

First Opinion: Artful Baseball in a Book Worthy of Willie

Winter, Jonah. *You Never Heard of Willie Mays?! Illus. Terry Widener.*
New York: Schwartz and Wade, 2013.

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Willie Mays hit 660 home runs during his Major League career, and Jonah Winter (author) and Terry Widener (illustrator) metaphorically add another in his name with *You Never Heard of Willie Mays?!* The book is an engaging and attractive illustrated biography covering the slugger's boyhood and early years in professional baseball when he established himself as the superstar that many baseball historians consider to be the best all-around player ever. Neither Winter nor Widener is a rookie in the field of children's books. Winter has written several biographies, many garnering awards, while Widener has earned his share of accolades as both a writer and an illustrator. The two previously have collaborated on *Steel Town*, as well as individual books that have featured the lives of baseball stars.

Winter's narrative begins with Willie Mays as a boy in Birmingham, Alabama, dreaming of baseball stardom. He idolizes Joe DiMaggio, copying the Yankee Clipper's batting stance while excelling in centerfield in sandlot games and on a semi-pro-team with his father. Breaking into the professional Negro Leagues as a teenaged phenomenon, Mays develops the ebullient style of play that fans enjoyed throughout his long career and that led to a contract with the New York Giants shortly after Jackie Robinson had broken white baseball's color line, "craziest rule there ever was" (Winter unpagged). Winter's narrative evokes and builds upon the mythic qualities defining the young Mays as ballplayer and public hero—his use of the basket catch,

his daring on the base paths, his playing stickball with kids on the streets of Harlem, and his nickname as “The Say-Hey Kid” (unpaged). Mays’ mythic qualities coalesce with the facts as the narrative highlights key events of his early career: his home run against Warren Spahn in his first Major League at-bat; his Rookie of the Year Award in 1951; his famous throw against the rival Dodgers, gunning down Billy Cox at home plate in a key pennant race, his loss of two years of baseball to military service; and his triumphant return in leading the Giants to a World Series win in 1954, when in the opening game he made perhaps the greatest catch ever, seemingly running forever to haul in a long drive by Cleveland slugger Vic Wertz to save the Giants’ victory in the opening game.

While the events themselves create an exciting story, they are further animated by the voice of the narrator, who speaks in the persona of an old-time baseball fan who idolized Mays when he was young. Throughout, the tone recalls the exuberance of a ten-year-old rooting for his home team: “we needed a miracle and this kid was supposed to be just that: the next Babe Ruth, the next Ty Cobb, and yup, even the next Joe Di Maggio” (unpaged). This youthful voice also enables Winter to reference social issues without casting too heavy a shadow on a children’s book. Naturally emerging are Jim Crow laws in the South, the plight of African Americans in industrial Birmingham, the segregation of professional baseball, and the influence of early television in assuring white America that non-white players not only belonged, but could excel. Supplementing the main text, occasional sidebars offer statistics or place Mays’s feats in the context of baseball history. Likewise, two pages of back matter summarize statistical highlights of his career, define baseball terms, and list website addresses for future exploration.

Equally important in establishing Mays as myth are Widener’s exceptional illustrations. Recreated from acrylic paintings, they have a folksy style at once realistic and cartoonish in producing power and movement reminiscent of the figures in Thomas Hart Benton’s work. Key illustrations expand into two-page spreads, using shadow and light to underscore emerging themes. For example, a bus carrying the teenaged Mays and his Negro League teammates seems to forge on through the southern night, appearing engulfed by dry grass and a barbed-wire fence in the foreground while a dark, cloudy sky looms above. Years later, as Mays streaks toward the wall, arms outstretched to make his game-saving World-Series catch, the pages open on a sunlit panorama of the old Polo Grounds. Finally, the front cover is a lenticulated portrait, which produces a holographic representation of Mays hitting when the book is gently moved. No space is wasted as the inside covers, front and back, contain four portraits, suggesting old baseball cards of Mays in various baseball poses.

Historical purists might quibble that the book treats only a fraction of Willie Mays’ twenty-three years in baseball. However, in focusing on the years when Mays burst onto the American scene, when nearly every American “heard of Willie Mays” (unpaged), the book fulfills the purpose implied in its title. Like Willie on the diamond, Winter and Widener play their game with a flair that readers young and old will enjoy and appreciate.

Works Cited

Winter, Jonah. *Steel Town*. Illus. Terry Widener. New York: Altheneum Books, 2008.

About the Author

Peter Carino is Professor of English Emeritus at Indiana State University, where he taught rhetorical theory, technical writing, and American literature. He is editor of three volumes in the series *Baseball/Literature/Culture*, and among his many published articles are several on baseball literature.