

# Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE  
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

## Word of the day:

### BOOM

Back when my father was a little boy growing up in Pennsylvania, there were two major league baseball teams in Philadelphia. One of them was the Phillies, in the National League. They're still there. The other was the Athletics, in the American League. They have since moved to Kansas City and then to Oakland, where they still are now.

You must not think that Philadelphia was a BOOM town for baseball at that time. The teams were terrible. Sometimes they'd be lucky if they could get for their crowd three old men, a boy peeking between a hole in the outfield fence, two stray cats, and a raccoon. But the Athletics did have a player whom the fans gave a nickname to. He was BOOM BOOM Beck.

That wasn't because he was a big man. It also wasn't because he swung a big bat. Mr. Beck wasn't much of a hitter at all. He was a pitcher.

Yes, he would stand on that pitcher's mound, get the signal from his catcher, glare at the batter, and then deliver a fastball right over the plate, and – BOOM! The batter would blast it over the fence for a home run. You have to like a guy who is that predictable.

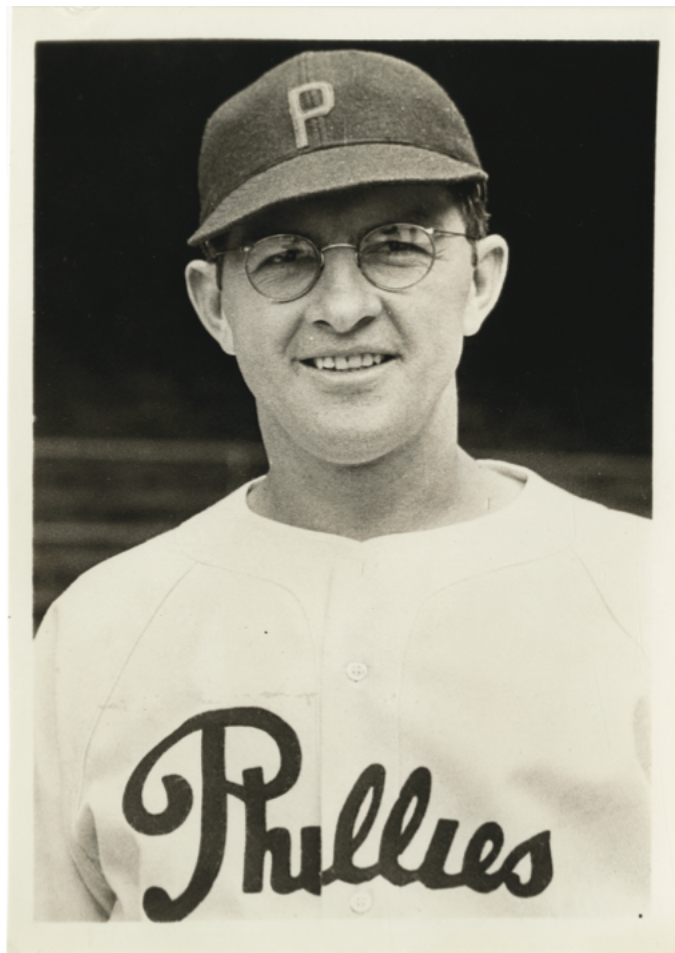
It wasn't the worst nickname the Philadelphia fans gave out, though. At least BOOM BOOM Beck wasn't his teammate Hugh Mulcahy. They just called him "Losing Pitcher."

The word BOOM for the big sound that a cannon makes is what we call "imitative," because the word imitates the sound. We have plenty of words like that: WHOOSH, FIZZ, CRUNCH. Think of the word SNORE, and think of Dad lying on the sofa, dead asleep, with his mouth open. That word is even better in German: SCHNARCHEN. "Fritzl SCHNARCHT!"

complaints his little brother

Hansel, rubbing his eyes as he walks downstairs to complain to Mother and Father – "Little Fritz is SNORING."

But there's another word BOOM that we spell



the same and say the same, that has nothing to do with sound. The BOOM of a sailing ship is a great heavy pole attached to the bottom of the sails. It can be swung this way and that to change the shape of the sails, so that you can catch the wind to push the ship in the direction you want. To LOWER THE BOOM on somebody, then, is not to make a big crashing noise in his ear, but to lower that pole weighing hundreds of pounds right on his head.

That word BOOM we get from Dutch, which shouldn't be a surprise, since the Dutch were great sailors and merchants, on the other side of the channel from England. For many centuries, English and Dutch sailors would jabber at each other using some words from English and some from Dutch, and they would understand each other well enough. It was a common thing. A lot of our sailing words come from Dutch: JIB, MAST. From Dutch merchants we get the word CHEAP, which meant a PURCHASE: so a GOOD CHEAP was a good buy, because it didn't cost a lot. A CHAPMAN is a trader or merchant. Back to BOOM: the word in Dutch simply means TREE. When you sing the carol O TANNENBAUM in German – what we know as O CHRISTMAS TREE – the TANNEN means FIR, and the BAUM means TREE.

Did we have that word in English, meaning TREE? Yes, we did, and we still do, sort of. A thousand years ago and more, you might have heard an English poet singing about the BEAMA SELEST (pronounce it: BEH-a-ma SEH-lest), the

BEST OF TREES. That was the Cross. And what is that long plank of wood running up the roof of your house? It is a BEAM. That's what BEAM meant, first – a tree, then a beam for a house or a ship. Later it came to mean a SHAFT OF LIGHT, kind of like a wooden beam, when you think of it.



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**Anthony Esolen** is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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