 5, 1991 K 15

BOOKS

The Seattle Times / Seattle Post-Intelligencer

May 5 1991 The Seattle Times

## erary diamonds

is examination of for many retired

expanded, updated compendium of facts about the game.

### PAPERBACKS

ame, the Domini- Alan M. Klein, in the Dominican national obsession. "ound the World" Robinson tells

■ "If I Never Get Back" (Ballantine, \$5.95) is Darryl Brock's back-to-the-future novel of the 1869 perfect season of the Cincinnati Red Stockings, the first professional baseball club.

■ "Big Sticks: The Phenomenal Decade of

# Elegy for an also-ran

Fielder's Choice. By Rick Norman. August House. \$17.95.

By DON WASHINGTON  
Contributing writer

Most of us can identify with Andrew Jackson Fielder. The protagonist in Rick Norman's first novel, "Fielder's Choice," is a decent person, loyal to family and friends, and a practical joker; however, his everlasting self-identification comes not from those good qualities, but from his self-doubt.

Norman, a lawyer in Lake Charles, has written about a man whose compassion gets him charged with treason for collaborating with the Japanese in World War II, and whose doubts about his own abilities keep him from accomplishing the things he wants most.

Jax, as his family calls him, comes close to being a hero while

pitching for the Browns at the end of the 1941 season. But in a moment of indecision, he balks in the winning run in a pennant-deciding game against the Yankees, and his image of himself is set.

Growing up in Smackover,



Norman

When the old man gets sick, Jax quits the high school baseball team — even though it means the team won't win the championship.

Ark. Jax looked up to his older brother, Jugs, as the one most likely to succeed. After their father leaves home and Jugs joins the Navy, Jax takes responsibility for the family.

When Jugs marries Dixie, the girl Jax himself has fallen for, he manages to swallow his disappointment. Even though Jugs is away in the Pacific and Jax's attraction to Dixie never wanes, he treats her with nothing but respect.

Finally, this character who represents all that is good and kind, who seems to deserve the attention his baseball skills have earned him, makes a bonehead play that determines the course of his life.

After his fateful balk, Jax resolves to give up baseball, and when the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, he joins the Army Air Corps to make sure he won't be in anybody's lineup the next season. One day, in a mission over Japan, he's shot out of his B-29 — named the "Miss Take" — and survives torture in a prison camp only by determining to marry the now-widowed Dixie.

Even in the prison camp, Jax can't escape his balk. A Japanese admiral, who happened to be in the stands of Yankee Stadium

that day, takes him out of the camp to make him a gardener. Jax makes friends with the admiral's son, and teaches him to pitch. Ultimately, it leads to the charge of treason.

The book is Jax's story as told to an Army investigator. It is an entertaining tale, and good reading, including a satisfying confrontation between Jax and his obnoxious, conniving younger brother Jude.

Like most of us, Andrew Jackson Fielder doesn't always make the right choice. He's just an average guy, whose blunder on the pitcher's mound made him famous, and who had an innocent friendship that the U.S. Army considered treasonous.

It would be easy to draw Gooseball Fielder as a bitter, sour man. Instead, Norman, helped along by the country dialect in which he writes, gives us a character who is humble by nature, who accepts his mistakes and moves on. We should all be so lucky.

Don Washington is a writer and editor for McDermott International Inc.

## Show

Even preceding page

in three innings and appears on the verge of tears, thanks mostly to his catcher's ineptness at showing a good target. There is Keenie in the dugout, sitting

