

Dawidoff, Nicholas. *The Catcher Was A Spy: The Mysterious Life of Moe Berg*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994. Pp. 352. Note on sources, notes, photographs, index. \$24.

As Nicholas Dawidoff demonstrated in his prologue, people become strangely fascinated by Moe Berg. During my undergraduate days at Berg's alma mater, I, too, was intrigued. The fact that my friend's grandfather had played college baseball with Berg only increased the excitement of learning about Berg's amazing life. Reading the one biography of Berg available at the time supplied me with some anecdotes, but actually raised more questions than it answered. (That biography was Louis Kaufman, *Moe Berg: Athlete, Scholar, Spy*, 1974.) In *The Catcher Was A Spy*, Dawidoff has offered satisfying answers to many of my questions.

As with any effort to explain someone's motivations, Dawidoff's attempts may not always convince every reader. Nonetheless, he posited balanced and reasoned explanations for many of the central mysteries in Berg's life. Furthermore, unlike the earlier biography, Dawidoff thoroughly documented the story with a 10-page "note on sources," and 58 pages of notes. (Kaufman included no notes.) So, a reader not satisfied with one of Dawidoff's theories can readily go to the original sources.

Perhaps the central mystery is: what was so fascinating about Moe Berg? Dawidoff's answer focused on the lifestyle that Berg was able to live during his nearly twenty years in professional baseball, and his World War II career as a spy for the Office of Strategic Services. Both jobs allowed Berg a flexible daily schedule during which he could read books and newspapers for hours, eat and drink coffee at a leisurely pace, and visit the museums and parks of the various

cities and towns in which he worked. Moreover, for twenty years he continued to be a scholar/athlete, an existence which most college athletes are forced to trade for a nine-to-five job soon after graduation.

Related to the question of why Berg is so fascinating is: why did such an intelligent and well-educated man play baseball? Dawidoff's answer, again, revolved around the lifestyle that baseball afforded Berg. He toured the United States, ate in fancy restaurants, and only worked a few hours a day. As Berg once said: "Isn't this wonderful? Work three hours a day, travel around the country, live in the best hotels, meet the best people, and get paid for it" (p. 100). Indeed, such a life was perfectly suited to a person who loved to learn, whether it was by reading as many as ten newspapers in a day or by talking with Albert Einstein.

As for the hours in the ballparks themselves, the majority of that time was also enjoyable for Berg. Although he was never an all-star calibre player, he established a reputation as a fine defensive catcher and handler of pitchers. For short portions of several seasons, moreover, he hit with above-average success. His skills, combined with his unique story-telling ability, made him a valuable asset to major league baseball teams from 1923 to 1939. Furthermore, his education and intelligence set him apart from other ballplayers to such an extent that throughout his career newspaper columnists featured him on a regular basis. Among baseball players, his academic prowess brought him fame and popularity.

On the other hand, among scholars and diplomats, his baseball career served a similar end. For historians of foreign relations and diplomacy, the role of baseball in international affairs is perhaps the most important aspect of this book. For example, during two trips in the 1930s Berg acted as a cultural ambassador in Japan by conducting catching clinics. Then, during WWII, Berg befriended a key Italian physicist, in part by teaching his children baseball. More generally, Dawidoff's descriptions of Berg's OSS service and the OSS itself should be of interest to scholars of foreign relations.

Berg's WWII experiences provide an illuminating glimpse into the actions of leading figures in the OSS, particularly William Donovan and Allen Dulles. The efforts by Berg to determine the progress by Germany in developing an atomic bomb, as detailed by Dawidoff, constitute a fascinating example of a unique OSS operation. (For another unique story of OSS work that details meetings with Ho Chi Minh, see Archimedes Patti, *Why Viet Nam? Prelude to America's Albatross*, 1980.) The stories of espionage prove instructive, in no small part because Moe Berg was successful. "Because he was a man who found it easy to make other people talk about themselves while keeping himself a secret, and because he was a loner with a penchant for disappearing, Berg was the perfect spy" (p. 126).

Dawidoff's book is useful for its explanation of Berg's appeal, and for its descriptions of Berg's OSS adventures. It is also valuable because of its discussion of the relationship between Judaism and baseball. As Dawidoff explained, the New York Giants, New York Yankees, and Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1920s all strongly desired to hire a Jewish player to attract fans

from the Big Apple's tremendous Jewish population. Partly because he never embraced Judaism publicly, however, Berg was never the big hero to Jews that Hank Greenberg would become. (That, of course, is also due to the fact that Greenberg once hit 58 home runs in a season and Berg only hit six in his career!) Dawidoff's analysis of Judaism and baseball resembles other authors' treatments of related topics, such as race and baseball or gender and baseball. Ken Burn's documentary film, *Baseball*, covers all of these issues in depth. (For a recent study treating race, see David Zang, *Fleet Walker's Divided Heart*, 1995. Along gender lines, see Gai Berlage, *Women in Baseball*, 1994.)

In addition to students of baseball, foreign relations, and Judaism, *The Catcher Was A Spy* should be of use to those interested in immigration. The early chapters portray the emigration from the Ukraine of Berg's father Bernard in 1894, his efforts to gain an education in New York City, and his success as a pharmacist in Newark. His insistence that his children speak English, not Yiddish or Hebrew, at home is especially illuminating. Despite such efforts, his refusal to change the family name meant that his boy Moe would suffer the painful anti-Semitism rampant at Princeton in the early 1920s while he was an undergraduate. Dawidoff's analysis of the atmosphere at Princeton utilizes characters from Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* skillfully, and is another strong component of this book.

Indeed, this book included useful material for scholars in a number of disciplines. The conclusion, however, was not entirely convincing. Dawidoff offered some Freudian interpretations of Berg's personality, partially blaming his father for Berg's lack of self-esteem. This chapter also briefly considered the possibility that Berg was a homosexual. As with much psychohistory, these sections sounded logical enough but were mostly no more than educated speculation. To that extent, the conclusion was interesting, but it did not stand up to the rigorous scholarly standards of the rest of the book. Of course, Berg would be horrified to see such musings about his most personal feelings in a book on public display in all of the cities that he visited as a ballplayer. Otherwise, he couldn't help but be pleased by this rewarding study, which features the two aspects of his life that he enjoyed the most—catching and spying.

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