



Mickey and Willie: Mantle and Mays, the Parallel Lives of Baseball's Golden Age

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Acclaimed sportswriter Allen Barra exposes the uncanny parallels--and lifelong friendship--between two of the greatest baseball players ever to take the field.

Culturally, Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays were light-years apart. Yet they were nearly the same age and almost the same size, and they came to New York at the same time. They possessed virtually the same talents and played the same position. They were both products of generations of baseball-playing families, for whom the game was the only escape from a lifetime of brutal manual labor. Both were nearly crushed by the weight of the outsized expectations placed on them, first by their families and later by America. Both lived secret lives far different from those their fans knew. What their fans also didn't know was that the two men shared a close personal friendship--and that each was the only man who could truly understand the other's experience.

Mickey and Willie: Mantle and Mays, the Parallel Lives of Baseball's Golden Age Details

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From Reader Review Mickey and Willie: Mantle and Mays, the Parallel Lives of Baseball's Golden Age for online ebook

Jim Gallen says

“Mickey and Willie” is a dual biography of two contemporaries who defined baseball excellence during their careers. Their lives had remarkable similarities, friendships, rivalries and personal failures. One thing they had in common was a father who pushed them into baseball. Mickey was the son of a miner from Commerce, Oklahoma and actually rode a horse to school. Willie was the son of a steel worker in a black section of Birmingham, Alabama. Willie played for the Birmingham Black Barons in the Negro leagues while Mickey spent a short time in the minors before making the Big Leagues in New York: a Yankee and a Giant.

Both were power-hitting, fast centerfielders who were the class of their leagues for years. Mickey starred in the World Series and Willie in the All-Star Games. Author Allen Barra delves deeply into statistical comparison trying to determine who the better player was and how many more MVP awards each, particularly Willie, deserved. Mickey was plagued by injuries while Willie remained healthier but claimed to be plagued by his ballparks, the cavernous Polo Grounds and the windswept Candlestick Park. Mickey was the favorite of New York writers while Willie had a long wait for appreciation in San Francisco. Fading is a part of life that each endured, Mickey in Yankee pinstripes while Willie ended up back in New York with the Mets. Willie would always resent that Mickey’s collectibles were more valuable and sought after than his.

Their personal lives make for contrasts with Willie seeming to come out on top. Mickey is depicted as an alcoholic and a skirt chaser. Willie was a teetotaler and loyal to his wives although neither were successful as fathers. Barra treats Willie harshly for his absence from the Civil Rights Movement.

I had known that both were great players, but now have a better understanding of their baseball qualities and personal failings. I think that this book spends too much time trying to quantify their career accomplishments. I came out of this book with a greater appreciation of Willie and less of Mickey and a greater familiarity with the baseball world of their era. I had enjoyed Barra’s earlier book “Yogi Berra: Eternal Yankee” (see my Amazon review). “Mickey and Willie” is a worthy addition to baseball’s story.

zumiee says

What more can be said about Mantle and Mays? Well, it turns out: a lot. The author does an effective and interesting job of comparing Mickey and Willie in an entertaining and thought-provoking narrative. The writing is insightful throughout, and often poignant. The author has obviously spent years thinking about what baseball during the era of Mantle and Mays meant to our nation, and to the author personally. Mickey and Willie are presented in all their colorful mix of complexity and simplicity, highs and lows, successes and mistakes.

History is an ongoing conversation with the past, as we seek to understand why things happened the way they did, and how the future was influenced. This book is a terrific contribution to baseball's history. But it's also a deeply human story, and would even be interesting to people who are not baseball fans.

Michael says

Geez. Not enough primary sources; Barra basically read every other biography of Mantle and Mays and strung them together. Which saves me from having to read them, for which I should be thankful, but I wish he had added more of his own memories.

Donna Davis says

Three stars for general interest; four stars for a niche audience. If you enjoy baseball and also like biographies, this may be a winner for you.

As for me, I found myself wishing I had read separate biographies of each of these players before tackling one that compares the two. The first third of the book was very slow going for me, because the narrative flips from one to the other frequently, and during their growing up years I found myself becoming confused...now wait a second, which one has the horse? There was so much minutiae and I had a hard time keeping track.

That said, the story has a certain elegance. I like the fact that it breaks apart stereotypes: Willie Mays grew up in the Jim Crow south, but his family was part of the Black middle class, urban folks with a degree of sophistication. Pictures of him as a youngster show a well developed, well nourished child wearing a nice suit. Mantle, on the other hand, grew up in a very poor mining community in Oklahoma. Had baseball not permitted him to escape Commerce, Oklahoma, he would likely have had to go into the mines as well.

