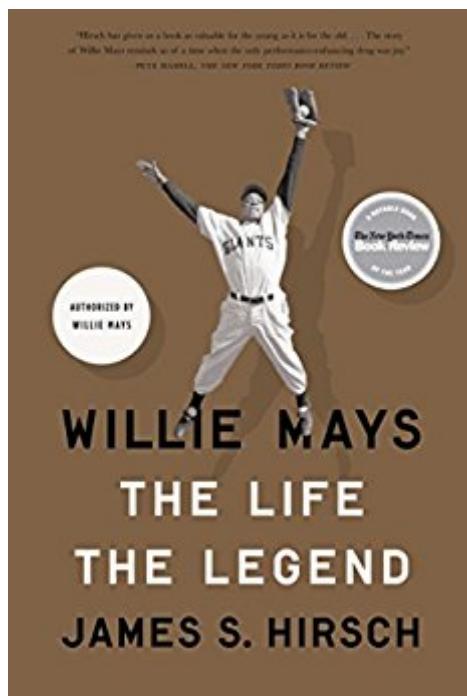


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Willie Mays: The Life, The Legend



Synopsis

The *enormously entertaining and wide-ranging* • (Seattle Times) authorized, definitive, New York Times bestselling biography of Willie Mays, the most complete baseball player of all time. Willie Mays is arguably the greatest player in baseball history, still revered for the passion he brought to the game. He began as a teenager in the Negro Leagues, became a cult hero in New York, and was the headliner in Major League Baseball's bold expansion to California. He was a blend of power, speed, and stylistic bravado that enraptured fans for more than two decades. Now James Hirsch reveals the man behind the player. Mays was a transcendent figure who received standing ovations in enemy stadiums and who, during the turbulent civil rights era, urged understanding and reconciliation. More than his records, his legacy is defined by the pure joy that he brought to fans and the loving memories that have been passed to future generations so they might know the magic and beauty of the game. With meticulous research and drawing on interviews with Mays himself as well as with close friends, family, and teammates, Hirsch presents a brilliant portrait of one of America's most significant cultural icons.

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Customer Reviews

One of my all-time favorite baseball players but I had never read a biography about him until now. Considering that I grew up in Brooklyn during the "golden era of NYC baseball" this volume was especially interesting even though I've always been a Yankees fan and idolized Mickey Mantle. Like all of us, Willie the human being was far from perfect even though I still feel that he is the best all-around baseball player who I've ever seen. Every year one hears that some rookie is the "next Willie Mays". So far, I haven't seen anyone better as a "five tool" player. Even if you never saw Willie play, if you're a baseball fan this is a must-read.

Take it from a baseball fan of over 50 years and a baseball historian of some note: This is a great book and one of the best baseball biographies I've ever read. The author has done an outstanding job of capturing the essence of the man, Willie Mays, and the magnificent yet tragically flawed era, the 1950's and 60's, in which he played. Don't pay any attention to the any of the low rated reviews (I'm wondering if they actually read the same book I did!) If you love baseball and baseball history, you're going to love this one. Some reviewers say the author spends too much time on the Civil Rights era and not enough time on Mays himself. Huh?? Here's a quote from one: "...what the reader gets is a history of Civil Rights, Jim Crow Laws, and a period in American that most people would soon forget. Less than 25% of book is devoted to the story behind Willie Mays, his fellow ball players, and the game itself." To me, this is a totally unjustified criticism. How could one possibly write a definitive biography about an African-American superstar, arguably the greatest player of all time, who broke into the Major Leagues in 1951 just a few years after Jackie Robinson, and ignore this important topic, or fail to develop it fully. What credible author would produce a biography like that? Can you imagine the criticism? A major part of Willie Mays' career and personality was formed by the racial context of the America in which he lived and played, and how he reacted to that context. It's an important part of his story. My favorite part of the book is the description of the relationship between Mays and manager Leo Durocher, developed beautifully by the author. We learn that the affection was mutual and was most definitely real. Durocher, a Hall of Fame manager, and his wife, the lovely actress Lorraine Day, loved Mays like a son. This in itself was quite progressive in the racially-charged 1950's. I'm quite certain that Durocher's greatest contribution to baseball was taking a young, naive Willie Mays under his wing when he was the most vulnerable - at the very beginning of his career, when his success at the Major League level was very much in doubt. He knew when to massage Willie's fragile ego and how to build his confidence, inserting himself into Mays' life as surrogate father, and allowing him to develop into one of the game's

