



Adventism and the Church of Baseball

A new novel, *The Brothers K*, is the best ever written about Seventh-day Adventists.

by Gary Land

IN THE FILM *BULL DURHAM*, SUSAN SARANDON'S character says something to the effect that she worships at the church of baseball. Everett, Peter, Irwin and Kincaid Chance also worship there, and their father, Hugh, works there—playing Triple A ball for the Portland Tugs. But their mother, Laura, worships at the “First Adventist Church of Washougal.” Out of the conflict between these loyalties and their tension with the love that binds the family together arises the drama of this long novel, probably the best work of fiction yet written that gives serious attention to Seventh-day Adventism.

Kincaid tells his family's story from the perspective of his mid-30s, but the voices of Everett, Peter, and Irwin appear from time to time through such means as excerpts from school papers—Irwin's hilarious “History of My Dad”—and letters. The younger twin sis-

ters, Freddy and Bet, play a lesser role. Letters from Gale Q. Durham, Hugh's manager when he pitched for the Kincaid (Oklahoma) Cornshuckers, offer an additional Casey Stengalish philosophical perspective.

The story begins in 1956 in Camas, Washington, just before Hugh Chance, who works off-season at the Crown Zellerbach paper mill, smashes his thumb in a machine, thereby not only ending his dream of going to the big leagues but also forcing him out of baseball altogether. Without purpose to his existence he goes through the motions of living until Caid, after Mama has left home temporarily following a fight over religion, challenges him with the example of a hair-lipped girl at church who prays heartfelt prayers despite her deformity.

Papa then builds himself a shed where he can pitch every night without being seen, though the boys find a place in the hedge from which they can spy. Eventually, through Everett's intervention, a surgeon replaces Hugh's thumb with his big toe, he develops what the boys call a “Kamikaze” pitch and,

Gary Land, who chairs the history department at Andrews University, wrote the essay, “The Literary Image of Seventh-day Adventists,” that appeared in *Spectrum*, Vol. 5, No. 1. David James Duncan's *The Brothers K* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 645 pages, is available for \$22.50 hardcover.

again through Everett's efforts, finds himself as a player-coach for the Portland Tugs and becomes the Pacific Coast League's legendary "Papa Toe."

Meanwhile, the boys are growing up and going their separate ways, most of which come in conflict with Mama's religion. Everett becomes the skeptic. In 1964 he begins supper time grace by saying, "Dear God, if there is One . . .," which provokes the "Psalm War," a physical and verbal battle with his mother that results, after an extended consultation between Laura and Hugh, in the lifting of religious requirements from the boys but also an ongoing "Cold War" from the mother. Peter by this time has delved deeply into Eastern religion and is a sort of Buddhist. Irwin is unaffected by these changes, for he is the naturally religious and joyous soul who never thinks to question his religion, even when his libido begins to take control of his social life. Caid, who does not say too much about himself, appears basically bored with Adventism.

Baseball holds the family together until the boys finish high school. But then Everett becomes a political radical at the University of Washington, and eventually makes his way to Canada to escape the draft, for which he is later convicted and sent to a work camp. Peter goes off to Harvard to study Eastern religion and ends up doing research in India; and Irwin and Caid study for a time at the University of Washington. But Irwin, the only practicing Adventist among the brothers, drops

out of school to marry Linda—who is pregnant—is drafted, goes to Vietnam, attacks his company commander who is about to order a young Viet Cong captive shot, is declared insane and sent to California for electroshock therapy. The effort to release Irwin from the clutches of the army brings the family, as well as some members of the "First Adventist Church of Washougal," together one last time in a tragi-comical and anarchic but very human farce.

Baseball and Adventism provide the two motifs around which Duncan develops the themes of family love, growth, and independence, and ultimately questions regarding the meaning of our existence. After the "Psalm War," Papa spelled out the parallels between baseball and religion:

So based on experience, I'm telling you guys: baseball and churches have got the same boredom factor, the same hypocrisy, the same Pie in a Big League Sky, the same bone-hard benches, the

same loudmouthed yo-yos mixed in among the decent fans in the pews, the same power-loving preacher/managers delivering the same damned "Do what I say or you're doomed" sermons. Hell, they've even got the same stinking organ music, (p. 180).

Not surprisingly, just as Irwin is the only Chance boy to continue practicing Adventism into his college years, so Caid appears to be the only one for whom baseball continues to provide the structure through which to understand his life.