Mantle was diagnosed early in life with osteomyelitis, and nearly had to have his leg amputated. Though he was able to save the leg and go on to run like lightning on the field, he was booed by New York fans who were convinced he had dodged the draft. His agent and manager both spread the word that he had been declared unfit to serve because of his condition, but the fans saw the man run and, in the parlance of the time, believed his sick-leg story to be a lot of hooey.

Mays tried to avoid the draft by pointing out correctly that he had eleven dependents, but they made him serve anyway. However, he was never placed in harm's way, and spent his tenure in the armed forces playing ball for a military team. When he returned to the professional field, he was already in shape, just as if he'd been off playing winter ball for a year or so.

This middle portion of the book is very interesting and has a photograph section that can actually be seen on an e-reader, a definite bonus. I enjoyed reading about their professional lives, and since they start far away from one another and grow gradually closer until they are together, the transitions are buttery smooth.

The end portion of the book is a let-down, although since it discusses their careers and bodies in decline, it is probably inevitable; I felt it could have done with some pruning, but those who hang onto every individual statistic will enjoy the charts and comparisons.

To me, however, trying to decide which athlete is "better" is specious. Who cares? They are both legends. They both deserve to be remembered well. There is no contest, as far as I am concerned.

Seeing how they struggled financially once they could no longer play was really a sad thing, and a good reminder of why star athletes earn every penny they make. By their late 30's they will be deemed old men,

and most of their lives will still be in front of them. Not everyone can become a coach, a manager, or an announcer. There aren't enough of those positions, and many athletes aren't gifted as writers, speakers, or teachers. They know what to do, but it's muscle memory, and when it's gone, it's gone.

Barra's research is mostly comprised of secondary sources; he has a few brief interviews, but his perpetual insistence on badgering Mays over his abstinence from the Civil Rights struggle got him cut off time after time. Mays was a reticent person, and it struck me once again that Black athletes have put up with such double standards; nobody climbs all over a Caucasian player who simply isn't political and prefers to keep his thoughts to himself. Yet Mays hears about it all the time, and his biographer here is as bad as any of them.

I appreciated his references to what he says are the best biographies of each man individually; those are now on my to-read list.

Meanwhile, I recommend this book to die-hard baseball enthusiasts who already know a little something about Mays and Mantle individually.

Spence says

Since my dad was a big Mickey Mantle fan as a kid he was someone I always liked as well. This was a great book that told me a lot about both of these guys I never knew about. It was say Mays wasn't awarded more MVPs. Great book overall.

Don says

Really enjoyed reading this book. Barra does a good job of writing in an integrated fashion, jumping back and forth between the lives of Mantle and Mays highlights his subtitle of parallel their lives were. The book isn't in depth as it could be, but what was fascinating to me what seeing Barra alternate his perspective, from the moments when he was writing purely as a biographer, to the times as a journalist and asking tough questions and making honest conclusions, to the times when he was just remarking and remembering as a fan. I didn't grow up watching Mantle and Mays, but I grew up loving baseball and baseball statistics, in which Mantle and Mays always loomed large. The book is imperfect as a dual biography, but for any fan of baseball, particularly baseball's history, the book should be an enjoyable read.

Gerry says

This book opens with the first sentence in the introduction: "I didn't cry when my father died, but I held back tears on August 13, 1995, when I heard that Mickey Mantle was gone." This was not an inspiring sentence for me and was rather a crude awakening – sports stars are people that most people do not know personally (like Rock Stars, Movie Stars, Famous Poets, Authors etc.) I felt this opening was rather cold and barren. From the git-go after reading this opening sentence I believed this book would be a tough read for me. An odd item however to consider based on the opening sentence in the Introduction is the dedication of the book

– “Dedicated To My Father – Alfred Barra – Who Loved Mickey but worshipped Willie.”

I am torn on this book – the first 300 pages was for me too much going back on forth on the comparison of the ballplayers lives growing up. As I continued to struggle through these pages I believed more and more that this book could have been at least 125 pages less than what it was a book dedicated to each with maybe a chapter for a reflection on those similarities on the other. Mickey and Willie were good friends on and off the field of play – this is apparent. This friendship lasted from their early adulthood lives and careers to the death of Mickey in 1995; Willie still speaks kindly today of his old friend as best I could tell by the way the author wrote the story.

