

April 2009 (09—2)

©2007 Society for American Baseball Research
Opinions expressed by contributors do not necessarily reflect the position or official policy of SABR or its Bibliography Committee.
Editor: Ron Kaplan (23 Dodd Street, Montclair, NJ 07042, 973-509-8162, Ronk23@aol.com)

Comments from the Chair

Andy McCue
Riverside, CA

Welcome to the new baseball season.

For those of us who collect baseball Guides, SABR stepped into the breach left by the death of *The Sporting News Baseball Guide* by paying for the creation of the *Emerald Guide to Baseball 2009*. The *Emerald Guide* contains all the basic information in the old TSN series plus some additional material. And, as an added bonus, it's free. You can download a PDF copy from the SABR webpage.

Those of you with collections of TSN Guides can also download the 2007 and 2008 editions to keep a continuous collection. Those of you as addicted to paper as I am can also pay for a paper copy from a site called Lulu.com for \$23.94. However, I'm discovering the PDF *Emerald Guide* is completely searchable in a second, much better than my fingers turning pages. It also draws its statistics from the Pete Palmer database, the definitive statistical history of the game.

Our committee meeting at the annual convention has been set for Friday, July 31 at 12:30 p.m. I hope to see as many of you there as possible. People will start showing up early in the week although the formal program won't begin until Thursday. We'll have a game at Camden Yards, tours of the Nationals Park and the usual round of presentations and panels. Stan Kasten of the Nationals will be the luncheon speaker.

If you have any items you would like to insure we discuss at the committee meeting, please send me some information in advance.

I'd also like to encourage you to take a look at the website of our newsletter's editor – Ron Kaplan. It's <http://rksbaseballbookshelf.wordpress.com>. Ron constantly updates his site with reviews of baseball books, interviews with authors, and other material. He recently had an interesting interview with SABR member, Committee stalwart and baseball book dealer Bobby Plapinger.



Reviews

The Girl Who Threw Butterflies, by Mick Cochrane.
New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers. 2009.

Juvenile baseball fictions of the 21st century come rooted in formulas that were pioneered in the 19th century. Our protagonist, an outsider, wants to break into an established team and play ball. The protagonist is talented but lacks confidence on and off the field. Expected enemies are met; unexpected friends materialize. A coach gives wise and temperate guidance. After some setbacks, the team heads into a Big Game. Despite their initial differences, the newly-forged teammates come together to earn a victory. Our protagonist is the game's hero, and victory is usually due more to acquired maturity and baseball smarts than to any prodigies of pitching or slugging.

The Girl Who Threw Butterflies by Mick Cochrane (author of the notable adult baseball novel *Sport*) follows that formula exactly, but makes it refreshing and alive for the year 2009. Molly Williams is the protagonist, a middle-school softball player of some note. Her father has died in the fall of her eighth-grade year. Her mother has become detached. Molly resolves to try out for the school baseball team. Her hopes ride on the knuckleball her late father taught her.

Elements of the formula shift into place under Cochrane's direction. A smug shortstop resents Molly's intrusion into his male domain. Coach Morales, on the other hand, treats "Williams" like any other player. Since a knuckleball pitcher needs a "personal catcher" unafraid to handle the floater, Molly enlists the help of Lonnie, a dreamy draughtsman whose one baseball skill is his tolerance for bruises.

Will they win the Big Game? I'm rooting for them, at any rate. But the journey, not the destination, is the key to strong sport fiction. *The Girl Who Threw Butterflies* is notable for several stops along the way. Cochrane evokes the suburban Buffalo setting with deft touches, making it integral to the story without losing his way in traveloguey exposition. He gives Molly a wisecracking foil in the person of her best friend, Celia.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Cochrane tells the story in third person — well, there are only three persons to choose from, and second is not used very often. But the perspective, limited to Molly but not in her voice, is very skillfully handled. There is a thin line in literature for “young readers” (the young end of the Young Adult range) between too much inner voice and too little. Too much, and you risk populating the mental life of a 13-year-old with insights beyond her years. Too little, and you risk the condescension of adult omniscience. Cochrane steers between these shoals with great assurance.

