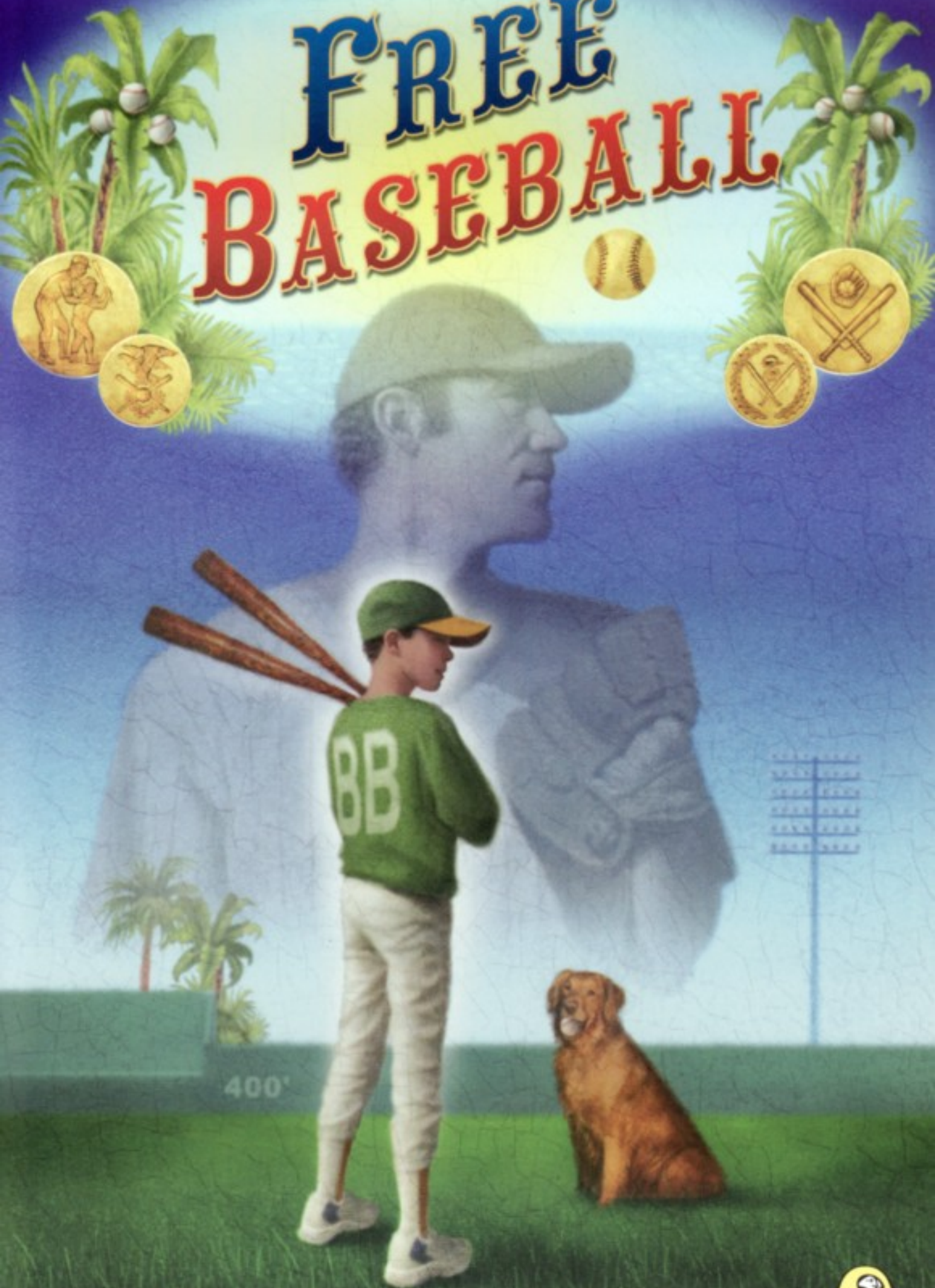


FREE BASEBALL



SUE CORBETT





THE CRACK OF THE BAT

I The place on earth Felix Piloto loved best was a spot of red dirt two-thirds of the way toward third from second. Deep in the hole, his body folded nearly in half, his mitt dangling so close to the ground it blocked its own shadow.

