



## Willie Mays: The Life, the Legend

*James S. Hirsch*

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On February 18th, 2010 Mr. Mays signed 100 copies for his Charity, The Say Hey Foundation. The signing took place at a local sporting goods store. You will receive the retail store receipt, copies of 2 newspaper articles announcing the signing and The Letter of Evaluation.

## Willie Mays: The Life, the Legend Details

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## From Reader Review Willie Mays: The Life, the Legend for online ebook

### Nathaniel says

This is a well organized, sincere, detailed look at one of the great ballplayers of all-time. Many have noted it's lack of criticism, or even the scent of objectivity about its subject, it's a valid criticism. Perhaps one day, someone will do a more objective biography of this great player, but this is a very fine biography. I reserve most of my criticism for the author. Hirsch does a nice job covering all the topics but frequently I found him going on a bit too long, when the topic had been exhausted, a paragraph, or a page before.

Example: he deftly covers the inequities in pay African-American ballplayers faced in the 1950s (and throughout the book) smartly comparing them to white players of the day, even of the same stature of Willie (Mickey Mantle), but I feel then goes on, adding on unnecessarily. The facts Hirsch lays out explain all too starkly the injustice. Does anyone really need more?

Example: In Hirsch's analysis of The Catch, he smartly gets other players and managers criticism of Mays, and then gets the explanation from Willie that defends the play. Hirsch then goes on again. Willie's explanation, whether you buy it or not, is sufficient, what Hirsch adds to the conversation, after that, is superfluous.

Example: Hirsch also makes noise about Willie having hit a HR in every inning from 1 to 16. Seems to me the correct part of that stat to go on about is from inning ten to sixteen, that's at least seven walk off HRs, not one to nine. But Hirsch asks rhetorically how many players [during their career:] come up in every inning? Really? You play long enough (in Mays case 22 years), probably every player. Don't get me wrong, I'm in no way diminishing Mays' achievement, I'm questioning the analysis.

I also don't know if Hirsch not being a noted baseball writer or even a more noted biographer hurts or helps him at the certain points. He doesn't screw up anything major, or even anything unforgivable (he misspells the hotel in Milwaukee, the Pfister...incredibly small beans), but there is a constant sense that Hirsch is a little uncomfortable in the language of baseball.

Look even after all that, if you have an interest in Willie Mays, all time great, and are a baseball fan, this is a tremendous book, and a whole lot of fun, and I totally recommend it.

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### Jason Koivu says

A strong and well-constructed biography of one of the first black men integrated into the majors in early 1950s America, and more importantly to the man himself, one of the best players and nicest guys ever to play the game. *Willie Mays: The Life, the Legend* encompasses a great deal of this monumental and yet utterly humble man's life as well as the times he lived it in prose that is at times lyrical - especially when it comes to describing baseball - but which is at all times throughout the book yeoman-like in its adherence and diligence to the true story and timeline of Mays' entire life...well almost his entire life, because he's still busy living it! As a fan of baseball I was surprised at how little I knew about Mays (especially that he was still alive) and Hirsch's book went a long way in shoring up my shortcomings in that area. Whether or not it would do much for those who are learned in 50s/60s baseball, that I can not say.

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### **Len says**

I like to start each baseball season by reading a baseball book, and it's hard to imagine a better baseball hero to read about than Willie Mays. This book was a thorough life story, starting with his childhood in Alabama through his time in the Negro leagues, on to his brief minor league experience -- and then of course the story of his remarkable major league career with the Giants and Mets.

Willie Mays has always been something of an anomaly -- a public figure with a very private personal life. Yes, we knew about his marriages and his financial issues and even his job with Bally's that kept him away from MLB for so many years. But he kept so quiet about his views on big issues that you perhaps thought he didn't have any views. But he definitely did.

Mays was one of the first African Americans in the major leagues and played during a difficult time in America for race relations. He wasn't outspoken like Jackie Robinson, but he experienced more than his share of racism and in his own way dealt with it -- by talking to kids and teaching them about right and wrong. He also was caught in the middle of baseball's expansion west and struggled with San Francisco fans early on being one of the last remaining New York Giants.

