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VICTORIES

By George V. Higgins

Henry Holt. 298 pp. \$19.95.

George V. Higgins bills his insightful twenty-second book as the companion to his 1989 novel, *Trust*. It is, in the same sense that the comedy mask always hangs near the tragedy.

Trust told the story of Earl Beale, the auto-stealing, basketball game-fixing sleaze with the prostitute girlfriend. A Higgins kind of protagonist, Beale, a throwback to the days before the attorney/author switched his focus from crooks to congressmen, hardly a perceptible switch.

Like *Trust*, *Victories* is set in 1968 Vermont, but Beale and Henry Briggs, the principal focus of *Victories*, are headed in opposite directions. Briggs' character savors less of *Trust* than of Higgins' other 1989 book, *The Progress of the Seasons*, his distillation of 40 years of baseball memories as a Red Sox fan, a crazed species.

Unlike, say, Cubs fans, the only group with as quaint a ballpark and an even longer wait since winning a World Series, Red Sox followers are maudlin. At Wrigley, baseball is fun. At Fenway, it is agony; guys who could spit baked beans through steel weep together remembering an old Sox game lost.

So the usually hard-boiled Higgins gets soft over Briggs, a retired Red Sox relief pitcher now serving as a game warden. True, Briggs' marriage is unrelieved badgering and his grown son is a self-centered cynic whom Briggs despises, but his domestic anguish makes him that much more compassionate toward his neighbors. He lets poor farmers feed on illegal game, he leaves waitresses excessive tips, he risks his life to save an ignorant teenager from being shot by state police.

In this baseball hero with the solid character, Democratic Speaker of the House Ed Cobb thinks he might have the man to unseat Republican incumbent Bob Wainwright, the Second District's congressman for 30 years. Wainwright is a do-nothing miser whose family fortune for three generations has derived from foreclosing on his neighbors' farms. He will be tough to beat. This is New England, where habit can ensure re-election and where "they don't expect much from their congressman, and as long as he doesn't deliver much, they're satisfied."

But Briggs and Cobb have help. There's Cobb's ally Donald Beale, the powerful and almost respectable brother of Earl. There's political columnist Russ Wixton, magnanimous yet harboring old grudges against Wainwright. There's Tom Calley, the professional campaign strategist who never loses. And there's Caroline Cooke, the bankrolling beauty who "wants herself a pet congressman for her very own."

The material is all there for a political soap opera, but the only soap Higgins touches is Lava. Like Briggs, he's a pitcher. He throws knuckleballs, writing the scenes we don't expect, omitting the ones we do. He thins the plot but thickens the characterization with his justly praised gift for dialogue. His witty-gritty voices sound authentic, yet the elliptical syntax and quirky punctuation don't reproduce real speech. Real speech is duller. Higgins creates the *illusion* of colloquial voices as Hemingway creates the illusion of Spanish.

His characters advance the tale circuitously, telling stories within stories, an expanding maze of who owes what to whom and which agenda underlies which. The fun—Higgins is always fun—comes from the dialogue itself: "They look at politicians up there just like we do garbagemen. You got to have them. They cost too much and they smell bad, but you got to have them."

Eventually, we don't care anymore if Briggs beats Wainwright. We care instead about how deceitful a world politics is. We care about stolid Yankee fathers explaining a son's death. We care for this insular region where no one is fully trusted whose grandparents were born elsewhere. We care about how we ourselves seek trouble because "comfort's bad for us. We need a lasting itch or something, in a place we can't reach. It's the only way we can think of to maintain our alertness."

Another way, of course, is to read a good knuckleballer, like Higgins.