## Going, going . . .

# BOOKS

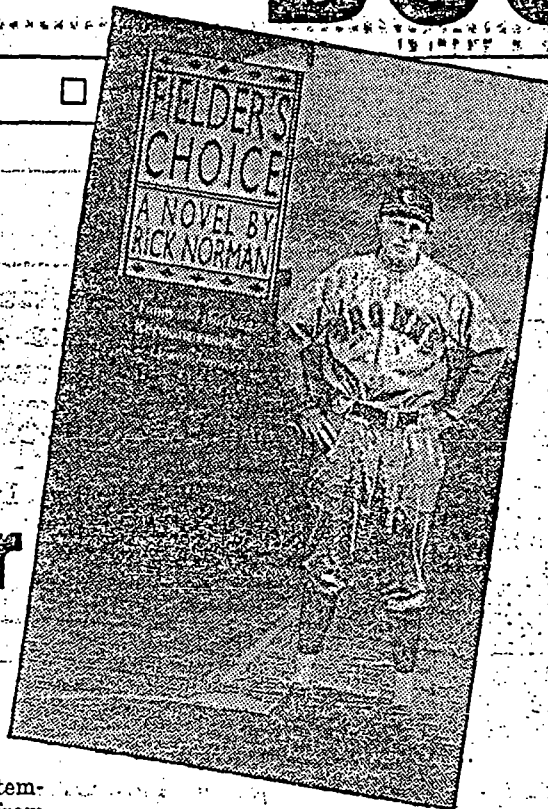
□ FICTION

□ BIO

## Novelist pairs baseball with war

By BOB ANDERSON

Advocate writer



**B**aseball, a team sport that systematically turns the spotlight from one player to the next, has a history of evoking good literature.

And war — despite its horrors, or maybe because of them — also has provided fodder for great books.

Rick Norman, who has an appreciation for the threads of folklore from both that have woven themselves into the American experience, has melded the two topics into a compelling novel that has sent its publishers immediately into a second printing. The book is *Fielder's Choice* (August House, \$17.95).

"I wrote about the two things I liked to read about best," Norman said in an interview after returning to Tara High School — where he once studied and played baseball — to discuss literature with students.

Written in a naturally flowing first-person, *Fielder's Choice* is the story of an Arkansas country boy in the late 1930s and early '40s who develops a pitch — the gooseball — effective enough to get him out of the family furniture store in Smackover to the big leagues with the St. Louis Browns.

His big league career is haunted by a single moment. Before he has a chance to drive the ghosts away he finds himself over Japan descending in a parachute to a far greater nightmare — a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.

The inhumanity of the camp and the mutual disdain of Andrew Jackson Fielder and his tormentors is transcended by the shared love of baseball by Fielder, a Japanese officer and the officer's talented son. Baseball becomes the catalyst for cutting through the stereotypes and revealing the people behind the flags.

Through research Norman constructs his character's wartime experiences and some of the history of the Browns, but he uses personal experience to talk about baseball, which he played in college.

With a laugh Norman recalls an editor's attempt to get him to change the title of the book, recounting their failure to communicate until Norman discovered that the editor didn't realize that "fielder's choice" is a baseball term. Despite such help from editors, the book, unlike many about baseball, manages not to bean students of the game with misinformation.

Norman also has a feel for country life in Arkansas, where he has ancestral roots, masterfully handling the dialect and providing an enduring portrait of an Arkansas family.

Though a relatively short novel that can be quickly read, *Fielder's Choice* took five years to write. Norman smiled when he said he undertook the project not out of some great compulsion to write but because "it was better than watching television."

"Sometimes I feel guilty," he said of his success in getting his first book published, after talking to so many writers who have tried so hard and failed.

But much of what this first-time author shows in *Fielder's Choice* is a gift that cannot be learned — it's a love for storytelling, an ear for dialogue and a voice that carries the story. Hopefully this noteworthy Louisiana writer (he lives in Lake Charles) will keep his eyes off the TV and his fingers on the keyboard. ■

## Park Poe

By CHARL

Los An

**P**HILADELPHIA popular n Poe was a at Americ thior-poet are vigor store his reputation. "The myth contr was a drug addict, a a reputation unde Park Service ranger Eckard.

Eckard said that Blackburn produce prove there is no har drugs, how the myt persists." Since Oct on display in school at the park service's Philadelphia.

"The myth was p Griswold," said Eck the anthology *The P ica*, authored by Gr with Poe and never was Poe's literary es pher and took adva ruin Poe's reputat.

He added: "Gris source of informat even to this day. Sc literature classes all impression with stud addict."

Thus, said Blackb the idea from schoo drugs. . . . We're tr We say, 'No, Poe did inspired to write l creativity and imag same."