Part of the difficulty in this book were the many upon many upon many more footnotes in pages all through the book. The last page of the book has what looked to me to be the largest footnote of all – I simply skipped all the footnotes after I reached page 50, I expect books on sports to tell a story absent footnotes reserved for books of History or Academia. Considering this is a sports book and nothing more; the historical context of the same remains in “sports” and to me this is not History – both gentlemen were sports stars. Yes, it was also their “job” but at the end of the day their job was a game.

I was not impressed with the Author’s reference to the many ball players such as Willie that were drafted in the early 1950’s and then coddled by the U.S. Army to play ball – many other boys did not have this luxury during the Korean War. One ball player referenced at least 10 times in this book is Ted Williams – a “ball player” that served in two wars and lost 5 years of MLB statistics to boot. A U.S. Marine Pilot who first flew Pursuit Planes during the Second World War he moved up to Jets during the Korean conflict. All the time the Author writes of the coddled players – and for all the times he references Ted Williams – he never combines the contrast for a moment. Another point I simply disliked.

By far the last 100 pages (maybe 90) of the book were the best for me. The Author had a professional relationship to some degree with both Mantle and Mays and other sports stars – this still in my opinion does not attribute a reason to the opening line in the introductory section. The NBA and NFL get honorary mentions in this book and he doesn’t give any honorary mention to the NHL. Even for the time frame where the NFL was just gaining gas in the early 1960’s the NHL had quite a storied history of sport in its own right long before the NBA and NFL came into existence – Howie Morenz was to the NHL what Babe Ruth was to MLB.

Simply too difficult a read – the final 100 pages cannot in my mind make up for the 480 of detail that leaves the reader confused. I simply give this book 2 stars (rounding down from 2.5) as the main interest for the majority of people in my opinion will be in the last 90-100 pages. This book was simply too long.

Keith McArthur says

Great detail and trivia I hadn’t known about the two superstars of my childhood Willie Mays and Mickey Mantle. I saw Willie Mays play in the Polo Grounds - my favorite player, and Mickey Mantle play at Yankee Stadium.

Paul says

This is not simply a biography of two players who have each had numerous biographies already written about them. Rather, it shows how their careers and lives were so similar and so connected early on, and how they were not only the greatest players of their generation (which is supported by statistics quoted throughout the book), but possibly the two best to ever play baseball.

There is new information in this book, including personal stories from the author, but it also draws from (and compares discrepancies between) previous sources, but it always maintains respect for the two subjects – men the author continues to hold in the highest respect, even with their flaws: Mays didn't help enough with the battle for free agency or the civil rights movement and was unkind to Henry Aaron; Mantle drank too much and could be surly with autograph seekers; neither had much success as a husband or father; etc...

While this is primarily a book for baseball fans, it's also an account of the biggest stars in sports (baseball being overwhelmingly dominant, particularly in the 1950s) and their lives of triumph and turbulence, on and off the field, and in the end makes readers contemplate "hero worship" and unrealistic expectations for those we admire.

Rob1109 says

Before I review "Mickey and Willie" I feel it's necessary to give some feedback so you know where I'm coming from. Firstly, I've always believed--in my opinion--Willie Mays is the greatest all-around player in history. (My opinion--not looking to start a debate.) Secondly: I am a Mets fan and therefore it's my duty to hate the Yankees! LOL That being said, however, there are certain Yankees that ya just gotta love: Jeter, Mariano, Reggie, Yogi. And Yes, of course, THE MICK!

I looked fwd to reading this book. While I know a good deal about both Mickey and Willie, I hoped to learn even more. However, while there were some enjoyable tidbits, I could have learned the same information with some online research. This book started out enjoyable but quickly turned into the author's one man crusade to lambast Willie Mays.

Early on, I was sure this book would be 5 stars. The more I read, it dropped. 4 stars. 3 stars. 2. Toward the end, this book was outright pi**ing me off. So angered I skimmed the last 8-10 pages.

There were some interesting tidbits. I enjoyed learning little things I had never known (how Willie got his name, the fact that Mickey first wore #6.)

However, this book quickly turned into nothing but a slam on Willie Mays.

It is fairly obvious that the author is a Yankee fan. If things didn't end well for the Yankees (the 1961 World Series, for example), the author quickly makes excuses.

Yes, we hold athletes up as heroes, idols, especially in the day when Mickey and Willie played. They were flawless faultless GODS. Of course, that's not true. No one is perfect, ballplayers included. And this naturally holds true to Mays and Mantle. However, the author clearly holds these men to a double standard. Mickey's numerous issues--excessive drinking, alcoholism, womanizing, skirt chasing, being bad with money, infidelity--is all summed up nice and neat by alluding to the fact that Mickey was simply a `country

boy' from Oklahoma, thrown into the media spotlight of NY, forced to live up to the hype of being the next Joe DiMaggio. Sure, Mickey messed up--but it wasn't his fault. He was a naïve country boy living in the big city.

