


10-1-2015

Book Review - Inventing Baseball Heroes: Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, and the Sporting Press in America

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Recommended Citation

Toepfer, Shane M. (2015) "Book Review - Inventing Baseball Heroes: Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, and the Sporting Press in America," *Georgia Library Quarterly*: Vol. 52 : Iss. 4 , Article 24.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol52/iss4/24>

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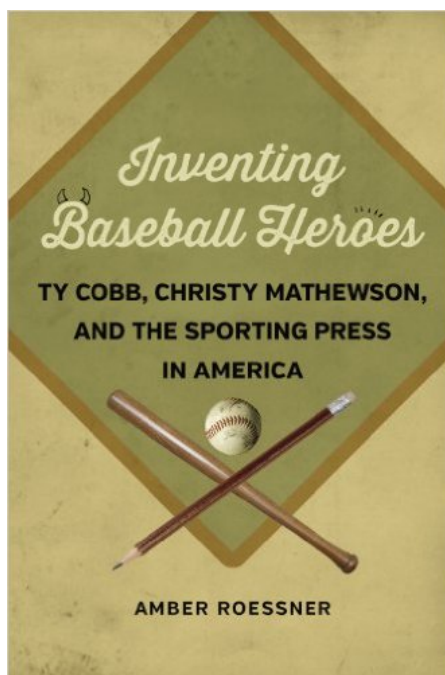
Off the SHELF

Inventing Baseball Heroes: Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, and the Sporting Press in America, by Amber Roessner (Louisiana State University Press, 2014: ISBN 978-0-8071-5611-7, \$39.95)

Amber Roessner undertakes an ambitious project with her book, *Inventing Baseball Heroes: Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, and the Sporting Press in America*. Roessner explores the complex process of “hero crafting” in the early part of the twentieth century, focusing on the symbiotic relationship between sports journalism and professional baseball as they each rose to cultural prominence. Mobilizing an impressive array of primary sources, *Inventing Baseball Heroes* presents a cogent, engaging narrative of American culture that is sure to intrigue scholars of journalism, historiography, and communication and sport.

Situating her study in the lineage of hero crafting prior to the rise of electronic media, Roessner contends that these two rising industries of sports journalism and professional baseball provided Americans with explicit manifestations of what success, and moreover what heroism, looks like in the early twentieth century. Roessner posits that Americans learned important values and lessons through the carefully constructed icons of baseball, specifically the star images of Ty Cobb and Christy Mathewson. These baseball stars provided American culture with symbols of athletic excellence, determination, and success at a time when it seemed American

society was devoid of many heroes. This hero crafting also benefited baseball itself, as the emergence of these national heroes drew passionate fans to the sport, cementing its status as America’s national pastime. Finally, Roessner contends that this hero crafting also benefited the field of sports journalism, as the rise of prominent sportswriters, such as Grantland Rice and Ring Lardner, was good for the field’s own growth.



Roessner gives considerable attention to the star images of both Mathewson and Cobb, particularly how each player’s constructed persona seemed at odds with the other. Mathewson was positioned as the proverbial saint, as sportswriters emphasized his Christian values, his sportsmanship, and his gentlemanly behavior both on and off the baseball diamond. Cobb, on the other hand, was positioned by many sportswriters as more of an outlaw or villain, with many sportswriters focusing on his conflicts away from the sport, as well as his exploits in the

game itself. For example, Roessner provides details of Cobb injuring other players during his base running, resulting in one sportswriter labeling him a “demon in spikes.” These depictions illuminate how the burgeoning field of sports journalism was integral in crafting the star images of these celebrity athletes, resulting in sportswriters assuming the role of cultural storytellers who frame our experience of an entire sport to fit into larger mythic narratives about who we are, what we value, and who we desire to become.

Inventing Baseball Heroes ultimately is an exploration of American journalism as it intersects with a burgeoning new industry, clarifying journalism's role in crafting the very values we culturally laud. But this crafting does not exist in a vacuum, and Roessner expertly narrates how shifts in journalism itself in the early part of the twentieth century impacted the coverage of the sport. This text provides

readers with a nuanced account of how interconnected the two industries of professional baseball and sports journalism are, and the cultural value each provided American society.

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