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A People's History of Baseball by Mitchell Nathanson
(review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Mitchell Nathanson. *A People's History of Baseball*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. 275 pp. Cloth, \$29.95.

Daniel A. Nathan

"It's hard not to be romantic about baseball," muses Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane (played by Brad Pitt) in *Moneyball* (2011). Beane is right. Historically, many Americans have been unable to resist the game's romance, its cherished (and incessantly repeated) images of "fathers playing catch with sons on fields of dreams in the glory of their times" ("Can't Anyone Here Take This Quiz?," *Village Voice*, August 18, 1992, 146). Sentimentality and nostalgia, ignorance and nationalism, becloud our sense of baseball history and reality. In this country, baseball romance rules.

Mitchell Nathanson's *A People's History of Baseball* is a historical corrective. It examines Major League Baseball (MLB) through an "alternative lens" (219), one that provides a useful, critical perspective. Nathanson's critique is founded on the idea that stories matter, that narratives help "construct our world" (xii). A legal scholar, Nathanson explains that his book "is not about the baseball stories we already know but the ones we are much less familiar with—the counter-stories" (xiv). By "counter-stories" Nathanson means narratives "that challenge accepted, conventional beliefs" (xiii). As one might expect, counter-stories "are often dismissed as (take your pick) manipulative, political, anecdotal, unprincipled, and/or unfair" (xiii). That is, they are ontologically just like the dominant narratives that most people take for granted as always-already true.

Organized thematically rather than strictly chronologically, the book's six chapters cover a lot of ground. The first considers the 1876 founding of the National League, whose team owners promoted their version of the game as a mainstay of "Victorian values," especially when compared to upstart rival leagues (15). In the process, the National League contributed to the "baseball creed" (15), which, though "little more than a cultural fiction" (29), argued

that the game was “an educational, socializing, and acculturation tool” of great moral value (18). The second chapter traces the roots of MLB’s extra-legal authority, thanks largely to a series of court decisions based on some dubious legal logic, beginning with the Supreme Court’s “infamous *Federal Baseball* decision” in 1922 (39). This chapter also discusses historically significant incidents—the game-fixing Black Sox scandal, the Pete Rose gambling affair, the steroids debacle and subsequent Mitchell Report—during which MLB swung its “extra-legal scythe” (35). Chapter three assesses “one of the most affirming morality tales in American history—the story of Branch Rickey, Jackie Robinson, and the integration of Major League Baseball in 1947” (68). Nathanson documents the nascent civil rights movement and the political push to integrate MLB that predated Robinson’s signing, the struggle for control of the Robinson story, and despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the disappointingly slow pace of MLB racial integration after Robinson.

The fourth chapter examines some of the most important ways in which MLB changed in the postwar years: continental expansion (adding eight new teams in the 1960s); an influx of new corporate ownership; a revolution in television broadcasting; the rise of the Major League Baseball Players Association, led by the remarkably effective executive director, Marvin Miller; and the historic Curt Flood legal case, which challenged (but did not defeat) the reserve clause. The end result of all these changes, Nathanson argues, was that “the entire structure of the game had been overhauled. It was now a players’ game, not an owners’ game” (144). The penultimate chapter scrutinizes the complex relationship among the American penchant of rooting for the underdog, the power of positive thinking movement, and the collectivism of the Players Association. This creative *mélange* of subjects reveals Americans’ preference for “romance over reality” (173); it suggests a preference for idyllic baseball fantasies and mythology rather than sober historical assessments. The concluding chapter focuses on baseball’s storytellers, the members of the media who “spun tales of baseball as America” (180), chief among them the influential, British-born Henry Chadwick, who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was responsible for formulating many of baseball’s most cherished statistics, such as the batting average and the run batted in. Nathanson’s appraisal of baseball writers is generally unfavorable. He writes that “despite their journalistic credentials, many media members were and are unashamed fans of the game and have simply been unwilling to present a more complex, perhaps less zealously patriotic, image of something they had looked up to all of their lives” (196). The one writer Nathanson admires was an outsider: Bill James, the statistical innovator who “directly and indirectly,

challenged the baseball creed” and who argued that “there was no higher moral purpose of the game and there could be none because the game existed only on the field” (202).

