

Winter 2004

Reel Baseball: Essays and Interviews on the National Pastime, Hollywood and American Culture

Marc Ouellette
Old Dominion University, mouellet@odu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs



Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Ouellette, M. (2003). Reel baseball: Essays and interviews on the national pastime, Hollywood and American culture. *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 4(1).
<http://reconstruction.digitalodu.com/Issues/041/TOC.htm>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

Reel Baseball: Essays and Interviews on the National Pastime, Hollywood and American Culture

Wood, Stephen C. and J. David Pincus, Ed. Forewords by Dale Petroskey and Alvin L. Hall. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003. \$29.95, softcover, 326 pages, 64 illustrations. ISBN: [0786413891](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/0786413891)

The editors of *Reel Baseball* begin by acknowledging the roots of their collection, which explores the intersection between movies and baseball. Since 1989 the National Baseball Hall of Fame has hosted the Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture. Since 1997, McFarland has published all papers presented at the symposium. *Reel Baseball*, then, functions both as a document and as an artifact of the "integral" place of baseball movies in American culture. Indeed, the book not only includes essays presented at the symposium, it has two foreword sections: one written by Hall of Fame President Dale Petroskey and the other by Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture Founder, Alvin L. Hall [1]. As well as essays considering three sorts of baseball movies -- those centred on baseball, those centred on Babe Ruth and those with baseball elements -- *Reel Baseball* includes interviews the editors conducted with directors, producers, actors, broadcasters and even some "real" baseball people. These four categories then comprise the sections into which the book is divided. It is worth noting that each section is preceded by a thematically related illustration penned by award-winning syndicated editorial cartoonist Frank Galasso. Thus, *Reel Baseball* attempts to achieve the delicate balance required of a critical celebration, if you will, for that is really the aim of the book: to appeal to fans and to fans, like the current author, who happen to be academics.

If there is a common thread throughout *Reel Baseball*, it is the various authors' love of the game. This should not, however, indicate that the fourteen essays and subsequent interviews are merely exercises in cheerleading. Rather, the volume can be reclassified according to the essays' critical approaches, which come from a variety of disciplines. Several essays emphasize the formal elements involved in reproducing both American myths through the effective employment of transhistorical archetypes. Thus, one finds Kenneth Burke's theory of "rebirth" applied to folk hero Shoeless Joe Jackson (91), as well Joseph Campbell's theory of myths applied to baseball heroes, in general (281). Such analyses do not seem incongruous given the reach of the various cultural icons. Indeed, a hero such as Jackie Robinson almost demands it.

Although it could be said that every essay in some way focuses on American culture, one-third of the essays directly examine the ideological underpinnings of a game which claims to be the "national pastime." In their contribution to the study, the Wood and Pincus begin with the premise that the "juxtaposition of the hero and baseball is uniquely American, and reflects our most basic cultural values" (33). In the afterward, appropriately called "Post-Game Analysis," Wood and Pincus recognize that the "American cultural persona has always had its jagged -- and we would expect nothing less of it national game [...] Baseball has often served as a unifying force in America. Ironically, in noting its familiar scale and accessibility, we see the class identification so fundamental to our culture generally" (295). Similarly, Robert Rudd and Marshall Most suggest that the "rejection of personal greed and materialism in favor of commitment to the team (community) and to the game itself is a fundamental tenet of baseball's ideology" (43). Admittedly, this take stops short of critiquing that ideology and might be considered nostalgic longings for the time when people played for the love of the game and not for the money. Nevertheless, Rudd and Most contend that one of the consequences of late capitalism is "an increasing sense of alienation from the social structure and an undermining of personal identity" (49). Their aim, like that of the other essayists, is locating baseball's place within such a social structure and how cinematic depictions reflect it. On this level the essays in *Reel Baseball* succeed.

In considering the chapters according to their critical approaches, the interviews remain a separate category, but one that is related to the others by virtue of the questions the editors posed. That said, the questions most frequently asked, regardless of the interview subject's profession, were those regarding the "authenticity" of the baseball portrayed on the screen. This topic is raised with respect to historical movies but is of primary concern in the interview section. Even so, little is made of the tension between what Steve Neale calls "generic verisimilitude" -- that is, a film's similarity to other members of its genre and to other films -- and its counterpart "cultural verisimilitude" -- the similarity to "real life." While not explicitly so, this tension does get some play in the interviews. In this regard, broadcaster Vin Scully recounts how he made his "broadcast" in *For Love of the Game* sound like an actual play-by-play of an actual game. Penny Marshall explains that she made the cast members of *A League of Their Own* pass a baseball test before they were screen tested. Producer Arthur Friedman (*Price of Glory*, 2000) laments that sometimes the cast and crew of a baseball movie do not have a love of the game and he hopes someday to make the quintessential baseball movie [2].

As mentioned earlier, the essays in *Reel Baseball* succeed insofar as they situate cinematic depictions of baseball within the dominant American culture and its ideologies. While they avoid tackling contentious issues, they provide a critical framework for further investigation and critique of those ideologies and baseball's complicity in them. The catalogue of relevant films provided by the editors will prove most welcome to those who take on this task. As well, given the paucity of scholarly -- as opposed to popular or critical -- considerations of sports films, in general, the volume fills a long-overdue gap in critical discourse and for this alone would be noteworthy.

Marc Ouellette

Notes

[1] The book and the forward were written and published before Petroskey, in a move he later tried to recant, banned Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins from participating in festivities celebrating the anniversary of *Bull Durham*, which is regarded widely as one of the best baseball movies ever made. The pair of actors have been outspoken critics of the (need for) war in Iraq. However, Petroskey felt that politics should have no place at the hall and that the event should celebrate America. It was in that "spirit" that he attempted to censor and later ban Sarandon and Robbins. [^]

[2] Ron Shelton, director of *Bull Durham* and *Cobb*, was the only one of the subjects from the film industry to have played professional baseball. One can only wonder whether actors such as Kurt Russell and Chuck Connors were unavailable, unapproachable or whether their knowledge might be too intimate and thus might disrupt the myth-making. [[^](#)]

Works Cited

Neale, Steve. "Questions of Genre." *Screen* 31.1 (1990): 45-66.