

September 2017

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Robert (2017) "Book Review: Leerhsen, Charles. Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.," *Saber and Scroll*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.apus.edu/saberandscroll/vol6/iss2/10>

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Leerhsen, Charles. *Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016. Book Review

Robert Smith, PhD

Context. Context is critical in understanding historical figures and events. Moderns perhaps understand the Aztecs and Babylonians for human sacrifice. Readers too often fail to look at the world within its historic prism. However, with Ty Cobb, certain established “facts” exist. The Hollywood hit movie *Field of Dreams* noted that everyone hated him. Ironically, the character who stated this in the movie was later thrown out of baseball for gambling and throwing the 1919 World Series. Cobb was a racist. He sharpened his spikes and maimed many players on the ball field. However, what if all this is wrong? Perhaps the history of the “Georgia Peach” was misappropriated and he was subject to a simple hatchet job. In recent history, similar examples have occurred; take David Irving denying the Holocaust, the faking of the Hitler Diaries, and the false story in *Rolling Stone* about campus rape.

Ty Cobb was perhaps the first real superstar in sports history. His impact is such that he turned baseball into an exciting game, where folks came to the ball park to watch him, as later people would flock to see Michael Jordan play. Ty Cobb was a revolutionary figure, turning baseball into a professional pursuit through his single-minded quest for perfection. He defined an era in American history as well, serving as a model for a nation flexing its new found muscle and sense of vitality. He was one of the first Southerners post the American Civil War to be accepted into mainstream America.

But the facts do not hold up to the legend. If Ty Cobb was so hated, why did he rate first among the initial inductees for the Baseball Hall of Fame, to include more votes than Babe Ruth? The accusation that Cobb did more to enforce the color line in baseball is patently false. The stories that Cobb singled out blacks to fight with are again false. In fact, Cobb was a pioneer in how he treated blacks in his personal life and he pushed for their inclusion at baseball’s home plate. Much of this is like many journalist stories today—never let the facts stand in the way of the story you want to create.

As both Ulysses S. Grant, and later Cobb, sensed their impending

mortality, both wanted to establish their identity for posterity. Grant was a good writer and the help of Mark Twain would not have hurt. Cobb, for his part, instead got a human cancer, a man of such malevolence who served as his ghost writer, Al Stump. When this hack—banned from reputable magazines that had fact checking units in the early 1960s—did the drafting, he lied. Made stuff up. Invented quotes. He narrated a cold, snowy Christmas Eve trip to the Cobb crypt. Basic fact checking by the author showed it had not snowed that day in Georgia. Or anywhere else for hundreds of miles around.

Stump dragged his feet on allowing Cobb to see the final product hoping Cobb would die first, which was the case. However, book sales were lukewarm at best. So what did this man do? He wrote an article for *True Magazine*, throwing his book under the bus—and of course Ty Cobb with it. His lies and innuendos became simply outrageous. The fix was in. For the autobiography, Stump earned \$3,000; for the hit piece in *True*, he earned \$4,000. Even after Cobb's death, this man's evil oozed on. He forged hundreds of Ty Cobb documents, personal artifacts, and baseball memorabilia after Cobb's death in 1961, telling folks Cobb gave these to him. This massive deception allowed him to amass a small fortune in the trade of these forged baseball memorabilia. The end state—Stump forged two Cobb diaries that ended up in the Baseball of Fame, only to be found to be a fraud by an FBI analysis in 2009. The Ty Cobb movie, based primarily on the book is even worse. The director stated Cobb might have killed as many as three people. Of course, he had no proof. They also put in a scene that never happened where Cobb purports to rape a cigarette girl in a casino. Basis? The director noted, "That actually was not in the original screenplay. That is something Al and I came up with during the shoot. It felt like the sort of thing Cobb would do" (p. 400). Yet much of what authors have written about Cobb since then has been based on Al Stump's rewrite of history in that poisoned-well article in *True Magazine*.

There are some small challenges in the book. Although Leerhsen adopts the typical biographical chronological style in telling the story, sometimes he jumps around so much that this reviewer had to go back to be certain that he had not missed a section. The author has a tendency to use odd phrases that highlight his command of the Thesaurus and writing skill to prove that he is not just a hackneyed, cliché-using sports writer. Perhaps of greater import, his writing style and the interweaving of material at times gives it a pseudo-jurisprudence feel. Adopting perhaps the use of more explanatory foot or end notes would have enabled the author to convey the same information but to make the writing less stilted.

This reviewer went into this book truly blind, except for the mythology and persona that he now sees falsely entombed Cobb's legacy. Ty Cobb—on and off the field—was quite human, and troubled. Cobb was perhaps more troubled than some and perhaps overly sensitive with pride. Yet it is easy to ascribe that to his antebellum upbringing and his need to make his way in a polite society that saw ballplayers as ruffians or worse, while laboring under the burden of being a Southerner. Today one might wonder if Cobb had a traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder due to his hair trigger temper. Yet one can imagine that Ty Cobb with his love of children would have founded a children's charitable clinic, for he had already built a hospital in his hometown. What readers end up with is the story of a complicated man who has over time been forgotten by the game he built. Therein lies the real tragedy, for Cobb and the game of baseball became estranged.