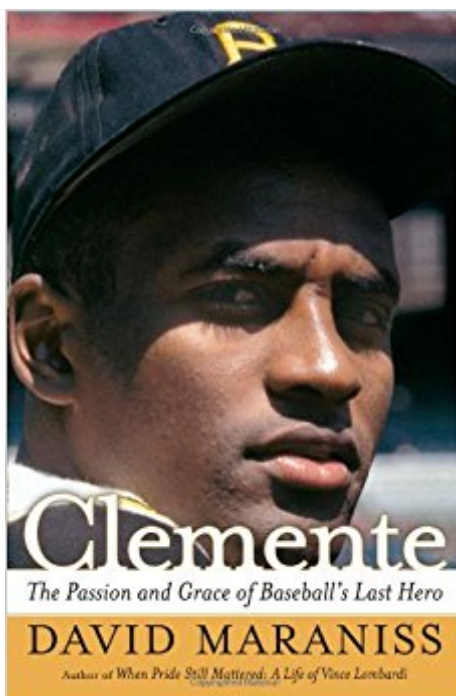


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Clemente: The Passion And Grace Of Baseball's Last Hero



Synopsis

From the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *When Pride Still Mattered* comes a book destined to become a modern classic--a full-scale biography of great baseball player and humanitarian Roberto Clemente, who lived, played, and died with enduring passion and grace. of photos.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. If ever a baseball player were deemed worthy of canonization, right fielder Roberto Clemente might be the one. Jackie Robinson may have suffered greater hardships during his career, but Clemente's nobility, charity and determination make him far more appropriate for a postage stamp than a Nike commercial. After 18 distinguished seasons, the Pirate star with the astonishing throwing arm died in a 1972 plane crash while en route to deliver relief supplies to Nicaraguan earthquake victims. Considering the potential for hagiography, Washington Post staffer and Clinton biographer Maraniss sticks to the facts in this respectful and dispassionate account. Clemente is a deceptively easy subject for a biographer: his acquired halo tinges past events and the accounts of his colleagues (although close friend Vic Power is frequently quoted to both admiring and frank effect). Clemente wasn't entirely virtuous--he had a temper and was sometimes given to pouting--but his altruism appears to have been a genuine product of his impoverished Puerto Rican upbringing. Maraniss deftly balances baseball and loftier concerns like racism; he presents a nuanced picture of a ballplayer more complicated than the encomiums would suggest, while still wholly deserving them. Photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a

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It's hard not to feel that Clemente, for all its virtues, is a bit of a letdown. With a Pulitzer Prize and notable biographies of Bill Clinton (First in His Class) and Vince Lombardi (When Pride Still Mattered) under his belt, David Maraniss sets high expectations. He mostly satisfies by revealing details about Clemente's tragic death and the compassionate instincts and dogged stubbornness that enabled it and by rightfully placing him alongside his generation's best players. But some critics note a reliance on research rather than reporting, which leaves Maraniss's famously inscrutable subject opaque until the closing pages. Still, not every hit is a homer, and critics applaud Maraniss for delivering the first notable biography of one of the most compelling players to take the diamond. Copyright © 2004 Phillips & Nelson Media, Inc.

David Maraniss' account of The Great Roberto's life on and off the diamond is captivating. His black, chiseled good looks won him approving glances from women, black and white in Latin and North America. His unquestioned talent in baseball won--grudgingly--the admiration of sportswriters near and far to Forbes Field. I was eleven when Clemente was called drafted from Brooklyn's farm club in Montreal in 1954. The Dodgers' buzzy Bavasi tried to hide him in Canada. To no avail. The '54 Pirates finished a dismal last place in the NL, and they had first dibs on The Great One and never hesitated. It took a couple years for him to reach greatness--1960, to be exact--when he had an MVP year only to finish 8th in the voting to an overrated Pirate SS named Dick Groat. Until that year his numbers were only so-so. His number of outfield putouts was noteworthy but, on the downside, so were his throwing errors. And for good reason: He had a rifle for an arm! In the late 50's and early 60's when a friend and I began to attend Pirates' games on a semi-regular regular basis, we'd make it a point to go early enuf to watch the Bucs take batting practice then fungo practice where a pirates' coach would use a very heavy bat to hit fly balls to the outfielders, one of whom was Clemente in right. I remember still the thrill and scintillation of Clemente rifling a throw to the plate or to third base, not on two hops; not one one hop' but a strike. More often than not, he'd duplicate it in a ballgame to the point that NL base runners no longer risked testing his arm. Then came the famous --or infamous--World Series of 1960. Clemente was the only Pirate to hit safely in all seven games and batted .314. People who follow MLB know the ninth inning shot off the bat of Bill Mazeroski that ended in a Pirates' victory, their first series crown since 1925. As Bob Prince, the Pirates' play-by-play announcer, would've said--if he'd still be in the TV booth "How sweet it is!" Just one more thing. David Maraniss committed one unforced error in his account. It was on page 115

when recounting Game Two of the '60 World Series. He stated the great Yogi Berra was starting in left field for the first time in his storied career. Not quite. Yogi started in left in Game One for the Yanks. How can I be sure? Because I was there! My high school chum and I had seats in the left field bleachers, and there 75 yards away wBerra playing a mid-deep left field for Pittsburgh's slugger, Dick Sturart. Almost in unison the Bleacher Bums sang out, "Move back, Yogi! Yogi, move back!" He didn't budge. And for good reason: The Yankees had the book on Stuart. 3 for 20 in The Series, all singles and no RBIs It broke my hear because, next to Clemente, Stuart was my favorite. It was truly a fairy tale finish to an extraordinary pennant run by the Buccos.

Passionate, compassionate, complex and proud, Roberto Clemente was a great baseball player. As David Maraniss explains in this very good biography, there is ample reason why Clemente is still an icon among Latin players, and while his tragic death on a relief mission is part of his idolization, he was so much more than just someone with raw, God-given skills to excel in all facets of the game. A man who seemed to dance to his own drummer, but not obnoxiously so, he was somehow much more thoughtful about life in general, concerned not just about his place in the game, but his place among men. The press, at least generally, did not treat him with respect, and quoted him often in the dialect of his accented English. As it did with other Latin players, there was a constant attempt to Americanize him. I recall having baseball cards in the late 1950's that labeled him "Bob Clemente". The Cubs' television broadcaster in those days always referred to him as "Bobby". Playing in Pittsburgh, a small market, he was underrated nationally as a player until he thrust himself centerstage and dominated the 1971 World Series. He resented not being placed in the upper strata of ballplayers of his era, had his pride sometimes mistaken for arrogance, played through injuries and illness, and made the game look easy, even when he was furiously hustling FOR a ball down in right field and rifling the sphere plateward to throw out a runner, gifted with the finest outfield arm I ever saw. My father's friend knew Clemente, and took me to the ballpark when the Pirates were in town, promising me an introduction. I was on crutches at the time, having had surgery to reduce my limp from cerebral palsy. I was too wide-eyed and shy to say much, but I remember the gentleness in his eyes and the encouraging smile. He cared about people, especially disadvantaged children, chose his friends, baseball types and otherwise without regard to race or status, and, as revealed in the book, wanted to practice the healing arts after he left the game. His death, caused by a mechanically flawed airplane that should never have taken off, leaves us wondering what great deeds he might have accomplished had he been given a normal life span. Lots of ballplayers these days have charitable hearts. Clemente did not just set standards on the field, but off it as well.

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