I loved reading about Willie Mays...both his on the field life and his off the field life. While I was too young to really compare him to today's baseball legends, I did get to see him play as a member of the New York Mets and remember even as a young child knowing there was something magical about him. I'll never forget seeing his pink Cadillac parked out front of Shea Stadium with the license plate that read "sey hey."

This is a great read for baseball fans, and for anyone who wants to explore what America was like in the 50s and 60s.

The only downside for me was that Hirsch was very rarely critical of Mays in the book. He did say a few things that were critical, but for the most part it was written as if Hirsch thought Willie Mays was never wrong and always the victim. This book is really a love letter of sorts to Mays. But hey, he was arguably the greatest all-around baseball player ever.

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### **Mary says**

I have always felt extremely lucky that I grew up during what is probably certain to be baseball's "golden age" - after World War II, but before television was widely available in most homes. In the summers, we played baseball all day in our neighborhood - boys and girls together - and then listened to baseball on the radio in the evenings at home with our families and friends. EVERYONE talked about baseball, knew the players, knew the scores, kept the stats. Even in school, our teachers "treated" us to listening to the World Series on the radio in our classrooms! In those days, it truly was The All American Game. And of all the wonderful players of that era, Willie Mays in many ways was certainly one of the most known and talked about. For one thing he was truly a tool player - he could hit, field, steal bases, bunt, slug and run with equal aplomb. Born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1931, he was raised up as a young teenager through the Industrial League in which his father, Willie Mays Sr. (aka: Cat) played, joined the Negro League during high school, and the minor league (St. Paul Millers) which had to wait for him to graduate from high school before he

could be moved up to the major leagues with the New York Giants when he was just eighteen. Though he took time out during World War II to be in the Army (predictably, he played baseball for the official Army team for the entertainment of the troops), he played baseball, mostly for the Giants in both New York and San Francisco, until he retired in 1973 at age 42.

His records and accolades both as a hitter and a fielder are the stuff of which legends surely are made. He retired with a lifetime average of .302 (it would have been much higher had he not played the last year and a half for the Mets) and 660 home runs and his lifetime total of outfield putouts, 7,095, is still the major league record. Season after season he finished "best," "most", "highest" in many categories of play. He broke multiple records almost every year he played. He was, as I recall, a joy to watch (or to "watch" while you listened!) As TV spread from house to house in my neighborhood in the late 50's, we'd crowd into living rooms - kids, parents, friends and neighbors - to actually see him live on "The Game of the Week" whenever the Giants were featured. Though I played with a Stan Musial bat and a Duke Snyder glove, the baseball I owned was a Willie Mays.

But he was a very private man. Always smiling on the field, he did not want to be bothered by much snooping and prying off the field. Like his godson, Barry Bonds, he snubbed the press. In an age when heroes like Jackie Robinson took strong stands in the emerging Civil Rights movement, he chose, he said, to let his baseball do his talking. He'd grown up in one of the most segregated cities in the South, but he personally had suffered much more, he said, by the covert prejudice he experienced in the North where "no one knows the rules, but the rules are firmly in place." To him this hypocrisy underscored the fact that the only way to overcome racism was to "rise above it." And so he took a drubbing in both the Black community and in the history of sports for his refusal to speak out, even when, as one of baseball's highest paid players, red-lining kept him from the house of his dreams that he wanted to buy in San Francisco. "Maybe it wasn't prejudice," he said. "Maybe she really didn't want to sell if after all."

This was one of the reasons James Hirsch wanted to write an authorized biography: to let Willie finally speak for himself on this subject. It took seven long years of hard turn downs to even get permission to begin. And this biography reads like a "authorized" version - Willie's reticence becomes the refuge of a shy "country" kid; his diffidence, the virtue of a man seeking to "keep the peace" between people in a troubled time. But ultimately the story in this story is baseball -- magnificently played. And in the end, that is the name of the game he played so hard, so well, for so long. I remember I was always happy to see him playing then; I was happy that I got to read about it now.