The death of Molly's father is another potential flaw that Cochrane finesses well. Young Adult and “young reader” fiction over-represent the death of parents; they are an actuarial nightmare for whoever writes life insurance on the forty-ish progenitors of their characters. I have usually assumed that such a proliferation of deaths is a way to talk about the prevalence of divorce without always talking literally about divorce. But in *The Girl Who Threw Butterflies*, Molly's dad isn't just shunted out of the way into Eternity. Death itself is something that the novel must process and deal with -- death, and the possibility of suicide. (That the novel touches on these issues without centering itself on them makes it a “young-reader,” or “middle-grade” book, not a full YA fiction.)

Death is not the only way to lose a parent in Cochrane's Buffalo, for instance. Molly's catcher Lonnie's parents really have divorced, and when his dad shows up at the Big Game “wearing a pink polo shirt, holding a baby on his chest in a Snugli,” he looks “like the poster boy for midlife crisis.” By counterpoint, the death of Molly's father seems all the more real, and his continuing presence in Molly's memory and willpower the more authentic.

Baseball novels for all ages also suffer from a family weakness: the temptation to create nine (or more) wacky individual characters, thus burying the story in exposition and character notes. Cochrane does well skirting this obstacle, too.

Many of Molly's teammates are no more than names, and others are sketched in with spare but convincing details (the tall one, the fast one, the two African-Americans). The team becomes the matrix for three characters -- protagonist pitcher, blocking-character shortstop, sidekick catcher -- who thereby stand out all the more effectively from their social context. You would think this was an easy effect to achieve, but many a recent juvenile baseball novel, even many a recent short story (their authors will be nameless here) makes the mistake of trying to give us nine separate character sketches in a dishwater-dull expository chapter. By contrast, Cochrane lets his characters emerge into view when they want to, and when Molly needs them to.

I'm 49 years old, and I raced through this book in one sitting. I have to think I am still enough of a child reader at heart that my sensibilities might serve as a guide to what's good for a young audience. And for my money, *The Girl Who Threw Butterflies* is very good indeed.

Tim Morris

University of Texas at Arlington

(This review original appeared on the ARETE listserv.)

Ed Barrow: The Bulldog Who Built the Yankees' First Dynasty by Daniel R. Levitt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.

There are a good many biographies of baseball executives just now. Norman Macht's on Connie Mack comes to mind, and Lee Lowenfisch's of Branch Rickey. They are joined by Daniel Levitt's opus on Ed Barrow (all three from the University of Nebraska Press). Each shows us one of the more successful baseball executives of the first half of the twentieth century and allows us a look at how a baseball club conducts its business.

What readers learn from Levitt's work is a kind of history of how the baseball industry operated in the first half of the twentieth century through the life of one of the industry's most successful executives.

The book has two parts, the second focusing on Barrow's time as Yankee general manager, the first with his adventures as a minor league owner and league president and as a manager in both the minors and the majors. His experience illustrates how baseball teams were organized.

Even as late as the 1920s, most teams “were still run like small businesses,” with the team's president as administrator and the manager “who

guided the players (the labor force) on and off the field.”

But at about this time, many owners -- the Yankee's Jacob Ruppert among the first -- began to understand that “a more sophisticated front-office structure was required. No longer could a manager and an amateur owner maintain sustainable excellence from a baseball team” (5). Barrow, hired by Ruppert, filled “a baseball position that remained largely undefined” (6). His varied experiences in business and baseball made him perfect for the position of general manager.

Levitt points out the Federal League war had something to do with this transition. He notes that “[James] Gilmore's success in lining up wealthy American industrialists as baseball owners testified to the industry's transition from small businesses to large, complex financial operations” (89). Barrow's own experiences as manager of the Boston Red Sox under Harry Frazee also prepared him. Frazee, more interested in Broadway than Boston, “delegated some ownership functions to Barrow and on occasion even empowered him to respond to ownership inquiries” (126).

Once he had been hired to help run the Yankees — “the best deal the Yankees ever made” — Barrow had “expanded responsibilities that fell within the purview of the modern general manager. He prided himself on both his organizational abilities and his player evaluation skills; the Yankee position offered him the opportunity to employ both.” He organized a scouting staff to identify talent and developed

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

strategies of player procurement and player development that began the Yankee's extraordinary run of successes.

