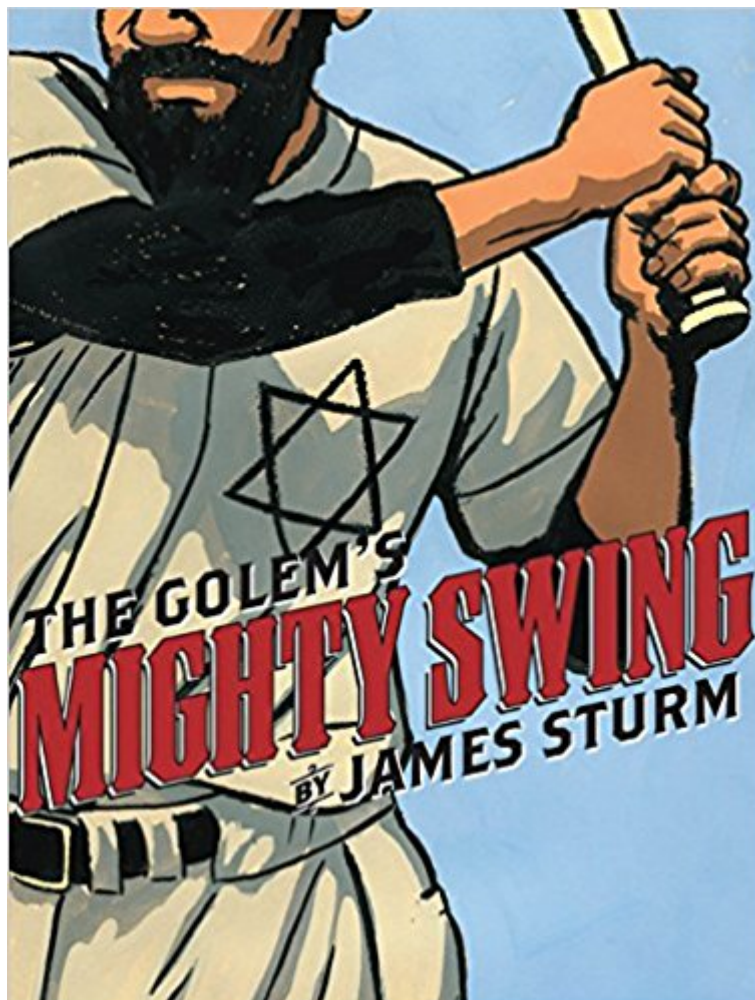


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# The Golem's Mighty Swing



## Synopsis

A new edition of the classic tale of a barnstorming Jewish baseball team during the great depression. Before penning his acclaimed graphic novel *Market Day* and founding the Center for Cartoon Studies, James Sturm proved his worth as a master cartoonist with the eloquent graphic novel, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, one of the first breakout graphic novel hits of the twenty-first century. Sturm's fascination with the invisible America has been the crux of his comics work, exploring the rarely-told or oft-forgotten bits of history that define a country. By reuniting America's greatest pastime with its hidden history, the graphic novel tells the story of the Stars of David, a barnstorming Jewish baseball team of the depression era. Led by its manager and third baseman, the nomadic team travels from small town to small town providing the thrill of the sport while playing up their religious exoticism as a curio for people to gawk at, heckle, and taunt. When the team's fortunes fall, the players are presented a plan to get people in the stands. But by placing their fortunes in the hands of a promoter, the Stars of David find themselves fanning the flames of ethnic tensions. Sturm's nuanced composition is on full display as he deftly builds the climax of the game against the rising anti-semitic fervor of the crowd. Baseball, small towns, racial tensions, and the desperate grasp for the American Dream: *The Golem's Mighty Swing* is a classic American novel.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The barnstorming baseball teams of the 1920s are the grist for this graphic novel that follows a

Jewish team, the Stars of David, through the Midwest in a broken-down bus, using the gimmick of exotic ethnicity to draw small-townners to their games. At this level, baseball is as much showbiz as sport, so to boost attendance, the team's sole black player, billed as a "member of the lost tribe," poses as a golem, a creature made of clay and brought to life by a rabbinical incantation. The scheme goes terribly awry, however, when the massive crowd it draws, inflamed by anti-Semitism, storms the field. Like its legendary model, this golem damages its creators. Sturm is a master of nuance, whose economical drawings effectively evoke the era, while his thoughtful compositions impressively capture action and atmosphere. He uses the national pastime to examine such equally American traits as racism and media hype. But mostly, this a particularly insightful take on the theme of immigrants caught between their traditions and the ways of a new land. Gordon Flagg

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“Sturm’s prose is as elegantly understated as his line work.”

Entertainment Weekly “[Golem’s Mighty Swing] ties together sport, art and literature into a grand-slam comic book.”

Time “Employing thick lines, minimal detail and simple prose . . . Sturm gracefully summons the seedy, often dangerous baseball world of the 1920s.”

Washington Post

This was a great little graphic novel about a ragtag Jewish baseball team The Stars of David early in the 20th century. It is part sports drama, part vaudevillian showcase, and part historical footnote commenting on the antisemitic tendencies of some backward small towns. With beautiful art and a simple narrative, the book turns the spectacle of America’s greatest pastime into a mythical battle of epic proportions on the field of America’s history of racial and religious intolerance. My only complaint about this book - and it is truly a taste one - is that I was not a fan of the pages of play-by-play. The rest of the book - all the dramatic action and gorgeous artwork and simple dialogue-less frames were beautiful and touching.