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### **hamptonenglish10 says**

Eric Mikulan  
Ms. Brooks and Ms. Sims  
English Book Review  
7 January 2013

For my non-fiction book I read the book Willie Mays: The Life, The Legend by James S. Hirsch. This book tells of the story of Willie Mays life from growing up in Alabama to becoming a Major League Baseball player. The book tells of May's struggles as he got drafted out of high school as he grew up in a time of great racism. His struggles continued as he began to play in minor league baseball in Minneapolis. Due to the great racism of the time of when he played in the Negro Leagues of the south which is were all the African

American baseball players played until Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier of Major league baseball. The book goes on to tell of May's career in the MLB with New York and San Francisco, and gives praise to one of the greatest baseball players of all time.

This book on Willie Mays is a non-fiction biography, I know this because the author tells the story of Willie Mays and his life and Career in baseball. Some information that I found interesting in this book is that Willies Mays ranks fourth on the all time home run leaderboard with 660 home runs. Willie Mays was the highest paid player of the late 1950s making \$100,000 which seems like a minuscule amount of money compared to todays athletes. Willies Mays played 22 seasons in the MLB which is a very long time to be in major league baseball where the average player only plays for around 5 years. Willie Mays set a Major league record for durability by playing more than 150 games in thirteen or more seasons.

Overall I would recommend this book to anyone who is looking to further there knowledge of one of the greatest baseball players of all time. I give the book four stars out of five since it provides lots of information about Willie Mays and Major League Baseball. However I did not give this book a fifth star because of the fact that it can become fairly boring at times. The book should be read if you like baseball and if you like the history of some of the greatest players.

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### **Barnabas Piper says**

It's closer to 4.5 stars - a really excellent biography. Hirsch does a wonderful job balancing Mays the legendary ballplayer and Mays the enigmatic man. I never knew about the tensions Mays experienced throughout the civil rights era, and Hirsch lays out that story wonderfully as well. Mays always captivated me as a historic, but sort of shadowy baseball legend. This book told his story in rich detail and narrative.

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### **Tara says**

James Hirsch did his best. He tried his hardest to shine a light on a player notorious for being closed off and inaccessible. I have no qualms with the writing, which was very well done, and the research and anecdotes are top-notch. But I have no idea what Willie Mays felt or feels about anything. The racism he must have endured growing up and all through his playing career? We know he *did* virtually nothing in response, but did he really not have any strong feeling about the injustice? Or should his feelings be so obvious, that we're lesser for even asking?

Lots of great little anecdotes, but the lack of insight to Mays and a certain repetition that can be common in baseball bios bring down the overall quality. Definitely recommended, especially if you haven't read anything about Mays' life, but it takes third place to the Henry Aaron and Mickey Mantle bios that came out the same year.

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### **Kiffie says**

I'm often skeptical of authorized biographies, but this one won me over as I moved along through it. It's sympathetic to Willie, but Hirsch is upfront about all of this. The book is thoroughly researched and is a comprehensive study of Willie's life not only on but off the field. Hirsch doesn't shy away from reporting on

Willie's money troubles, his problems with his first marriage, his problematic relationship with Jackie Robinson, and his sometimes prickly dealings with the press. But it's all overshadowed by his remarkable exploits on the field and his charitable work with kids. I am only sorry that I was too young and/or too much a follower of the American League as a kid and never really saw Willie play.

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### **Dan says**

I'm of two minds concerning this book.

The first is that it's great and makes me a little sad. James Hirsch's biography on Willie Mays captures the magic of mid 20th Century baseball. Pitchers pitched whole games, nobody had heard of steroids and games were an action packed two hours. People mostly heard games over the radio and players were people you'd see walking down the street.

Baseball mysticism aside, this book was kind of boring. Hirsch spends 500+ pages on Mays with another 100+ pages of notes. He goes through too many seasons game by game and goes into an incredible amount of detail on individual plays.

Instead of a straight biography, I'd rather it have been a history book with Mays's baseball career as my guide. Tell me more about New York in 1950s when the Dodgers, Giants and Yankees all filled stadiums. Explain the changes in the world around Mays as he went from a token MLB player in the 50s to an uncomfortable race leader in the 60s. How baseball went from a pastime to a corporation. Mays was around for all of it, and I was always more interested in these topics than the highs and lows of his 22 year career.