As Levitt notes, prior to World War II, players were procured in four ways: by sale or trade with another Major or minor league club; by signing an amateur as a free agent; or through the Major League–minor league draft. He underlines “Barrow’s (and Ruppert’s) brilliance in adjusting player procurement strategies to the circumstances of the time.” Initially they purchased players from other American League teams, principally Frazee’s Red Sox. Then they bought high-priced minor leaguers. Finally they succeeded with players from their own farm system.”

Developing an effective scouting system was essential to this enterprise. Barrow both emphasized and reorganized the Yankee’s scouting department, assigning scouts to particular regions of the country. Levitt credits Ruppert with the vision to establish a farm system and George Weiss with its direction, but notes the Barrow had the wisdom to see its usefulness.

Two subjects Levitt emphasizes deserve particular mention. The first is the relation of Red Sox owner Harry Frazee to the Yankee owners. Levitt is the co-author of an article in the most recent *Baseball Research Journal* disputing the claim of Glen Stout and Richard Johnson in *Red Sox Century* and elsewhere that Frazee did not sell players to the Yankees primarily because he needed the money. In *Ed Barrow*, as well as in the article, Levitt takes time to present evidence that, as he puts it “with his mounting financial obligations, Frazee had become a seller of top talent.”

The second is the complicated problems resulting from the development of the farm system. Levitt devotes a whole chapter — “If You Say I Did It, I Did; but I Did It Asleep”— to describe an owners’ meeting in which the option rule is discussed with very little understanding of it on the part of the executives involved in the discussion.

Though Levitt is interested mostly in Barrow’s professional life and in how the Yankees sustained their successes, readers also get a look at Barrow the person. He is “the *Bulldog* Who Built the Yankees’ First Dynasty.” A pugnacious fellow, he occasionally indulged in physical violence in his youth. Autocratic by temperament, “he demonstrated little skill or tolerance in lobbying decision-making bodies.” Levitt speaks of his “dictatorial and overbearing style,” describes him as “aggressive, dictatorial,” remarks on his “intransigence,” and his “thin skin and short temper. Surprisingly, the author does not find that Barrow was especially tough in salary negotiations.

Yankee fans can read through all this quite happily, as there are no notes to distract them. For the serious researcher, Levitt has provided several kinds of support for his narrative. First of all, there are eighteen tables in an Appendix on all sorts of subjects, from “Estimated Salaries, 1897” (Table 1) to “Barrow’s Income after Joining the Yankees” (Table 18), the latter year by year. Levitt’s Bibliography begins with a “Note on Sources” some seven pages long describing his research. This is followed by a list of “Published Works” that runs just over thirteen pages.

Leverett T. Smith, Jr.
Rocky Mount, NC

Roger Clemens and the Rage for Baseball Immortality, by Jeff Pearlman. New York: Harper, 2009.

Over the last several years, almost every baseball fan — and a lot of non-fans as well — have felt a sense of betrayal. Their heroes have feet of clay, the emperor has no clothes. What makes the situation all the more sad is how these athletes stick to their guns and deny, deny, deny in the face of what many would consider overwhelming evidence.

QuickTime™ and a decompressor are needed to see this picture.

Roger Clemens is one of these people. Named by Brian McNamee, listed in the Mitchell Report, he has maintained his innocence, going on programs such as *60 Minutes* to bring his case to America. Jeff Pearlman’s new bio depicts Clemens as man desperate to hold on to glory as long as possible, willing to sacrifice health, family, friendship, even the adoration of the crowd, to be, to use a phrase, “the best there ever was.”

It is a sad tale; the reader knows how it turns out. As the pages wind through his childhood, college and minor league career, and his rise to stardom, the pages flow faster and faster to the inevitable present (we have yet to see what his ultimate fate will be; Pearlman believes jail time is just a matter of time).

There is no doubt Clemens was a marvel when it came to preparation, throwing himself into extreme workouts even before the drug allegations were made public. Was he too single-minded in his pursuit of excellence? The answer depends on the individual’s point of view. Was Clemens’ decision to take his start on the day his wife, Debbie, was giving birth the height of selfishness or professionalism? The same could be said when he took the mound after his beloved mother, Bess, died.

