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In the thirty-four years since his retirement, Henry (Hank) Aaron's reputation has only grown in magnitude. But his influence extends beyond statistics, and at long last here is the first definitive biography of one of baseball's immortal figures.

Based on meticulous research and extensive interviews The Last Hero reveals how Aaron navigated the upheavals of his time - fighting against racism while at the same time benefiting from racial progress - and how he achieved his goal of continuing Jackie Robinson's mission to obtain full equality for African Americans, both in baseball and society, while he lived uncomfortably in the public eye. Eloquently written, detailed and penetrating, this is a revelatory portrait of a complicated, private man who through sports became an enduring American icon.

The Last Hero: A Life of Henry Aaron Details

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From Reader Review The Last Hero: A Life of Henry Aaron for online ebook

Montzalee Wittmann says

I picked up the audible book from the library. It's long! Part of it could have been cut for in my opinion. I don't see how it related to Henry, sure it was baseball but I don't want to hear all baseball statistics for that time period. Just what matters. There just seemed to be too much of it. Just give the important ones.

Rtc

Brad Hodges says

Like many young baseball fans of the 1970s, one of my favorite players was Hank Aaron (the others were Al Kaline and Roberto Clemente). I was at just the right age to be excited about his breaking of Babe Ruth's all-time home run record, and watched live on April 8, 1974, when he took Al Downing deep for number 715. At that time he was the toast of America, but it was no secret, as revealed in Howard Bryant's fine biography of Aaron, *The Last Hero*, that it was a trying time for the man.

Henry Aaron (those who knew him never called him Hank), was from Mobile, Alabama. He had little formal baseball training, but despite that he dreamed of being a pro player. He didn't even play high school ball, instead honing his skills by hitting bottle caps with sticks. He signed with the Negro Leagues team the Indianapolis Clowns, and thus, before he retired in 1976, was the last active Major Leaguer who had played in those leagues.

Aaron was the first black player in the notoriously intolerant South Atlantic, or Sally, League, where he played for Jacksonville. He was such a good hitter that it was hard to keep him on the farm, and he ended up on the Milwaukee Braves in 1954.

Bryant covers those early years closely. The Braves, who had just moved over from Boston, were starting to form a good nucleus. I was interested to read how teams were shaking the dust and contemplating movement. The St. Louis Cardinals thought about moving to Houston (!), and Bill Veeck of the Browns wanted to move to Milwaukee, but ended going to Baltimore. If the Braves' ownership had hung on, they might have ended up staying in Boston and the Red Sox would have moved, as the latter would start on a several-year period of doldrums. Imagine how baseball would be different today without the Red Sox in Boston!

The Braves would end up in the World Series in 1957 and 1958, both times playing the Yankees. In '57 Aaron was MVP and they won, in '58 they would be one of the few teams that would blow a 3-1 game lead.

As the book goes on after that, though, the tone shifts from a seasonal diary to a more general approach to the man. The Braves, who would move to Atlanta in 1966, would go to the postseason only once more while Aaron was on the team (in 1969). Instead, Bryant focuses on Aaron's place in baseball history, and the most elusive subject of all--Aaron himself.

Bryant was able to interview Aaron for the book but he is the most incomplete character of the story. Bryant,

in fact, goes off on tangents that at times made me forget the main subject of the book, particularly a chapter that is more about Jackie Robinson than Aaron. The truth appears to be that Aaron was a closed figure to most of the world, and very few people got to know him. After his career ended, many thought he was bitter or angry. He would be forever compared to Willie Mays, and Aaron always thought he was a better hitter.

The chapter detailing his chase of Ruth is terrific. Aaron snuck up on the record--it was thought Mays had the best chance, but tailed off at the end of his career. It was only after Aaron passed the 500-homer mark that people started taking him seriously. In 1973, at 39 years old, he hit 40 homers and ended the season one shy of Ruth. Death threats had already started pouring in, and he had his own security detail. On the first day of the 1974 season, in his first at bat, Aaron hit number 714 off of Jack Billingham in Cincinnati. The Braves' management, fearful he would set the record on the road, ordered manager Eddie Matthews to leave him on the bench, which prompted the ire of commissioner Bowie Kuhn (Aaron would have a long-time enmity for Kuhn).