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### **Luke Koran says**

Before I even dreamt of picking up this book, I surprisingly knew very little about Willie Mays, who is widely regarded as the greatest overall player in the history of baseball. As a growing baseball historian, I knew I had (and desperately wished) to start learning about the "Say Hey" kid, and fast. I began when I was putting my baseball card collection together, where I looked at May's statistics - both career, year-by-year, WAR, and defensive value - and read numerous publications that ranked the best players of all-time. Ken Burns' 22 hour "Baseball" documentary has a few nice segments on Mays as well, especially on one of the most iconic moments in all of sports, "The Catch." But I knew this still wasn't enough. As I developed a keen interest in sporting (auto)biographies, I knew one thing: Willie Mays was going to be near the top of my list to read about.

Thankfully, this newly-published Mays biography (and authorized, too!) made its way into my hands, and Willie's complete story will now forever be stored in my memory. Hirsch does an excellent job in documenting Mays like none before has quite accomplished and with such elegance and thoroughness. Yes, plenty of commentary is made on the Civil Rights era that paralleled Mays' career, including Jackie Robinson's criticism of his inaction. But every last word of it is necessary in telling the whole story of who Willie Mays was as both a man and as a superstar athlete. In any case, there are so many detailed layers to this biography. You will learn so much about this larger-than-life man that has been previously unknown to the public, especially his interactions with his teammates in the clubhouse. Those recollections of instances where Mays' was continually being teased, which always brought such an innocent high voice in him - as

well as his constant mega-watt smile - really resonated with me, as I emanate these exact same qualities, or at least I've been told. Mays, it turns out, is one of the most likeable and relatable athletes I have ever encountered. Be prepared to enjoy this book, like, A LOT.

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### **Nathan says**

My previous knowledge of Willie Mays was limited to the once-over given him in grade-school history books: he was an African-American who overcame racism in the national pastime and became a Great American Figure: a catalyst of social change who just happened to play baseball. Hirsch is more thorough, but hardly less adulatory -in the other extreme. This ponderous volume flirts constantly with hagiography. Hirsch paints Mays not as the Great African-American Hope (apparently, he was actually accused by some as not being active enough on behalf of civil rights), but as a natural athlete with a superlative genius for the game. The stats fly hard and fast, the bulk of the book playing off as a highlight reel. None of it is undeserved, and indeed, I wasn't aware of just how good Mays really was (he was literally revolutionary). But it's repetitive to the point of tedium. The life story of Mays is presented here as mere filler between play after spectacular play, record after shattered record. It got old quickly. By time Mays wore out, I was ready to see him go, and the grand spectacle of his bowing out wasn't as affecting as Hirsch wanted it to be. Mays struggled mightily with retirement, but no one really thought he had any business trying to play any more. Hirsch, of course, can't bring himself to admit that himself, and just sounds rather whiney instead of properly elegiac. Mays' life after retirement is recounted with a sort of sighing perfunctoriness, and the book ends with a bland recap of the career stats.

As much as I love baseball, I was surprised that I didn't have more patience with this. It's not an efficient book. There's too much prose for the material; not that the material isn't worthy of it, but the prose is too aware of the material's grandeur to handle it properly. Die-hard Mays fans will probably already know most of this info, and newcomers will be daunted by the amount of it.

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### **Paul Pessolano says**

“Willie Mays. The Life, The Legend” by James S. Hirsch, published by Scribner.

Category – Sports/Baseball Publication Date – February 09, 2010

“The Catch” was made by Willie Mays in the 1954 World Series, and there is no other “The Catch” in any other sport, that includes football.

The story of Willie Mays goes far beyond the sport of baseball, although baseball was his life and he gave everything he had to the sport. The era of Willie Mays saw not only great changes in baseball but also in politics, especially in the civil rights movement. Willie was a very personal person who steered away from controversy; he only wanted to play baseball. Willie came from a poor family in Alabama and very early saw his future would be tied to Major League baseball. He played in the Negro League and worked his way up to a starting position for the New York Giants. Willie was so intense playing the game that he took the success of the team on his shoulders. He was one of the few players EVER that was a complete ball player. Willie could hit, run, catch, and do anything else required of him, even to the point of breaking up fights and controlling an unruly crowd. Willie did have problems with marriage and finances. It was not until later in

life that he found the woman of his dreams and was able to get his finances under control. Willie would do anything for "the kids", he had a special place in his heart for them and made many a special effort to go to hospitals and sign baseballs for them and ask how they were doing. Many charitable things that he did went unnoticed because he did not want the notoriety.