Pearlman — a columnist for SI.com and former *Sports Illustrated* senior writer whose previous books include *The Bad Guys Won*, a study of the 1986 New York Mets, and *Love Me, Hate Me*, a Barry Bonds biography — points to many instances where Clemens went off the deep end, perhaps none more infamous than the “splintered bat-throwing” incident against Mike Piazza in the 2000 Subway Series against the Mets. In light of the steroid and other drug accusations, many such events have been retroactively attributed to “the rage.” but it seems Clemens’ intensity predates the use of pharmaceuticals.

The whole story is a melodrama: poor, unathletic boy overcomes humble beginnings, becomes a superstar, takes everything for granted, and falls mightily. It would be interesting to get a psychologist’s take on the book. In the meantime, Pearlman has afforded us the opportunity to take a peek inside Clemens’ head for ourselves. Like a car wreck, it’s hard to turn away.

Ron Kaplan
Montclair, NY

Congratulations to SABR award winners

Ballparks of the Deadball Era, by **Ronald M. Selter**, was named as the winner of the 2009 Larry Ritter Award. The prize is given by the SABR Deadball Era Committee in recognition to the best new book related to the Deadball Era published in the previous year.

A statement on an SABR.org, praised the work. "Selter's meticulously researched study covered every ballpark used during the Deadball Era and explained how changes in ballpark configurations affected outcomes on the field. It will remain the definitive work in this area for a long time to come."

The award will be presented at the committee meeting at the convention in Washington, D.C.

Tom Swift, author of *Chief Bender's Burden: The Silent Struggle of a Baseball Star* (University of Nebraska Press) was named winner of the 2009 Seymour Medal. Swift provides a nuanced, novel-like biography of Charles Albert Bender, the first Native American to play in the American League and one of only two Native Americans in the Baseball Hall of

Fame.

Swift received the medal at the Seymour Medal Conference in Cleveland, April 24-26. Sports columnist Joe Posnanski was the keynote speaker.

The Seymour Medal, named in honor of Dr. Harold Seymour and Dorothy Jane Mills (Seymour), is awarded each spring to the best book of baseball biography or history published in the previous calendar year.

QuickTime™ and a decompressor are needed to see this picture.

QuickTime™ and a decompressor are needed to see this picture.

QuickTime™ and a decompressor are needed to see this picture.

"The Remainder Bin" Others news on books 'n things

* **Tim Morris** of the University of Texas at Arlington continues to update his impressive on-line "Guide to Baseball Fiction" (www.uta.edu/english/tim/baseball/index.html).

* **Tom Hoffarth** of the *Los Angeles Daily News*, produced an impressive collection of "30 books in 30 days," a daily series of baseball book reviews (www.insidesocal.com/tomhoffarth).

The SABR-Yoseloff Research Grant

Do you have a research idea that's been kicking around in your head? If a lack of funds for travel, photocopying, or other research-related expenses has stopped you from pursuing a pet project, consider applying for a SABR-Yoseloff research grant. Through the generosity of the Anthony A. Yoseloff Foundation, SABR is able to award baseball research grants to its members with the intention of later publishing that research. A minimum of \$4,000 is allocated for awards annually, but distribution is dependent upon the quality of the proposal pool. The maximum grant award is \$1,000, and individuals are limited to one grant per year. The Yoseloff Grant Program is not restricted to any single area of baseball research, thus most projects are eligible for full or partial grant funding.

The final work product of the proposed research must be suitable to be published by SABR, although copyright will remain with the author. For clarification, publication does not necessarily mean print publication. The final work product may be something that SABR can publish on its web site in electronic format, such as an article, a database, or other media product. Only SABR members are eligible to be considered for a Yoseloff-SABR Baseball Research Grant.

The deadline for the 2009 calendar year is May 15. Application forms are available on the SABR website.

Please send articles, reviews, and suggestions to Ron Kaplan at Ronk23@aol.com. Please put "SABR Newsletter" in the subject line.



Seymour Medal winner Tom Swift, author of *Chief Bender's Burden*, is flanked by Dorothy Jane Mills, widow of the late Harold Seymour, and SABR executive director John Zajc at the award presentation held in Cleveland last month.