However, Willie Mays is criticized, scrutinized, condemned and crucified for every little thing he did. The double standard was appalling and disgusting. Mickey's actions are explained away and excused: Willie gets ripped a new one for his.

In one scene, the author is telling about Willie's acceptance speech into the HOF. The author goes so far as to quote excerpts from the speech and then put in parenthesis why what Willie was saying was wrong.

Per the author, Willie had an easy go out of it. Mickey battled for everything he got. Willie was "coddled" by the Giants, Mickey was "taken advantage of" by the Yankees. Mickey was pushed by Yankee managers (Casey, Yogi, Ralph Houk) to always do better. Giants managers all had to "kiss Willie's a**." Mickey left baseball not overly wealthy cause he gave away his money to friends--he was an easy target and people took advantage of him. Willie left the game without much money---well, simply cause he spent too much. Mickey constantly played hurt. Willie sat out with "mysterious illnesses."

At one point, Mr. Barra even ridicules Willie Mays for who he dedicated his autobiography to: Why didn't he dedicate to his father? Why didn't he dedicate to his coach? And so on...

I consider myself a very well informed Baseball fan. Yet, I've never heard or read ANYWHERE some of the things in this book elsewhere. Willie Mays was rude to reporters, cold, moody, mean to fans, refused to sign autographs. Willie was booed and hated in San Francisco.

Willie comes off not as the man who played Baseball with a childlike enthusiasm but rather as "a bitter old man even when he was 30." Mays resents everyone and everything around him--from teammates to the city of San Francisco to reporters to managers to family. Supposedly, he even hated Hank Aaron when it became clear Aaron would break Ruth's record and not Willie. Per the author, Mays once called Aaron, "a dumb ni**er." Willie also comes off resentful of Mickey's baseball cards and memorabilia selling for more than his own.

Willie Mays is represented as a combination of the WORST of every hated ballplayer to ever play: He's Pete Rose-Ty Cobb-Barry Bonds-Roger Clemens-Raffy Palmeiro all rolled into one.

As Willie gets older and his stats obviously decline, the author seems to rejoice in Willie's deteriorating numbers. (I could almost picture the author cackling with an evil snicker.) Yet, on the flipside, when the author talks about Mickey's declining numbers as his career wound down, Mr. Barra does not hesitate to justify it by citing Mickey's age and history of injuries. It's as if: Mickey's number declined cause the poor ol' country boy drank too much and didn't take care of himself. Aww, shucks. Willie's numbers declined: GOOD!

Another aspect of this book that I found annoying was the author lambasting Willie over and over and over and over for not speaking out more during the Civil Rights struggle in the 1960's. Yes, retired Jackie Robinson did. As well as other athletes--Bill Russell, Muhammad Ali and Curt Flood. However, 99.9% of black Ballplayers during the 60's also did not speak out against racism: Did Hank Aaron? Reggie Jackson? Frank Robinson? Bob Gibson? Willie Davis? Vide Blue? Maury Wills? Lou Brock? Willie McCovey? And so on? No, they didn't. Yet the author constantly ridicules, scorns and disparages Mays for doing the same thing practically every other player did.

There are also numerous factual errors as well as bad journalism: 1) The author claims that the Brooklyn

Dodgers won the 1st 2 games of the 1955 World Series. Incorrect--the Yankees did 2) The author goes on a rant about Maury Wills winning the MVP (1962?) 3) The author mentions a game Willie Mays played in against the Houston Colts. They were NOT the Houston Colts but rather the Colt 45's (later renamed the Astros). 4) The author turns this into an op-ed piece and not a novel. He consistently questions MVP selection, saying it's appalling Mays and Mantle did not win more. Well, any true Baseball fan realizes what an MVP award truly is. Right or wrong, the award does NOT go to the best player but the most VALUABLE player. 5) The author makes no mention of Duke Snider. Yes, this novel is about Mantle and Mays but how in the world can you discuss 1950's Baseball in New York and fail to mention The Duke along with Willie and Mickey. 6) The author, throughout the book, will make reference to things Willie did (he didn't show up to a certain function, he was never close to his adopted son, etc..) The author writes, 'Why Willie did that was never explained.' Well, Mr. Barra, if you're writing a book about Willie Mays shouldn't it be your job as the author to find out the reason why? 7) Toward the end the author insinuates that Commerce< OK (Mickey's birthplace) and Fairfield, AL (Willie's birthplace) are almost gone from the map, ghost towns. The author mentions that in 2010, the population of Commerce was barely over 2000. Well, quick research will show that 90 years ago, in 1920, the population was only 2600! So, really, the town has not nearly dried up. The population has only dwindled by roughly 400 people in almost a century