But on that Monday night in Atlanta three days later Aaron did set the record at home. Bryant chooses to quote Vin Scully's eloquent call of the moment: "It is over. And for the first time in a long time that poker face of Aaron shows the tremendous relief...What a marvelous moment for baseball. What a marvelous moment for Atlanta and the state of Georgia. What a marvelous moment for the country and the world. A black man is getting a standing ovation in the Deep South for breaking a record of an all-time baseball idol. And is a great moment for all of us, and particularly for Henry Aaron."

Of course, underlying the Aaron story is what Philip Roth called the "human stain," race. Aaron battled racism, as did all black players in those days, when they couldn't stay in the same hotels that their white teammates stayed in. Aaron, who today is 77 years old, covered the period from when blacks couldn't play in the big leagues to when the stadium in Mobile, in which he wasn't allowed to attend or to play, now bears his name. It is an American story, and no matter how often it is told is resonates with the courage of those who defied the odds and achieved greatness.

Bryant ends the book with the spot Aaron was put in with regard to Barry Bonds breaking his record. It was a no-win situation--if Aaron showed any petulance, it would be seen as sour grapes, but to embrace it would have been a denial of Bonds' obvious cheating (Aaron hated cheating--Gaylord Perry and his spitball was a long-time nemesis). Aaron had no love for Bonds, and would not travel around with him as he passed milestones, but did finally tape a congratulatory message for him on the night Bonds hit home run 756.

The book, which is at times as serious as an autopsy, is well-written but occasionally sloppily copy edited. In one sentence, two different dates are listed for Aaron's second marriage. Bryant is thorough, but he has the uphill battle of trying to decipher a man who will not be solved. I think this passage says it best: "At virtually every major stage in Henry Aaron's professional life, a familiar pattern would develop, predictable as a 3-0 fastball: He would excel on the field and somehow become wounded off of it, slowly burning at yet another personal slight. It was only after he'd walked out the door, embarking on the next chapter of his life, that he would be rediscovered, the people he'd left behind realizing, too late, that the world without him seemed just a bit simpler. The reassessment would always be the same: Henry Aaron was a treasure after all. He carried himself with such dignity! And the people who wanted to celebrate him anew and be close to him and tell him how much he had touched them would always wonder why he appeared to live at a certain remove, and why he did not seem particularly overjoyed by their sudden and heartfelt acknowledgment."

In Tiger Stadium one day in 1975 or 1976 I had the chance to see Henry Aaron in person, while he played for the Milwaukee Brewers, and he hit a home run. The Tigers won the game, but I think I was more thrilled about seeing a bit of history.

Rebecca says

Enjoyable, but could have been about half the length. Aaron's playing his cards close to the vest means you finish still not thinking you have much insight into the man himself, but it's a good window into the inner world of baseball from Jackie Robinson to the steroid years.

Jj Burch says

Really enjoyed this book! Great for history fans and baseball fans. If you are not into baseball, I would pass. But as a baseball fan and Milwaukee native, I loved this!

Kimbolimbo says

This was truly an excellent book. Henry Aaron is now my hero. Baseball, something I've never given much thought to except back in jr high when I had a crush on a boy named Brett, a boy who saw the world through a baseball mitt. Wow. I think there will be parts of this book that will stick with me for a long time. I will now be one who wishes for the good ol' days of baseball. I loved the insight into the history of US racial struggles. This book is up there with *Hidden Figures* as deep and profound. I highly recommend this book. Struggle through the baseball stats and descriptions because the rest of the book will change your world.

Jeff says

It's hard to classify Henry Aaron as underrated, but when you think of what he has accomplished in over two decades playing baseball plus years in the front office and compare that with the attention he has received compared to other players, he does seem sometimes overlooked. Aaron held the all time homerun record in baseball from 1974 until Barry Bonds broke it a few years ago. This book covers both homerun chases in detail, as well as covering Aaron's rise as one of the last players in the Negro Leagues to jump to major league baseball and the racism that he encountered though the minor leagues and into the majors.

It's often a challenge to write a biography about a private, often quiet athlete like Aaron, and there are times when the author spends more time talking about Aaron's world and context and about games he played in than about Aaron himself. But those short digressions are few. Overall an insightful look into an athlete that accomplished more than almost anyone in his sport in the face of adversity.

