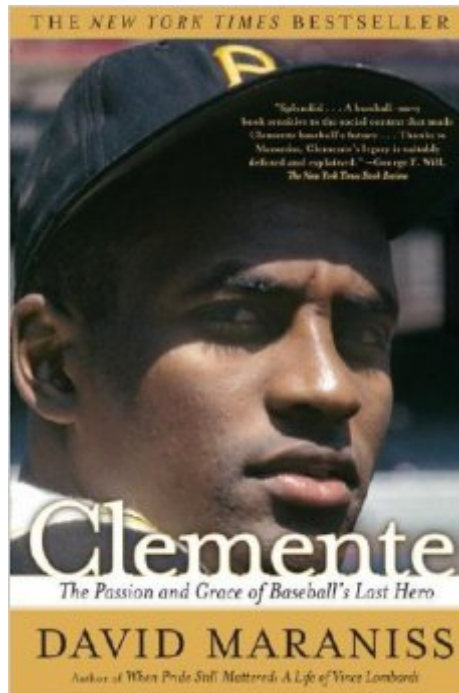


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Clemente: The Passion And Grace Of Baseball's Last Hero



Synopsis

On New Year's Eve 1972, following eighteen magnificent seasons in the major leagues, Roberto Clemente died a hero's death, killed in a plane crash as he attempted to deliver food and medical supplies to Nicaragua after a devastating earthquake. David Maraniss now brings the great baseball player brilliantly back to life in *Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero*, a book destined to become a modern classic. Much like his acclaimed biography of Vince Lombardi, *When Pride Still Mattered*, Maraniss uses his narrative sweep and meticulous detail to capture the myth and a real man. Anyone who saw Clemente, as he played with a beautiful fury, will never forget him. He was a work of art in a game too often defined by statistics. During his career with the Pittsburgh Pirates, he won four batting titles and led his team to championships in 1960 and 1971, getting a hit in all fourteen World Series games in which he played. His career ended with three-thousand hits, the magical three-thousandth coming in his final at-bat, and he and the immortal Lou Gehrig are the only players to have the five-year waiting period waived so they could be enshrined in the Hall of Fame immediately after their deaths. There is delightful baseball here, including thrilling accounts of the two World Series victories of Clemente's underdog Pittsburgh Pirates, but this is far more than just another baseball book. Roberto Clemente was that rare athlete who rose above sports to become a symbol of larger themes. Born near the canebrakes of rural Carolina, Puerto Rico, on August 18, 1934, at a time when there were no blacks or Puerto Ricans playing organized ball in the United States, Clemente went on to become the greatest Latino player in the major leagues. He was, in a sense, the Jackie Robinson of the Spanish-speaking world, a ballplayer of determination, grace, and dignity who paved the way and set the highest standard for waves of Latino players who followed in later generations and who now dominate the game. The Clemente that Maraniss evokes was an idiosyncratic character who, unlike so many modern athletes, insisted that his responsibilities extended beyond the playing field. In his final years, his motto was that if you have a chance to help others and fail to do so, you are wasting your time on this earth. Here, in the final chapters, after capturing Clemente's life and times, Maraniss retraces his final days, from the earthquake to the accident, using newly uncovered documents to reveal the corruption and negligence that led the unwitting hero on a mission of mercy toward his untimely death as an uninspected, overloaded plane plunged into the sea.

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Customer Reviews

Roberto Clemente was a legendary ballplayer - a .317 career batting average, 3000 hits, four N.L. batting titles, twelve gold gloves, 1966 National League MVP, 1971 World Series MVP, and the first Latino elected to the Hall of Fame. Impressive as these statistics and facts may be, they cannot capture Roberto's greatness. To try to capture Clemente this way, David Maraniss writes, "is like chemists trying to explain Van Gogh by analyzing the ingredients of his paint. Clemente was art, not science...it was hard to take one's eyes off him". Maraniss' new biography of Clemente, (the first since shortly after he died) captures the many facets of this complex man who truly did live his life both on and off the diamond with passion and grace. Where the earlier Clemente biographies, written shortly after his death, were little more than tributes and eulogies for the fallen hero, Maraniss writes of the man in all his complexity, and though he deservedly calls him a hero, he does not treat him as a saint. Notoriously thin skinned and prickly, Clemente had a career-long feud with the press. Though it was aggravated by the racism of the time, (Clemente was infuriated when the press would quote his interviews using phonetic spelling to capture his accent) and the language barrier, his sensitive personality, often perceiving slights where they were not intended, was equally to blame. He was obsessed with his health and ailments, complaining constantly about his pain, and some accused him of being a goldbricker and a hypochondriac, yet he seemed to play at his best when in his greatest pain, and ended his career breaking the record for most games played in a Pirates uniform.

As a young boy growing up near Chicago, I attended countless baseball games at both Comiskey Park and Wrigley Field. Visits to those stadiums were a routine and regular occurrence. But each year a special treat would take place for my brother and me. My father would travel with us 90 miles

north of Chicago to Milwaukee County Stadium to watch the Milwaukee Braves. I remember a game played one evening in the early 1960s when the Braves battled the Pittsburgh Pirates. Henry Aaron was the Braves right fielder and that evening he homered and played his normal exemplary game. But the star was number 21, Roberto Clemente, the Pirates right fielder who was then establishing himself as one of baseball's young stars. Clemente had two hits and showed extraordinary speed as he ran the bases. In the field he was flawless, and uncorked an incredible throw from right field as he cut down a Braves baserunner attempting to go from first to third on a hit. Even my father, not much of a baseball fan, was impressed, remarking to me, "Who is that 21, he is quite a player!" While the years have diminished some of the details of that game played more than 40 years ago, I have never forgotten the night when perhaps the two greatest right fielders of their generation performed on a weeknight evening in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. David Maraniss selects unique subjects for his biographical talents. For reasons known only to him, he has limited his subjects to the fields of politics and sports. While these two topics may seem diverse and unrelated, in many ways they are part of a common thread. Politics and sports are a unique juxtaposition of two significant aspects of our culture, where success and failure are often public and fleeting.

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