One more point: I wanted to read about Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays. Yet, for some reason, Mr. Barra continually threw in things about himself, shameless little plugs on other books he's written. When Mickey Mantle died, I want to know about it: where, why, who was at his bedside, did he suffer, last words, local reaction, etc... Instead, we get told about Mickey's passing from the author's personal point of view" I was on my way to interview Herschel Walker when Mickey Mantle died. WHO GIVES A S*** where YOU were.

I was sure this would be a 5 star rating at the outset. Then it dropped to 4. Then 3. I was sure I'd give it at least 2. However, this book will get just 1 star. And for me, that is rare. Only 1 other review I've done has gotten 1 star. I only give 1 star to books I can't finish, unreadable. If I finish a novel--even if it's bad---I still give it 1 star. But not this time.

Jenny says

I'm not a real baseball fan, I'm a fair weather fan. It's my third American sport after football and basketball. My family and friends are major SF Giants fans, and my husband is a Dodger fan.

This was a great book and I had so many baseball conversations that started with "did you know..." I was enthralled and couldn't put it down. There are too many stats for me, but all the player references kept prompting me to ask my husband "is so-and-so still alive?" I can't believe such stories are still our country's recent history. I can't believe that my mom and dad actually watched them play. I truly have a deeper appreciation for the history of the game.

He says on the first page, that these two are the most written about players. This book is comprehensive. It references and quotes many other books. It has also inspired me to read more about these men and the history of the game.

Kevin McAllister says

There have been many bios written about Willie Mays and Mickey Mantle but Allen Barra, the author of this one had a great idea ; since the two were so often compared why not write a bio about the both of them, comparing their upbringings, their playing careers, and their retirement years ? These were two of baseballs most iconic payers, heroes to millions of boys growing up during the 50ies and 60ies and it becomes very clear early in this book that Barra was one of those boys. So it came as no surprise reading about the amazing accomplishments they both performed on the field and while it's also clear that while on some level , Barra still views both Mickey and Willie as heroes, both these men had a serious dark side and Barra pulls no punches in discussing and exploring these flaws. It's a well researched book and I admire the work Barra put into but I have to admit to finding it a quite depressing read. That being said, I'd still recommend it to any fan of baseball. It is definitely a tale worth reading

Harley says

This book is the author's love letter to two of his favorite baseball players: Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays. Allen Barra grew up in New York while Mickey and Willie were playing there. As a sports writer he had the opportunity to interview both players over the years. The careers of both Willie and Mickey began almost at the same time. Barra traces their lives and their careers. He examines the legends and stories that grew up around each man and either confirms the truth of the legend or debunks it. He does not whitewash the flaws and weaknesses of each man including Mickey's drinking and womanizing. Barra has obviously done a lot of reading and research to produce this book. He examines statistics and games in comparing the two men.

Mickey Mantle, who played for the New York Yankees, was booed much of his career by the New York fans as a draft dodger. During the Korean War, Mickey was given 4F status because of a disease he had. The fans did not understand and called him a draft dodger. They also booed him because he was not Joe Dimaggio. Willie Mays, playing for the New York Giants, was loved by the fans of New York. When the Giants moved to San Francisco, Mays for the first time in his career was booed by the San Francisco fans in part because he was not Joe Dimaggio.

Mantle grew up poor in Oklahoma. Mays grew up in segregated Birmingham, Alabama. For both men, baseball was the way out of poverty. Their fathers were major factors in their development as players, pushing them to be the best they could be.

Growing up in central Illinois in the 50's and 60's as a St. Louis Cardinal fan, I knew of both Mays and Mantle. I found this book fascinating and rich in detail. It may have too many statistics for some people. I would recommend the book to any fans of Mays, Mantle or baseball.

Luis Perez says

It's obvious this was a labor of love for the author. His childhood love of Mantle and Mays (as it surely was for millions of youngsters in the '50s and '60s) practically mandated that he (or someone like him) would eventually write this book. Barra does an extensive amount of research to piece his material together and carefully build his case.

This is a great look at the lives and careers of Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays, but all that ground has been covered before. The real hook to this book is the burning question: Who was better? You may or may not agree with the author's conclusion, but his argument is well-thought out and will make for interesting conversation among baseball enthusiasts.

John Uzzi says

Just like watching Willie play.