The book not only covers Mays's baseball career but the civil rights movement and the expansion of Major League Baseball. This is an excellent read for those interested in sports, especially a player that is one of a kind and will never be seen again.

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### **Spiros says**

Willie Mays was my third childhood hero, right behind Curious George and Batman. In our games of streetball (or drivewayball), I willingly ceded any right to "be" Willie to Anthony McBride, who was a year older and infinitely more athletic than me. I was perfectly content to "be" Bobby Bonds. Hence, it was a long time before I nerved myself to pick up this tome, and it was only because I found a \$10 hardcover copy at Housing Works that I wound up purchasing it, and carried it around the East Coast for a couple of weeks; when I returned to work, the first thing to greet my eyes was a shiny stack of \$10 copies on our remainder table, but hey: it's nice to buy books at Housing Works (also, a tee-shirt to replace the Paul Madonna Green Apple shirt I had left in Baltimore).

All in all, Hirsch does a great job. What galled me the most, even more than the racist residents of Miraloma Drive who tried to stop Willie from lowering their fucking property values when he moved to the City in 1958, was reading about San Francisco's idiot parochial press. I mean, I have been known to drink, but I'm pretty sure I am incapable of the vitriolic spew that Charles McCabe scrawled about Mays, and it comes as no surprise that Glenn Dickey questioned Willie's baseball intelligence; Dickey is the same cock-knocker who would later opine that that the 49ers should trade Joe Montana after the 1985 season. In reading this, Barry Bonds' relations with the press become more understandable; Barry is my exact contemporary, and he grew up watching the local press buffoons rip into both his father and his godfather.

Actually, it always amazes me how het up journalists get about players' salaries. Was Willie taking money that Stoneham had otherwise earmarked for the media? Stoneham basically ran (or drank) the franchise into the ground: between 1968 and 1974 the Giant's debuted Bobby Bonds, Dave Kingman, George Foster, Garry Maddox, and Gary Mathews into their outfield; by 1977, none of those players was with the team. Did the press ever get snippy with Stoneham? Not even after he sold the team to LaBatts, and put the Giants in jeopardy of being moved to Toronto or \*shudder\* St. Petersburg. And yet these same stooges had the effrontery to accuse Willie Mays of "Uncle Tomming". Fortunately, the local sporting press has both shrunken and dramatically improved since Willie's time, and I willingly buy the fishwrap on Saturdays just to read Bruce Jenkins.

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### **Chuck says**

It's stunning to think that, as important he is as a baseball player and as an American icon, there has never been a biography written about Willie Mays. For people who actually read my book reviews, you will note that my summer reading kick has included some sports biography. The last book I posted on was a life of Henry Aaron, and, although I didn't know a great deal about Mays at the time, the one troubling thing I found was the author's need to "dog" Mays to promote Aaron (something Aaron himself did not do).

Similarities between the two are many, the comparisons, natural. Both were born in Alabama in the 1930s, both were raised by strong, supportive fathers, both "came up" through the Negro Leagues, and both faced the segregation of baseball in the 1950s, as well as facing segregation in the supposedly "liberal" and "free" North. Neither publicly complained about the treatment they endured, and both were initially criticized for not using their athletic fame to comment on social issues, and both also became respected as pioneers, showing African-Americans in a positive light when few were visible.

However, both were different men. I won't discuss Aaron more--he is a man I profoundly respect whom I have written about elsewhere. And, perhaps because of the difference in their ages (Mays is a few years older), I have fewer memories of Mays playing than I do of Aaron. I do, however, remember Willie Mays 40th birthday because it was a national news event, and I realize from Hirsch's biography that he was still playing at a high level the season he turned 40. Interestingly, my memories of him are of spectacular catches in the outfield rather than at the plate.

Mays does a remarkable job of chronicling Mays life from the early days to the present, using testimony, documentary evidence, and, sometimes, interviews from Mays himself. Hirsch's usual patter is to tell a story with the evidence available, and then to provide Mays' comments afterward.