Author: James Sturm  
Genre: Graphic Novel  
Plot Summary: Noah Strauss, known as "The Zion Lion" during his brief stint with the Boston Red Sox, is now the hobbled manager and number three hitter for The Stars of David, an independent "Jewish" traveling baseball team. Baseball was truly America’s pastime in the days of Prohibition, and a good team with an intriguing gimmick, skilled players, and some marketing savvy, could make a good living by busing through small towns and

taking on the local teams. The Stars have plenty of talented players, but they are missing that extra element of spectacle that can draw the really big crowds. They are barely scraping by and suffering from low morale. Their bus is in a sad state, they are forced to sleep in cheap flophouses, and they must endure the racial bigotry that follows them everywhere they go. Just when things seem to be at their worst, Noah is paid a visit by the fast-talking baseball promoter, Victor Paige. After taking in one of their games, Paige has decided that The Stars could pack the stands if only they had a Golem in their lineup. Paige goes on to explain that a film featuring a Golem (an enormous mythical being of Jewish legend) is captivating audiences in New York City, and his agency has obtained the original costume used in the film. If the Stars' hulking African American clean-up hitter, Henry Bell, would don the costume he would be sight to see. Noah reluctantly agrees to go along with the scheme after initially rejecting the offer. Paige immediately begins to hype up the arrival of the Golem in the town of Putnam, where The Stars will battle the local "All Americans." In his fervor to create interest in the game, Paige fans the flames of anti-Semitism within the community by playing on their fears and misconceptions. At game time, the stands are filled with a tense, angry and vocal crowd.

**Geographical Setting:** Michigan; New York City; Greenville, NC  
**Time Period:** 1920s  
**Series:** Part of the "American Trilogy" (non-sequential)  
**Appeal Characteristics:** This story takes the reader back to the days before steroids and million-dollar contracts, when ballplayers struggled to make a living playing the game that they loved. There is a mood of stoicism that runs throughout the story, as the hard-nosed players struggle with a hardscrabble existence on the road. Baseball fans that long for the purity of old-time baseball will love this book. The prose and the illustrations are clean and spare, reflecting the tone of the story. The action unfolds quickly and compels the reader to turn the page. Though this is a short book, the author does a good job of creating characters that have a depth of personality. Anyone with even a passing interest in the history of baseball will enjoy the terrible and fascinating anecdotes that these characters relate to one another.

**Read-Alikes:** Fans of the writing style and artwork of *The Golem* should check out *Above and Below: Two Stories of the American Frontier* (2004), by James Sturm. These two stories complete his "American Trilogy," and showcase more of his stark and understated illustrations. *God's Man: A Novel in Woodcuts* (1929) by Lynd Ward, will offer similarly dark, colorless, and striking images. For more on traveling teams of the 1920s, see Alan J. Pollock's nonfiction book: *Barnstorming to Heaven: Syd Pollock and His Great Black Teams* (2005). This will convey the racial bigotry encountered by minority ballplayers and share some great old-time baseball anecdotes. *The Celebrant* (1983, novel) by Eric Rolfe Greenberg, gives a realistic portrayal of early 20th century professional baseball. It also deals with the issue of Jewish assimilation. *The Southpaw* (1953, novel) by Mark Harris, concentrates on the

gritty life of a pitcher who is trying to deal with the ups and downs that come with playing professional baseball. It is not as fast-paced as *The Golem*, but it is a gripping read and is narrated in a laconic tone. Red Flags: Profanity; racial bigotry; racial slurs; some violence (off stage); alcohol consumption

*The Golem's Mighty Swing*, by James Sturm (108 pgs., 2001, 2002, 2003). This is an adult graphic novel. It's exciting to see how this genre has grown out of children's comic books & now has such an important role in book publishing. Like Hollywood, most of the founders of this genre were Jewish, with Will Eisner (of blessed memory) being considered the father of it all. *Maus*, by Seligman became the first huge best seller that came out of this genre. This graphic novel combines the Jewish fable of the Golem with the historical reality of traveling professional baseball teams playing throughout small-town America in the years between the two World Wars. Sturm has done an excellent job of bringing this part of history alive through his drawings & his dialogue. There were traveling Jewish baseball clubs. They did face anti-Semitism in many of the towns they played in. The Golem is an actual Jewish fable. Plays & books have been written about it. In the end the Golem always brings sadness. Most graphic novels are slim, like this one. I would like to see some of these writer and illustrators tackle big subjects in longer many paged graphic novels of 300+ pages. I think that so far, Seligman has been the only one to explore such longer lengths.

James Sturm, *The Golem's Mighty Swing* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2003) Ah, the glory days of baseball, when the game was played by little travelling teams who catered to niche markets. Such is the atmosphere of James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, a graphic novel set during the Depression and featuring an all-Jewish (with one black guy wryly described as a member of the lost tribe) team who travels the country in a broken-down bus playing in the bush leagues. They run into a promoter who decides the team could probably spice up its image (and attendance) by having said black guy dress up in the same costume used in Paul Wegener's 1920 film *The Golem*, and by chance, one of his friends happens to own that costume. What no one counts on is how the image of a strong Jewish person will inflame a racist crowd... Sturm's great strength here is that his characters never seem to take this extremely serious situation seriously at all; the narrator has a sort of wry fatalism about everything going on around him. It's a good voice to use in telling a tale of this sort, and it gives the narrative a lighter tone than it would otherwise have. It's a pretty strong volume, on the whole, though the final section did seem to cry out for a little more fleshing out. Worth looking into, though. \*\*\*

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