all-time greats. Read this wonderful exchange between Mays and Durocher when Leo found Mays crying, after starting out his career 1 for 24: "Mr. Leo," Mays said, "I can't help you. I can't even get a hit. I know I can't play up here, and you're gonna send me back to Minneapolis. That's where I belong. I don't belong up here. I can't play up here..." Leo responded: "What do you mean you can't hit? You're going to be a great ballplayer! Look son. I brought you up here to do one thing. That's to play center field. You're the best center fielder I've ever looked at. Willie, see what's printed across my jersey? (Mays nodded). It says Giants. As long as I'm the manager of the Giants, you're my center fielder. Today, tomorrow, next week, next month. You're here to stay." It's hard to imagine what may have happened to Willie Mays had Durocher not been there to guide him as he made the difficult transition to the Majors. Durocher would never hesitate to proclaim that Mays was the greatest player he ever saw (and he saw a lot - his career went all the way back to the Yankees of Babe Ruth in 1925). This led to one of my all-time favorite baseball quotes. Extolling Mays' virtues, Leo once blurted out (paraphrasing): "He can run, he can hit, he can hit with power, he can throw, he can catch... if he could cook, I'd marry him!" To say that this book doesn't cover Willie's negatives as well as his positives (as some reviewers have said) is again just not accurate. Actually just the opposite is much closer to the truth. I felt that I came to know Willie Mays the man - warts and all. Like all of us, Willie Mays had his flaws and was far from perfect. I'm much more aware of that now after reading this book. To me, that's the making of an excellent biography. I don't want a sanitized version... I want the truth. Other reviewers imply that the book is too long. That criticism may have some justification. But I found myself enjoying the book more and more as I went along. I don't feel any topic was overplayed, and I can't imagine editing out any sections. Overall, this is an excellent biography. I'm glad that I read all 556 pages, and I would heartily recommend it to all.

Utilizing over one hundred interviews, several thousand articles in magazines and newspapers, documentaries about Mays, and the cooperation of Mays himself, James Hirsch has produced the first major biography of the great Giant centerfielder. It is well-written, engaging, and entertaining. Beginning with his early years in Birmingham, Alabama, moving to Mays' time in the black major leagues, focusing on his major league career in New York and San Francisco, and ending with his life after baseball, the author presents a portrait of a complex individual who needed praise and encouragement, not criticism, to perform at his best. Leo Durocher, his first manager, understood this, but not all of his successors did. Hirsch thoroughly covers Mays' career. There is the catch in the 1954 World Series, the daring base running (e.g., scoring from second twice on groundouts to first base and scoring from first on a bunt), the throws from the

outfield that cut down runners at third base and home plate, the four homers in one game, the 1962 pennant race, his role as peacemaker in the Juan Marichal-John Roseboro incident, and his return to New York in a Mets uniform. We see Mays being mentored by Monte Irvin early in Willie Mays' career, only later to serve the same role to Jim Ray Hart and Bobby Bonds. Hirsch brings out Mays' not wanting to face Ralph Branca as Willie waited in the on-deck circle with Bobby Thomson at the plate in the crucial third playoff game with the Dodgers in 1951. Mays would soon overcome this fear and relish the role of being at the plate when the game and/or the season were on the line. Hirsch does not overlook the troubled times in the life of Mays. He discusses Jackie Robinson's criticism of Mays for not using his high profile position to publicly speak out for civil rights. Whenever Mays experienced discrimination, he did not publicize the incident, not wanting to draw attention to himself. He let his play on the field win white fans over to his side. The author also deals with the years of struggle it took Mays to win over the fans in San Francisco. Nevertheless, some in the press continued to attack him as an overpaid, underproductive ball player, especially during crunch time. Mays had a rocky road with the reporters, not trusting them and refusing to reveal his inner self to them. He also suffered from a disastrous first marriage, faced bankruptcy in the early 1960s despite being the highest paid player in the game, and was ostracized from baseball from 1979 to 1984 when he became a greeter at an Atlantic City casino. Hirsch also does not neglect Mays' relationship with his godson, Barry Bonds, and the issue of steroids. After his career ended, Mays even faced the innuendo that he had used amphetamines during his playing days. Mays the human being is shown by his love for children and teenagers. He would constantly visit hospitals to see the sick, giving boys and girls autographed baseballs or pictures as well as words of encouragement. He would speak to youth groups, telling them not to smoke or drink (neither of which he did) and providing community groups with sports equipment. He even reached out to troubled youth, including a teenage O. J. Simpson, who was running with a gang, but he refused to testify as a character witness at Simpson's murder trial. He would help friends without asking for anything in return. The author concludes that "Ruth was baseball's most dominant player; Mays was its greatest master." (553) Not only could Mays run, field, throw, hit, and hit for power, he was one of the most intelligent men to play baseball. Before there were pitching and hitting charts, Mays studied pitchers to see what they would throw in certain situations and hitters in order to correctly position himself in the outfield. Some of his greatest catches were made because of where he positioned himself in the outfield prior to the pitch. His endurance is seen in an unequalled streak of 13 seasons of playing in 150 or more games. Among his records are for at-bats, hits, total bases, and runs scored in the All-Star game.

Unfortunately, like many other superstars, he stayed in the game too long, and the last memory of this great defensive outfielder was his misjudging a fly ball and pleading on his knees of an umpire's call at home plate in the second game of the 1973 World Series. This is a must read for those interested in baseball biography and baseball in the 1950s and 1960s.

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