Which is why it was so unusual that he was wishing he was somewhere else—so out of character for him to be caught off guard when a high chopper nearly clipped him in the chin. Felix was good at anticipating the odd bounce, but he'd been distracted—looking at the sun, instead of at the plate—trying to figure out what time it was and how soon he could ask to leave.

Plus, the Tigers were supposed to be practicing dead-fish bunts, ground balls that traveled just a few feet before rolling into no-man's-land out of any fielder's reach.

"JAKE! WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE BAMBINO WAS THAT?" Coach Drew threw his hands in the air.

Even after first bobbling the ball, Felix fired to the bag in plenty of time to throw out Jake.

Coach Drew showed the first baseman his open mitt, signaling him to throw the ball. "Jake! Have you ever seen a dead-fish fly?"

Jake scuffed the dirt in the base path, trudging back to the batter's box. "Dad, I *tried* to deaden it!"

"Let's go over this one more time, guys." Coach Drew took off his black cap with the big orange *T* and smoothed his hair. He always did this to calm himself down. The two boys who batted before Jake had failed to lay down decent bunts either. "What do you call a bunt hit into the air?"

"An out," a few of the guys mumbled.

"Flex your knees, square your shoulders, TAP the ball. Not SWING at the ball. TAP the ball." Coach Drew turned to face the infield. "Felix, what's that saying again?"

Ugh, why did I ever mention this? Felix asked himself. "*Dele un beso,*" he shouted, bracing himself for the taunting he knew was coming. Sure enough, he heard Carlos and the others squeak out kissy-face noises from the bench. He smiled and turned his backside toward them, showing where they could put their kisses. That set off the usual round of hoots, too.

"De-lay oon bay-so." Coach Drew turned the words around in his mouth, like he had a sunflower seed stuck in his teeth. "'Give it a kiss.' Felix, show them how to do it one more time, please."

Felix trotted in, flinging his mitt to Jake who tossed it to Carlos. He picked up the bat Jake had dropped and crouched into his stance. Coach Drew threw him a fastball. Felix turned toward the mound and loosened his grip, letting the bat slide a little in his palms. He aimed the bat so it met the ball head-on

with a gentle smack, shooting it into the grass between the mound and the third-base line.

It dribbled to the edge of the turf and came to a complete stop.

"You guys see that?" Coach Drew had given this speech before. "*That* is a perfectly executed bunt! *That* gets you on base every blasted time."

Felix didn't bother running it out. Nobody had even tried to field the ball. Coach finally walked a few steps to his right and cupped the ball into his glove.

"Coach?" Felix was hoping he had earned a little "time off for good behavior," as Coach called it, because he wanted to get home as soon as possible.

"Your dad teach you how to do that, Felix?"

"No, his mother!" somebody on the bench shouted, and the kissing noises started up again.

Ha, Felix thought, like Mami would ever teach me anything about baseball. Will she even come to *any* of my games this year? "Okay if I go now? I've got a ton of homework."

"Get out of here, Felix. Time off for good behavior," he said, saving his growl for the other Tigers. "Carlos! Take Felix's spot at short. Jake! Get back in the batter's box and start kissing these baseballs!"

Felix stuffed his glove into his backpack and slung the heavy sack over his narrow shoulders. He had a brick at the bottom of the bag because he was trying to build up his shoulder and arm strength. He could bunt all right. But he wasn't much of a home-run threat.

BASEBALL IS IN HIS BLOOD

Felix knows a lot of ballplayers but not the one he wants to know the most: his father, a baseball star in Cuba, who risked everything to send Felix to America. His mom won't reveal *anything* else. When a team with a few Cuban players comes to town, Felix sneaks into the locker room to talk to them. That's when the players mistake him for their new batboy. Determined to uncover the truth about his mysterious father, Felix plays along. Just for a few days, he thinks—long enough to find out about his dad. Life at the ballpark is perfect. And when the team ends a long losing streak, the fun-loving, wisecracking players hail the new batboy as their lucky charm. But Felix is slowly uncovering the painful reality of his family's past. Is he strong enough to face the truth?

A JUNIOR LIBRARY GUILD SELECTION

"An engaging, well-written story with a satisfying ending."

—*School Library Journal*