The rangers con Poe's stories, includi the House of Usher Mountains" do refe maintain that reader author's work with t

Eckard said that i ters and other docu tion of any drug hab of Poe, such as Dr. T nited the author use Philadelphia physio Poe well but dislike several years after P

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topics including warm-bloodedness, running capabilities, intellect, gigantism, bird-dinosaur relationships, skeletal design, preservation, and extinction are also discussed in light of what is known about the physiology of modern animals. Christopher McGowan is a professor of zoology at the University of Toronto and the curator of vertebrate paleontology at the Royal Ontario Museum.—RR

**Rookie Coaches Soccer Guide**  
AMERICAN COACHING  
EFFECTIVENESS PROGRAM (ACEP)  
Leisure Press, \$7.95 paper, ISBN 0-88011-383-9

**Rookie Coaches Basketball Guide**  
ACEP  
Leisure Press, \$7.95 paper, ISBN 0-88011-412-6

**Rookie Coaches Tennis Guide**  
ACEP  
Leisure Press, \$7.95 paper, ISBN 0-88011-420-7,  
Box 5076, Champaign, IL 61285-5076

In the ever-growing world of youth sports, our children are subjected to varying levels of coaching knowledge and understanding. Often hurried or inadequate training is offered, as parent volunteers are pressed into service. The result is rookie coaches navigating through team practices by the seat of their pants, sometimes perplexing their charges with erroneous advice, often entirely missing the game plan for effective coaching.

This concise series of training guides provides a solution. Prepared by the American Coaching Effectiveness Program, these manuals ask the questions that should occur to novice coaches and then clearly provide the answers. A large part of each guide is devoted to the real challenge of coaching youth sports: establishing a positive, communicative relationship with the children. Important information on team practice planning, injury prevention and youth sports philosophy is also presented. The final sections of each book teach sport-specific material. Every basic skill is detailed along with player drills. The coach will appreciate the useful strategies that are outlined for each sport.

Youth sports directors take note. Relief is imminent for parents who grimace when their child's coach barks insensitively. Placed in the proper hands, these guides can foster a positive sports experience for our children.

—Alan "Coach" Bernhard

appeared in China and then expanded their range by dispersal into North America.

Other paleontologists—White among them—interpret the available evidence differently. They say the subfamily Lepo-

## Fielder's Choice

RICK NORMAN  
August House, \$17.95 cloth,  
ISBN 0-87483-172-5

Choosing and not choosing both have consequences, and no one knows this better than Andrew Jackson Fielder. From the small town of Smackover, Arkansas, emerges "Gooseball" Fielder, so named because of his famous rising pitch—the "gooseball." Fielder's Choice is the tale of two brothers growing up with big dreams of the major leagues in a bush league environment. When the older of the two brothers goes into the service after planting the major league dreams in Andrew, "Gooseball" finally gets to the major leagues only to find that he misses the companionship and guidance of his older brother. He joins his brother in the Army, only to be taken prisoner by the Japanese and obliged to learn about them as a people. His baseball talents help him adjust as he becomes a baseball coach for a Japanese team that finally ends up facing the New York Yankees and losing. But Andrew Jackson Fielder ends up a winner by making a pivotal right choice along the way.

Rick Norman has done a mesmerizing job of spinning this inventive tale wherein real morals are discovered in unreal dreams. This is a book to read on the front porch on a hot afternoon, a glass of lemonade in hand, and the World Series on the radio in the background.—H.L. Oswald

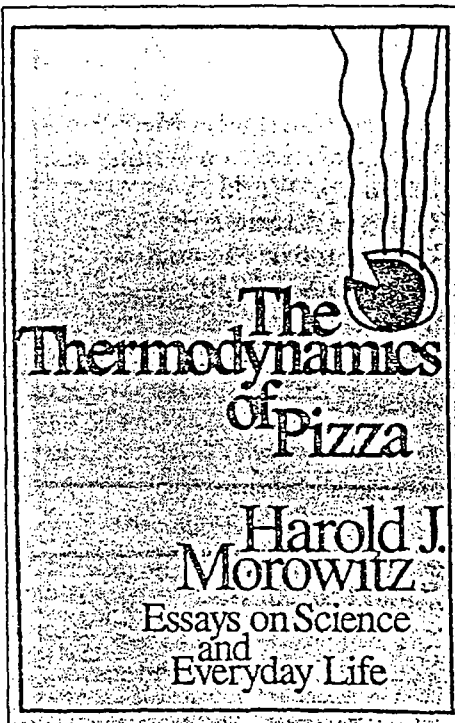
## The Tornado

JOHN EDWARD WEEMS  
Texas A&M University, \$10.95 paper,  
ISBN 0-89096-460-2

First published in 1977, this new paperback edition describes a funnel cloud that hit Waco, Texas, on May 11, 1953, leaving 114 dead, hundreds injured, and tens of millions of dollars' worth of damage in its terrestrial wake. This gripping and detailed tale of human drama and tragedy by eyewitness newspaper reporter J.E. Weems describes automobiles rolling end over end, buildings collapsing like stacks of toy

scientifically valuable fossil material on federal land under a special permit that has been annually renewed for the past five years by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. □

building blocks, and a movie theatre crumbling on its terrified patrons. Royalties from the sale of this edition will benefit the book fund of the Waco-MacLennan County Public Library.—RR