What emerges is a man who, because of a combination of skills and effervescent personality, gained acceptance in the 1950s at a time when very few African-Americans were granted access to much of anything in society. And therein lies the rub with Mays--his celebrity got him a "pass," protecting him from some of the worst things that many black men at the time faced, and yet he faced much racism. His refusal to complain or even publicize the slights he faced causes some to criticize him as a "Tom" or as someone whose status as athlete made him out of touch with everyday African-America. Hirsch notes that Mays was a transformative player--the first African American baseball player that white youth actively emulated. He also notes Mays steadfast refusal to court controversy over the many slights he faced for his race (inability to gain housing in San Francisco even when he was the highest paid Giant is one example) as being part of a consistent philosophy, while continuing to note the criticism he received for not being activist enough. (This was virtually identical to the stance Aaron took). Important to remember is that both men were sons of the South, of segregation, and that it is easy for someone like Jackie Robinson, who grew up in California in an integrated neighborhood, to criticize people for not opposing segregation when they have less experience with it. Opposition in the South could get a black man killed, something taught by Mays' father.

However, this book is primarily about baseball. Mays' greatness is hard to quantify--at one level, he is considered the greatest player ever, but he doesn't hold many records, and those he does hold are obscure (he is the only player to cumulatively hit a home run in every possible inning of a baseball game from innings one to 16, for example). But his records are impressive--660 home runs are, before the age of steroids, second only to Aaron and Babe Ruth, a career batting average over .300, nearly two thousand runs scored and two thousand runs batted in. It is the record of a player who was excellent for a very, very long time--quite productive into his 20th year in the bigs (although he faded quickly the year later, and regretted the last two years he played).

But more than that is the defense--the ability to anticipate the ball, to catch what would, for any other outfielder, be a home run or a triple, the rocket arm, able to consistently throw out a runner at home. Mays has far more putouts than any other outfielder, a record that hasn't come close to being reached in the nearly forty years since he retired. Also hard to quantify is the crafty base running, often being thrown out but distracting the fielders so a team mate can score the winning run, things that made his team win many games but never appeared in any stat line.

This is the genius of Hirsch's book--he is able to make the average reader understand the subtleties of Mays' greatness while meaningfully exploring the issues he faced in life. The book is flattering but not a hagiography; Mays faults are noted (it is interesting to note that he read every page of the book but did not ask Hirsch to change anything except a factual error or two).

I'm going to return to Howard Bryant's biography of Henry Aaron for a moment. I thought it a superior book, but thought it was flawed by the author's need to push Aaron above Mays. It bothered me at the time because I thought it diminished from the strong case he made for Aaron's greatness, which stands alone and is not threatened by Willie Mays. Hirsch also notes that, given the way Mays was torn up by racial controversy, had he been in a position to assault Ruth's home run record, he would not have handled it as well as Aaron did (something Mays acknowledges).

However, rather than criticize Bryant, I want to celebrate one of its excellences, one that I didn't fully appreciate 'til I read Hirsch's book on Mays. Bryant, who is African-American, writes from an "inside" that Hirsch cannot access. When Bryant notes that Aaron was criticized for "not hustling," the author goes into a thoughtful explanation of the challenges faced by an African-American male in the South, noting that sunup to sundown labor was expected no matter what, and that there was no advantage for a black man to move a bit faster to impress a white boss. It's the kind of insight that helps explain a time, a place, and a bias very well. It's something that, as gifted as he is, as good as the book was, Hirsch as a white East Coast male, doesn't have the experimentally authority to write about. This isn't a flaw in the book at all, but I wondered if an African American author might have offered different analysis of Mays' refusal to court controversy.

This book is excellent; I always had in my mind that Mays was a good player, and now I can see what all the shouting is about. I heartily recommend it, for baseball fans and for those interested in social history of the 50s and 60s.

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### **Brian Eshleman says**

I was even more impressed on my second read through. Hirsch seems to understand the contours of the character of Willie Mays as they carry him through different phases of his life. Hirsch also displays a particularly adept understanding of the times Willie Mays lived through and the ways in which his subject was magnified and challenged by the culture that impacted him.

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