

Heroes on Deck

Inventing Baseball Heroes: Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, and the Sporting Press in America by Amber Roessner. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014. Hardcover, 227 pp., \$39.95

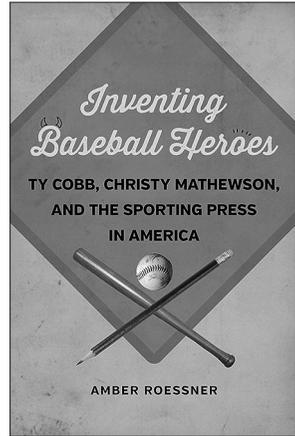
Reviewed by Patrick S. Washburn, Ohio University, United States

Americans have always had a penchant for creating heroes, some of whom have become celebrity figures forevermore with a small number achieving an almost mythic stature. Such persons as presidents George Washington and Abraham Lincoln come easily to mind, as do frontiersmen Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett.

Amber Roessner, an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Tennessee, has narrowed her examination of heroes to arguably the two most famous players in what was America's national sport, baseball, from 1900 to 1928. Pitcher Christy Mathewson played seventeen seasons, winning 373 games and having twelve consecutive twenty-win seasons; outfielder Ty Cobb, meanwhile, won twelve consecutive league batting titles in twenty-four seasons and still holds the record for the highest lifetime batting average (.367). Both were among the first five players inducted into the baseball Hall of Fame in 1936.

While both players have been researched extensively by historians in both popular and academic books, Roessner focuses on the way that newspaper and magazine sportswriters used what she calls hero-crafting to influence how Mathewson and Cobb were viewed by the public. "The term 'hero-crafting' suggests both a skill-based practice and an art or a trade," she writes. "Others have dubbed the process 'mythmaking' . . . [which] might mislead readers. 'Myth' . . . implies that a story is somehow untrue. But these heroic tales [of Mathewson and Cobb] were based in fact. The details were sometimes exaggerated by sportswriters for the sake of the narrative but often provided insight into greater cultural truths" (12). She notes that hero-crafting of baseball stars by sportswriters had begun in the latter half of the 1870s and was perfected by them by 1900.

Going hand in hand with hero-crafting was what became known as the gee-whiz school of journalism, which was particularly practiced by sportswriters. They used "rosy rhetoric" (2) to cover sports stars like celebrities. "Sports reporters touted their brute strength and speed as comparable to that of Greek warriors," Roessner notes. "They drafted heroic journeys complete with a story of separation, initiation, and return. They celebrated the physical prowess of athletes, along with their mental and moral attributes.



They applauded scientific play, comparing managers and team leaders to military tacticians and praised icons that played ‘clean’ ball and practiced good sportsmanship” (24).

However, as Roessner adroitly points out, Mathewson and Cobb proved that heroes came in all forms. While the former was not perfect—he sometimes smoked, drank, gambled, and swore—he frequently was called the “Christian Gentleman” by the press with sportswriter W.O. McGeehan labeling him “the incarnation of all those virtues with which we endow the ideal American” (153). On the other hand, Cobb played tough, hard-nosed baseball and was well known for sliding savagely into a base with his razor-sharp spikes held high. If an opponent was hurt, so be it. And on one occasion, he went into the stands at a game for a heckler who had lost one hand and several fingers in a printing press accident and beat him severely. Nevertheless, he was portrayed as a good example of the success that could come from determination and hard work, and was regarded as a “gentleman by instinct” (154). Thus, what was written about them had a similar moral: everyone could learn something valuable from them about how to succeed.

In discussing how gee-whiz journalism played a major role in making Mathewson and Cobb heroes, Roessner notes that sportswriters frequently utilized literary journalism techniques. While her book does not begin with a definition of what literary journalism was at the turn of the twentieth century, which may prove a detriment to some readers who are unfamiliar with it, she does mention its attributes at various points. These included: imaginative writing, “sentimental, optimistic tones and narrative structure” (23), similes, metaphors, epic heroic tales, humor, characterization, and dialogue that famed sportswriter Ring Lardner in 1914 called the “natural speech of the lowbrow” (115). Numerous examples of these techniques of literary writing by sportswriters appear throughout the book.

At first glance, Roessner does not seem to break new ground. The creation of heroes by sportswriters, using gee-whiz journalism, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, has been touched upon by other historians. However, what is important about her well-researched book is that it examines this form of sports journalism in far greater depth than anyone else. And equally important is that her book does a better job of explaining why this type of journalism occurred. In brief, the sportswriters traveled with the baseball teams, ate and drank and played cards with the players during the season, sometimes socialized with them during the off season, and in many cases ghost wrote articles and books with them. Both the players and the sportswriters depended upon each other in doing their respective jobs and succeeding in their careers. As a result of this book, scholars are provided the best in-depth look to date of how sportswriters did their jobs in the first three decades of the previous century. It is a sobering examination of what was basically a nonobjective, but highly interesting, form of journalism. Readers at the time couldn’t care less about the obvious problems this engendered. They simply loved what was written.

Thus, Roessner’s book is well worth reading about a bygone time in journalism and the important part that literary techniques played in it.