In most ways, *A People's History of Baseball* succeeds. The book is well organized and engaging, and Nathanson is fundamentally correct. Baseball is more than a game. It is, as he puts it, “a concept” that “bears significant emblematic weight” (xi). While true, this is not a novel or trenchant insight. Numerous writers, ranging from Walt Whitman and Mark Twain to Jacques Barzun and George F. Will, among others, have also proposed that baseball is indelibly linked with American ideals and values, history and culture. Add Nathanson to the list, although unlike some of the aforementioned writers, he is no cheerleader.

Nathanson is also right that over the course of many years, myriad people—most notably, MLB team owners and members of the media—have successfully forged a strong “nexus between baseball and America” (xii). It was and is in their interest to capture the flag, which is usually a winning strategy in the United States. Oddly, however, an important baseball stakeholder is missing here: baseball fans. They/we too have helped build and maintain the “nexus between baseball and America” (xii). In a book titled *A People's History of Baseball* this is a strange and perhaps disappointing omission. Baseball can only be the people's game if the people assent to it, no matter what stories the power elites spin or what political and legal shenanigans they get away with. The game's “enduring popularity” (180) has many sources, including aesthetic ones, some of which are beyond MLB's reach.

Speaking of the book's title, it obviously evokes the work of Howard Zinn's popular *A People's History of the United States, 1492–Present* (1980), and Nathanson thanks the late historian and social activist for inspiring him and “for demonstrating to anyone willing to listen that the received wisdom is hardly the only wisdom” (ix). Zinn's book, like Nathanson's, is drawn mostly from secondary sources and is polemical (which is fine by me). But many respected historians panned Zinn's work when it was first published. Cornell University's Michael Kammen said that it read “like a scissors-and-paste-pot job” and called it “simpleminded” (Michael Kammen, “How the Other Half Lived,” *Washington Post*, March 23, 1980), while Columbia University's Eric Foner argued that it “reflects a deeply pessimistic vision of the American experience” (Eric Foner, “Majority Report,” *New York Times*, March 2, 1980). My point is not to suggest that *A People's History of Baseball* is similarly flawed, although it too has a dark vision of MLB ownership and the media, but to emphasize its intellectual and political lineage.

At the same time, Nathanson's title also calls to mind Harold Seymour's *Baseball: The People's Game* (1990), which we now know was mostly written by his widow, Dorothy Seymour Mills. The books are remarkably different. *Baseball: The People's Game* chronicles how the game was played by boys on sandlots and in schoolyards; by adults in colleges and prisons; by ballplayers on semiprofessional, industrial, and town teams; by men, women, whites, African Americans, and Native Americans. In her review of *A People's History of Baseball*, Mills, no doubt thinking about the relationship between Nathanson's title and the book's content, writes, "When most writers speak of 'baseball,' they really mean the major leagues. They don't even consider the minor leagues, the independent leagues, and the thousands of amateur players. To them, Major League Baseball is the only baseball that counts. Mr. Nathanson, too, falls victim to this narrow use of terminology" (Dorothy Seymour Mills, review of *A People's History of Baseball*, *New York Journal of Books*, February 23, 2012, <http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/review/people's-history-baseball>). She has a point. Then again, Nathanson's project is different (and more complicated) than his title suggests.

And finally, Nathanson is right that MLB is "conservative by nature," extremely proprietary, and willing to fight to protect its interests, which are principally financial (212). The same is true of most multi-billion-dollar industries. But since baseball is more than a game—because it is a valued cultural institution and a text shared by millions of citizens and fans, passed down from one generation to the next—Nathanson's desire for us to understand its complex, messy history (rather than just its sanitized mythology) is salutary, worthy of praise. A thoughtful, substantive exploration of some aspects of MLB's unsavory past and present, *A People's History of Baseball* is a welcome alternative to the far more numerous baseball romances published every spring.



Patrick K. Thornton. *Legal Decisions That Shaped Modern Baseball*. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2012. 240 pp. Paper, \$39.95.

Richard C. Crepeau

Over the past two decades there has been a growing interest in the intersection of sport and the law. Websites and journals devoted to the subject have appeared across the academic landscape, emanating from law schools, history