## The Thermodynamics of Pizza Essays on Science and Everyday Life

HAROLD J. MOROWITZ  
Rutgers University, \$21.95 cloth,  
ISBN 0-8135-1635-8

In this collection of more than fifty assorted warm and witty essays, biophysicist H.J. Morowitz explains why pizzas stay hot so long, why olives are edible, how ice can carry electricity, why summer camps require health forms, as well as what drooping eyelids, electric eels, and curare have in common. Morowitz elucidates with unusual brevity the big questions that underlie seemingly trivial facts.—RR

BLOOMSBURY REVIEW

JUNE 1991

Richwoods WV

## THE WAYTS OF MILLSBORO

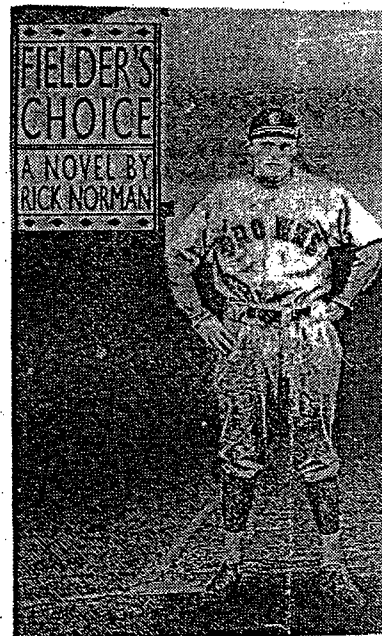
### If You Like Baseball You'll Love

**T**HE story of Feilder's Choice is a familiar one, with enough character and detail to make it ring true. A sturdy young man from a struggling home has a talent for baseball, and might have been one of its all-stars. Then life happened. The hero of Rick Norman's baseball yarn is Andrew Jackson Fielder, who comes out of an Arkansas oil patch just before World War II with his unique "gooseball," a rising pitch which puzzles the best of batters. One of three brothers, he is also in love with Dixie, a neighbor; they all are. But he is too shy to tell her so.

"Gooseball" does a stint with a farm team, and then joins the St. Louis Browns for a promising start in 1941. Disaster happens when he goes against the Yankees in the deciding game of the pennant race; he joins the Army Air Corps in disgrace. As with many young men that year, his world continues to fall apart. Dixie marries his brother, Jugs, in his absence, and then later the abusive oaf brother Jude when Jugs is killed.

Fielder winds up in a Japanese prison camp near Tokyo, and nearly dies before being recognized by a Nipponese admiral with a passion for baseball. Our hero is asked to teach the officer's son his special pitch, only to have

### "Fielder's Choice"



Andrew Jackson Fielder.

the young man die as a kamikaze pilot in the closing days of the war. Worse yet, Fielder returns to face charges of disloyalty after the armistice.

Unofficially blacklisted, and with physical problems stemming from prison camp, his career seems

anger at his brother's mistreatment of Dixie and Jug's son makes him resolve to turn his life around. The finale is in the form of a newspaper clipping entitled "Gooseball flies once more."

As for the old athlete, he concludes, "I've had a thousand choices to make in my time . . . a fellow's got little control as to whether his choice is the right one. All he can do is make sure he done it for the right reason. And there's not but one reason. . . . Love, is all."

Author Rick Norman, an attorney in Lake Charles, La., says he turned to law because he could not hit a good curveball. Also, he likes to tell stories, and now he gets "paid for exaggerating." His first novel has won unusual critical acclaim for its terse, natural style and page-turning plot.

"I wrote it," he adds, "for adults plagued by the memory of their mistakes." Perhaps he seems to be saying that for some of us, as for even old "Gooseball," there is still hope.

("Fielder's Choice" by Rick Norman, August House, P.O. Box 72203, Little Rock, Ark., 200 pages, hardcover, \$17.95. Mail orders, add \$1.50 shipping.)♦