

Book Review: 'Dreaming Baseball'

by Arthur Salm

"Dreaming Baseball" by James T. Farrell; Kent State University Press; 317 pages; \$28.

Joe never did say it wasn't so. Because it was.

"Joe" being Shoeless Joe Jackson, the great slugger who, with seven Chicago White Sox teammates, threw the 1919 World Series to the Cincinnati Reds. It's one of the signal events in our cultural history, and marks one of the many times America was said to have lost its innocence.

(Somehow we keep getting credit for regaining it, perhaps in the same manner that abstinence-only groups confer "retroactive virginity" status on young women who promise Not To anymore.)

'DREAMING' STRIKES OUT - 'Dreaming Baseball' was written 50 years ago by the great storyteller James T. Farrell. CNS Photo.

Eliot Asinof's "Eight Men Out" (1963) is the definitive account of what became known as the Black Sox scandal. He has contributed a kind foreword to "Dreaming Baseball," a novel of the Black Sox written half a century ago by Farrell, now published for the first time.

By the late 1950s, though, Farrell's powers had waned; he was no longer the great storyteller who fashioned "Studs Lonigan," a gritty, mesmerizing trilogy of hardscrabble, downward-spiraling Irish in Chicago. "My Baseball Diaries" (1957), a collection of Farrell's reminiscences, essays and fiction, had not sold well, and he was unable to find a publisher for his untitled baseball novel. In the afterword to this new book, Ron Briley, one of the editors, explains how the surviving manuscripts - there were several, with variations in character, structure and style - were fashioned into a coherent novel.

"Dreaming Baseball" opens in 1956. The narrator, former White Sox infielder Mickey Donovan, is working as an instructor for a Florida baseball camp on a chilly winter night. He hears the news that Buck Weaver, the brilliant third baseman for the 1919 Sox and one of the eight players banned from baseball for life, has died. After years of trying not to think about the bitter disillusionment of those years, Donovan now retells the story from his point of view: a 19-year-old rookie, fresh off the streets of Chicago, who saw bits and pieces of the whole thing from his catbird seat on the bench.

Farrell said he'd have given up his writing career to have played second base for the White Sox, and it shows; this is very much a fan-written novel, with no feel for the grit and sweat and physicality of the game. When Donovan tells us about his first major-league hit, he simply announces that he got it - not what it was like. You feel as if you're watching from the stands.

The very best parts of "Dreaming Baseball" take place off the field and away from the clubhouse: pickup games on vacant lots, the madhouse of a Cincinnati hotel lobby during the World Series, and, most of all, Donovan as an older man, watching kids dizzy with hope and short of talent.

The editors gave it a fine title but apparently saw their task merely as one of assembly, and the book sags with surplusage; fully a third of it (a ballpark - what else? - estimate) should have been chopped. Farrell was trying to write a novel, but mostly he was just dreaming baseball.

Best buy: "Eight Men Out."

Then, there's Peter Golenbock's "7: The Mickey Mantle Novel" (The Lyons Press, 304 pages, \$25), wherein the Mick, in heaven, tells his story to Leonard Shecter, Jim Bouton's "Ball Four" co-author, also Up There. Mostly it's Mantle scoring, and sometimes even playing baseball, which he also liked. On sale now, "7" was set to be published by Regan Books, got ejected as part of the Judith Regan/O.J. Simpson-book rhubarb, and was finally picked up on waivers by Lyons.

Best buy: "Ball Four."

