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IF I NEVER GET BACK

By Darryl Brock

428 pp. Crown

Submitted for your approval: Sam Fowler, frustrated crime-and-disaster reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle whose wife has left him for a t.v. anchorman, boards Amtrak in Cleveland after his father's funeral, collapses and wakes up surrounded by the Cincinnati Red Stockings at the beginning of their legendary 64-0 season, in 1869. The team invites Fowler to join them on their tour. Darryl Brock has researched the period minutely and writes of baseball's early years with such affection that the reader cheerfully surrenders his disbelief to this winsome fantasy. Fowler visits Rochester, the "Flour City" filled with wheat dust, and Troy City, then a larger steel capital than Pittsburgh, with muttonchopped athletes whose future Hall of Famer, George Wright, makes less for the season than Will Clark now earns in an inning. Armed with 120 years of baseball history unknown to his teammates, Fowler invents the bunt, the intentional walk, even hot dogs, hamburgers and Cracker Jack. But the course of time-travel adventure does not run smoothly for our hero. He enrages sinister gamblers and falls in love with a teammate's sister who embroils him in the doomed Fenian political intrigue to free Ireland. Amid this saga, Fowler tours Manhattan with his literary idol, Mark Twain, to whose *Connecticut Yankee* Mr. Brock's book owes tribute. Hunted by gunmen and revolutionaries, will Fowler ever get back to his own century? Does he want to? Mr. Brock keeps the reader eager to find out. Beyond the first-novelist flaws—some fatty prose, a narrative viewpoint a bit inflated and self-conscious—this is an engrossing, even charming tale with that John Irving quality of seeming to be written with love. By its final inning, the reader is sad to see it end.