For most of the novel, Adventism does not

Set in the time period in which I grew up, The Brothers K combines the mythology of the baseball that I lived both asleep and awake as a boy, with the Adventism in which I was raised and that I now study and teach, and with which I too have struggled.

appear very attractive. Until the “Psalm War,” Mama grimly tries to hold her children to her religious beliefs and practices. When she sends the three older boys to summer camp, Caid observes, “I think she was hoping to prove that a place could be fun even if it had to do with Adventists. And I think she’s wrong.” After the war she, with the cooperation and support of Elder Babcock—her self-righteous, removed-from-life pastor—engages in a witch hunt to prove that her unbelieving boys are going over to Satan and in the process drives them away from herself. Sabbath school and church services are boring, the church members seem to have no humanity, and the beliefs appear incredible.

Everett expresses his regret at being born into this “Sabbath cult,” and Caid wonders

“how can we possibly behave decently toward people so arrogantly ignorant that they believe, first, that they possess Christ’s power to bestow salvation, second, that forcing us to memorize and regurgitate a few of their favorite Bible phrases and attend their church *is* that salvation, and third, that any discomfort, frustration, anger or disagreement we express in the face of their moronic barrages is due not to *their* astounding effrontery but to *our* sinfulness?” (p. 227).

When the church not only refuses to help Irwin obtain conscientious objector status but undermines his efforts by declaring that he is not a real Adventist, Seventh-day Adventism appears a hopelessly closed-minded, irrelevant, oppressive institution.

Toward the end of the book, however, the image softens somewhat. Caid comes to understand Irwin’s attack on his officer as growing out of his innate Christian pacifism that he learned at church. When the final crisis arises and Irwin must be rescued from the army, most church members turn a deaf ear to the family pleas, but Brother Randy Beal (a wonderful ballplayer, by the way, who seems to lose his life force when he is in church) and his

wife Nancy (on whom Caid had an adolescent crush), Irwin’s old Sabbath school teacher Sister Harg, and the visiting pastor, Elder Kim Joon, all turn out to help.

Joon, in fact, surprises Caid by his own criticism of institutionalized religion when he says,

“The first Christians [I] met as a boy in Korea were Adventist missionaries, very simple people. They had no power, and wanted no power. They told us Bible stories, it is true. But they gave us food and shelter and medicine first, and teased us and told jokes and played with us and loved us. So we *begged* them for the stories. . . . This was what Joon thought Christianity meant! Food and medicine for the body, and stories for the heart if you begged for them. Then he came here, found a country full of people begging *not* to hear the stories, went to seminary, and found out why. No food. No medicine. No doing unto others. Just a bunch of men learning how to bellow the stories at others whether they wanted to hear them or not!” (pp. 576, 577).

Then he adds, “Ha! Kincaid was right! Joon is an orphan! And now he longs to do for a stranger named Irwin what Old Man McCready [an Adventist missionary] once did for a stranger named Joon.” Not surprisingly, Joon plays a key role—even if it requires stretching the truth—in obtaining the help of the Southern California Conference administrators and through them physicians of Loma Linda University, all of which leads to Irwin’s rescue.

Finally, we learn why Mama grasped her Adventism as if it were a life preserver. Caught as a young woman in a cycle of violence and sexual abuse, she had visited churches in search of help and it was the Adventists that helped her. And when she married Hugh, he understood the meaning this religion had for her life, and though he did not accept it himself and tried to act as the voice of reason when she attempted to impose it on her family, he made no attempt to undermine her faith.

In the end, after Hugh dies from lung cancer, Mama places his ashes in the blue ceramic jewel box in which she had kept her tithes and offerings. After initially having his insides “turn” on seeing this, Caid thinks,

it began to feel about perfect. Because what *is* an offering, really? What can human beings actually give to God? What can they give to each other even? And what sorts of receptacles can contain these gifts? Work camps and insane asylums, Indian trains and church pews, bullpens and little blue boxes . . . Who belongs in what? When do they belong there? Who truly gives what to whom? These were questions we were all struggling to answer not in words, but with our lives. And all her life Laura Chance had placed ten percent of all she'd earned in this same blue box before offering it—in the full faith that it would be accepted—to her Lord. So now, just as faithfully, she'd placed a hundred percent of her husband in the same box. That was her answer to the questions. And I'm hard put to think of another that would do greater honor to her husband, her Lord or her little blue box (p. 621).

The Brothers K, a title of multiple meanings, is a book rich in language (although readers unaccustomed to contemporary literature should be warned of the frequent four-letter words), in philosophical and religious questioning, and in narrative. It made me laugh, it made me cry, sometimes both at the same time. A few years ago I read Duncan's *The River Why*, a wonderful novel that combines fishing and metaphysics. As a novel, *The Brothers K* is probably an even better book because it more closely integrates its philosophizing with the narrative drama. It also struck me at a very personal level. Set in the time period in which I grew up, and combining the mythology of the baseball that I lived both asleep and awake as a boy with the Adventism in which I was raised and that I now study and teach and with which I too have struggled, this novel gave me an emotional and intellectual experience I will long remember.