William says

A really heartfelt and touching compendium of Henry Aaron's life and career. A son of the Jim Crow South, the man rose to the pinnacle of baseball and American achievement. The book was a turgid read for me for the first third of it because I have little interest in baseball history, names, and records. To the baseball

fanatic though this may actually be the best part of the book. I prefer his life story, his overcoming of the odds and his contributions to social progress in general and baseball in particular. Hank Aaron, whose record setting home run came on a pitch by the Uncle of one of my friends, Willie Mays, and Roberto Clemente are all featured in the book and are athletes that shaped my childhood. The book unravels Henry's stoic personality and exposes the dignity and humility present in this 'last hero' that is absent in so many of today's athletes.

Trey Mustian says

There are books that do a better job of recounting Henry Aaron's brilliant baseball career but the strength of this book is its exposition of how our society shaped Henry Aaron and how he, in turn, profoundly affected our society. The book does an excellent job of portraying the times in which he grew up, rise to prominence as one of the first African American baseball superstars and how he spent his years after playing baseball still impacting people's lives. It is a great complement to a book such as Aaron's autobiography " I Had A Hammer".

Stephanie Moran says

FINALLY! I feel like this book took me much to long to read - mostly because I just wasn't a fan of the writing - Bryant just didn't make me feel excited about reading his book.

Let me make a full disclosure - I made a challenge to myself - to read all the biographies in my library. As I walked down the aisle to the beginning, I saw a lot of political names.. I was dreading coming to those names. I got to the beginning and found this book - Henry Aaron. I was not happy, because if there is one sport I care nothing about, it's baseball. And, this book is 600 pages about one baseball player.

After finishing this book, I am more appreciative of learning about who Henry Aaron was as a person and a player than I am of actually reading this book. I felt that the author sometimes went on and on about other players, sometimes there was no real connection made by the author or myself, as the reader, to Aaron. Also, I hated the play by plays of certain games - but that could be more because I am not a sports person than anything. The last thing that really got under my skin, was the flashbacks. Bryant would fully describe something and then flashback to an earlier time and describe something in detail. I don't understand why he did that - sometimes it confused me because it involved player or important people and as an outsider, I really didn't know who they were.

So all in all - I felt this book would have been more impactful if the author stayed completely on topic - Henry Aaron - and stopped trying to be overly fancy with writing a biography.

Nathan says

Aaron's characteristic aloofness cripples this book from the outset. He's so carefully guarded his persona and image that Bryant is forced to dwell on his statistics and his contributions to African-American baseball, but these aspects have been covered elsewhere, and so feel pedantic and one-sided here. Bryant does his best with a difficult subject, and has certainly compiled a workable body of research, even if his vanilla writing

doesn't really carry all of it efficiently. But again, the subject remains distant, so far out of reach on a pedestal that we never engage with his story. One almost feels Aaron's resentment at being scrutinized, even at this distance. The detachment of the text is thus a major tradeoff: we sense the reserve of Aaron himself, but we never get to know him beyond the usual hard-knock life story, the flash of his wrists and the home-run record. A letdown, not all (or even mostly) Bryant's fault, but a letdown nonetheless.

Jeremy says

Great overview of Aaron and his life. When you consider that the book starts in the 1930's and goes through Bonds breaking Aaron's record, you really get a sense for how much life Henry has lived. It's remarkable that he did so much both within and outside of baseball. In particular, it was interesting to get an insight into how the home run chase really was, how he actually felt like he lost something during it. The context was also fascinating. It was cool to see Aaron in the context of the civil rights movement and segregation, as well as to see the friendships and animosities in the Braves' clubhouse. Also illuminating to see how Atlanta embraced the Braves and how Aaron was a figurehead of the new era of baseball: The first black superstar playing on the first Southern baseball team.

And I never thought about it, but he is sort of the last hero. Aaron was the last of his generation, the last truly great player from the golden age of baseball.

Tim Basuino says

While Barry Bonds was pursing the all-time home run record, we of course were treated to lifetime perspectives of Henry Aaron. I'd been casually aware of Aaron's heroics, being a lifetime fan of baseball and its various rich databases (it didn't hurt that, until the debut of David Aardsma, Henry ranked first alphabetically), but hadn't gotten much of a sense as to what the man was about. Hence, when I saw this book available at a reasonable price, I eagerly picked it up.

