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Bluegrass Baseball: A Year in the Minor League Life by Katya Cengel (review)

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**Katya Cengel. *Bluegrass Baseball: A Year in the Minor League Life*.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. 272 pp. Paper, \$19.95.**

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SPOILER ALERT Baseball is people.

Granted, that is not as startling as Charlton Heston's revelation forty years ago. But it feels good to remember every once in a while that the real stories in baseball center on people. In the expansive world of baseball writing, plenty of fine authors focus on politics and economics, teams and titles, numbers and records. Even well-written baseball stories about people tend to center on the people who play the game, particularly in the major leagues.

Katya Cengel's *Bluegrass Baseball: A Year in the Minor League Life* is devoted to people and not just the players. Kentucky's minor-league teams—Class AAA, Class A, and independent—provide the context for her well-conceived and skillfully woven tapestry of personal stories that moves beyond a narrow focus on players to the often unnoticed and unrecognized silent majority of the minors: merchants, media, mascots, marketers, moms (and dads), ministers, medics, mentors, and the many others who complete the picture of minor-league baseball. Cengel profiles a host mom in Florence, for example, one of the devoted and nurturing guardian angels who can be found throughout the minor leagues protecting players' interests. Lori Snider organizes housing for Florence's players each year, and through her experiences readers come to know some of the other archetypes populating minor-league baseball. She describes, for example, the cougar who wanted to host players in her home: "They call them cleat chasers, and every year there's somebody" (205). Through such personalities, Cengel reminds her readers that an indispensable thematic element in minor-league baseball story lines is captured through the eyes of the women—girlfriends and groupies, wives and wannabes—who move in and out of the players' lives. Her book, in fact, is filled with both men and women whose perspectives and experiences help readers to understand the minor leagues and professional baseball in general.

Cengel's focus on people sheds light on other important facets of baseball. Her portrait of Lexington Legends president Alan Stein, for example, takes her readers from the team's national anthem auditions to the outrageous "bets" Stein would make each season when guaranteeing a victory on opening day. In doing so, Cengel directs readers' attention to the core of the minor-league brand: "being able to 'touch the community,' generating excitement for the club, and, of course, providing entertainment" (7).

Cengel also offers brief but important glimpses of the obstacles facing foreign-born players, who by 2011 and 2012 constituted over 46 percent

of minor leaguers (“Percentage of Foreign Players Rises,” *ESPN.com*, April 5, 2012, http://espn.go.com/mlb/story/_/id/7779279/percentage-foreign-major-league-baseball-players-rises). She shows her readers a part of the minor leagues that “Alan Stein doesn’t want you to see” (36): the often neglected living situations of many Spanish-speaking players, unseen environments that exemplify the many inequities concealed within the business of baseball. In telling the stories of Louisville pitcher Aroldis Chapman and, more importantly, of Louisville’s trainer and general problem solver, Tomas Vera—who helped Chapman acclimate—Cengel is able to make the important point that the problems confronting foreign-born players go beyond learning the language to the often more difficult challenge of mastering subtle yet significant cultural differences.

Indeed, Cengel broadly directs her readers’ attention to challenges facing minor leaguers: travel and transportation, housing and laundry, shopping, relationships, and meeting the most basic of needs—eating and sleeping properly. Through Bowling Green’s trainer, Scott Thurston, for example, readers learn about the challenges of feeding a baseball team on a shoestring budget while trying to maintain some semblance of nutritional balance. More than anything, her descriptions serve as a reminder that the game of baseball revolves around details that are largely unknown to most followers of the game: “the more mundane tasks of fielding a baseball team, like debating whether to purchase smoked or regular turkey. Important stuff, but then, when it gets down to it, the everyday business of baseball can be downright boring” (165). Actually, as they emerge from Cengel’s stories, those “mundane” details are what bring baseball to life.

Without betraying fidelity to their favorite team, many baseball fans sooner or later focus on following and rooting for individuals. Cengel’s book captures this repeatedly, such as when she introduces her readers to Louisville player Matt Maloney: “He is the kind of guy you can’t help but root for; he wasn’t born with a ton of talent, money, or connections, just a dream and determination” (90). Fans “can relate to players like Justin [Lehr] who have seen success and failure and have the fortitude to keep believing day after day that it is all worthwhile” (249). But devoted followers of the game also find satisfaction in the successes of the people off the field: Jared Elliott, Bowling Green’s strength and conditioning coach, moving up to the next higher organizational level; Tom Gauthier, the team’s radio broadcaster, receiving a promotion to Class AA; and Tomas Vera, the problem solver, getting to the bigs.

Bluegrass Baseball is a reminder that players are not the only people in baseball with dreams of making it to the show—they are not the only or even the best stories to follow in baseball. Baseball is more than just the teams and the players, the records and the numbers. Baseball is people.