
GOOD, HOWARD. *Diamonds in the Dark: America, Baseball, and the Movies*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996. Pp. xiii, 187. Notes, photographs, selected bibliography, index. \$37.50 cb.

In a 1889 speech welcoming home Albert Spalding's globe-trotting baseball teams, Mark Twain pronounced baseball to be "the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century!" A few years later, Walter Johnson put it more simply: "Baseball is simply a dramatization of the life struggle of a man."

The Hollywood Dream Factory has occasionally inspired similarly inflated descriptions, although, unlike baseball, its origins are not shrouded in myth. Largely the creation of Jewish immigrants living in New York, and initially viewed only by the lesser elements, Charlie Chaplin called movies "the people's art."

Indeed they were. As was the case with baseball, it would take more than a half a century before intellectuals and other denizens of good taste considered the artistic and metaphorical possibilities of film. Howard Good, a professor of journalism and an unblushing fan of both the New York Mets and the Silver Screen, presents a lively analysis of what happens when “Hollywood and Cooperstown converge” (p. 20) in his *Diamonds in the Dark: America, Baseball, and the Movies*.

Until recently, baseball films usually struck out at the box office; after all, no film could capture the real drama of an actual game. Characterized by trite plots, maudlin characters, and actors who clearly could neither bat, field, nor throw, early baseball films appeared artificial and hackneyed. *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942) was simply the best of a bad lot that actually began with the showing of *Casey at the Bat* in 1899. However, with the film adaptation of Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural* in 1984, followed by *Bull Durham* (1988), *Field of Dreams* (1989), and *Major League* (1989), baseball movies began attracting large audiences.

Like baseball itself, Good begins slowly, first sketching his own romantic attachment to baseball before justifying the special affinity intellectuals have for the game. After a chronological discussion of baseball as film genre, his later chapters become arbitrarily topical. Chapter two examines the use of bats, balls, and gloves (“The Western showdown has its counterpart in baseball films, with bats, balls, and gloves substituting for guns.” p. 22); chapter three analyzes the symbolic setting of the old ball park (a throwback to an earlier, more innocent America); chapter four and five focus respectively on biographical films (“biopics,” which celebrate the myth of the self-made man) and musicals (a chapter that might have profited from a rain-out); chapter six, seven, and eight feature stock characters, such as pitchers (naive, country bumpkins), catchers (grizzled veterans), owners (arrogant and grasping), managers (“irascible piles of lard”, p. 159), and even sportswriters (middle-aged, cynical urbanites). Stereotypes all, who are well characterized by pitcher Larry Anderson’s acid comment, “Hey, you’re only young once. But you can be immature forever” (p. 93); Good’s chapter nine, on minorities, women, and children, is his best.

Good argues that minority portrayals “tend to be mixed-superficially dignified, but essentially degrading” (p. 140). Hollywood does not offend, and white viewers loved the idea of a kindly Branch Rickey helping an eager and dependent Jackie Robinson (“No baseball film presents the master-servant relationship more unctuously than *The Jackie Robinson Story*” (1950, p. 141). Films such as *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Star and Motor Kings* (1976) portrayed old Negro league players as cake-walking clowns.

Happy Latinos speaking pidgin English and practicing voodoo fertility rites on their bats and gloves fare no better in baseball films. Even in such well-made movies as *Bull Durham*, *Major League*, and *Pastime* (1991), blacks and Latinos are measured against white cultural norms. For example, Hollywood has never evaluated the revolutionary effect Jackie Robinson and other blacks had on the game that had become stodgy and predictable or speculated why Latin ball players have flourished in baseball, especially in positions such as shortstop that demand grace and elegance.

Good argues that women exist in baseball films primarily to help men. There are the occasional temptresses, but these often turn out to be proverbial whores with hearts of gold. More common are long-suffering farm girls and plucky mothers. Clearly, the ball players themselves do need all the help they can get: "Dazed and awkward around women," writes Good, "[they are] so awkward that they practically seem embarrassed to have a penises" (p. 155).

A concluding chapter contains considerable evidence of the hypocritical and foolish nature of most baseball films: "Films are commercial products," Good writes, "that inevitably support the corporate system that produced them. . . . Baseball films are related, at bottom, not to mythology and rite, but to advertising, public relations, and journalism." They are, Good insists, "full of magic and bullshit, a corrupt brightness that obscures what it means to be part of a mass society." (p. 172). If true, and I tend to agree, why then write a book filled with the same kinds of contradictions, or perhaps as a fan himself Good pines for the same kind of romanticism and nostalgia Hollywood features in its films. Intellectuals, after all, will wax poetic about baseball at the drop of a curve ball.

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