By and large, this is a good read (certainly, it didn't take me but ten calendar days to complete). Whether it sheds any true light on Aaron is another matter entirely, although to be fair, he didn't pander to the general press as say Cal Ripken Jr. or Willie Mays. One gets a sense as to the injustices Henry faced (not the least of which was being given the moniker 'Hank'), and one also gets the feeling that he doesn't care too much for those perceived as cheating to enhance their statistics (his love for Ken Griffey Jr. was a rare touching moment through the book).

So, yeah, it's a Henry Aaron biography, for which it's clear that Bryant, while enjoying the subject, had a bit of trouble learning anything new about him. I do wish the editing were a bit better – items get repeated often, sometimes within a matter of a page or two – really, I only needed to learn about what a mediocre pitcher Herm Wehmeier was once. So next time, hire a better editor!

Ben says

Hank Aaron has a rightful place in sports history, but his legacy should be far greater. In many ways, he was

hampered by his time, place, and personality. He came into his own during the last gasp of the Negro League, after Jackie Robinson broke the initial barrier, and had to share the spotlight with Willie Mays - a much more colorful, media-friendly personality. Unlike Jackie, Henry came from the deep South, and he was always much warier (rightfully so) about the media portraying him as a dumb black country rube. So he kept to himself, and the media favored Willie, Frank Robinson, Ernie Banks, and the rest of the "second wave" African-American baseball players. His reticence and mild sarcasm was interpreted as aloofness, ingratitudo, and smug superiority. Then, 20 years after he finally breaks Babe Ruth's all-time home run record, the steroid era makes a mockery of the concept of celebrating home run volume - first, in the McGwire/Sosa race, then as juiced players continue to shatter previous season records, culminating in Barry Bonds, Willie Mays' godson, seizing Henry's crown in 2007 and leaving us with a collective bad taste in our mouth.

Henry may not have been the flashiest personality, but he deserves to be celebrated for his accomplishments. And this book is just as interesting as any I've read on Ruth, Ali, or McEnroe.

Carol Storm says

Hank Aaron is an American hero, and he deserves respect. He also deserves a decent biography by a man who doesn't smother his subject with an avalanche of faint praise, backhanded compliments, and an endless stream of defensive apologies from the author. Howard Bryant tries so hard to make Henry Aaron into a transcendent figure, and yet the harder he tries the more Hank just looks like a nice, not-too-bright guy who hit a lot of home runs. Mind you, I'm sure there's more to Mr. Aaron than that. But Howard Bryant is not the man to tell you so.

This book is long and dull. You learn nothing about Henry Aaron's real personality. You get a lot of black history, but no insight into how it formed this one individual's character. Bryant keeps saying things like, "Henry wanted change, and he was angry about how America was. But just because he felt things deeply doesn't mean he was prepared to speak out." That's fine for an ordinary guy. But if you're trying to sell Henry Aaron as a hero (the last hero, no less) you've just got to come up with something out of the ordinary for proof. (Aside from hitting 755 homeruns, that is.) Howard Bryant just can't do it. So he keeps apologizing, over and over, making Hank look smaller and smaller as the book drags on for hundreds of pages.

To make matters worse, Bryant keeps bringing up two other black baseball legends, Jackie Robinson and Willie Mays. Every time Bryant describes Jackie in action, whether defying whites off the field or on, the book comes to life. This author has a great book in him all right -- but he needs a subject he genuinely admires. That would be Jackie, not Hank.

As for Willie Mays, it gets even stranger. Apparently Willie Mays beat Henry Aaron up, or stole his lunch money, or dissed him in some mysterious, unstated way. Now Henry Aaron hates Willie. But we never really find out why. Howard Bryant just goes out of the way to echo Aaron, that Willie is mean, selfish, a two-faced jerk, whatever. A little quote or two from Willie might have been nice. Or from Willie's family. Or from Tallullah Bankhead!

Altogether, this was such a tedious, badly written book that it really made me want to read Henry Aaron's autobiography, **I HAD A HAMMER**.

Because it had to be better than this.

Alan Kaplan says

Very good book about the Atlanta Braves icon. Warts and all biography. As a long time Atlanta Braves fan, I now understand why the fans and the city never really warmed to Henry Aaron. In spite of his refusal to play to the fans or the press, I now better appreciate his awesome baseball skills.
