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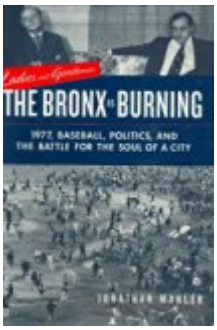

Jonathan Mahler. *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bronx is Burning: 1977, Baseball, Politics, and the Battle for the Soul of a City.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005. x + 339 pp. $25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-374-17528-3.

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Jonathan Mahler attempts a mini-history of New York City in the allegedly pivotal year of 1977. His method is to weave a pastiche of narratives about matters like baseball, mayoral politics, journalism, night life, and mean streets. The thesis in his book casts New York wildly thrashing about in the mid/late 1970s, with the city's teetering on financial collapse providing both an economic as well as political backdrop to the fights that came to a head in the year's mayoral race. That race involved the incumbent Abraham Beame, who was saddled with the city's many financial woes, the narcissistically abusive Bella Abzug, who steadily dressed outrageously and played the wealthy white women's card as means of acting out her personality disorder, the smooth and sharp Mario Cuomo, who seemed the sane political and psychological alternative to the other two, and a few minor candidates, one of whom was an unknown named Edward Koch, who in the winter and spring was polling at less than 5 percent. Koch would win the race, and what thrust him past his noteworthy opponents and onto victory lies at the heart of what Mahler sees as NYC's great transformation that year.

The centerpiece in Mahler's analysis of how Koch won concerned the infamous New York power blackout in July and the ensuing riots, largely, although not exclusively in Brooklyn. The title of the book about the Bronx being in flames is thus a trifle misleading, as the conflagrations there were not at the center of the social upheavals that were so important in New York City's political outcomes that fall. The book title came from a line uttered by ABC television's Howard Cossell as he witnessed a neighborhood afire while broadcasting a Monday night game from Yankee Stadium. Cossell's line seemed to have resonated in Mahler but for reasons that are never clear, as the Bronx disturbances figured little, not only in 1977 New York's politics but in Mahler's own accounting of the year's events. It was the insurrections in Brooklyn and elsewhere that brought about a "backlash," as Mahler put it, and this backlash drove the city's voters to seek a mayoral candidate who could convincingly promise them that there was someone out there who also

believed that the city had spun too long out of control and needed to be put back into good order. Better than any other candidate, Koch gave the city that sort of assurance, and thus he won.

At a descriptive level, Mahler adds many other themes into the story of urban conflagrations and subsequent desires for order. Drugs, prostitution, peep shows, and smut were everywhere. The gay scene, in an era before anyone ever heard of AIDS, was coming out ever more brazenly. Disco, both the clubs and the thumping music, was, along with early punk, at its adolescent apex (or nadir?). All these themes built a sense of intensity among New Yorkers--delight for some, rage for others. Then came the summer blackout riots, plus several of the Son of Sam murders, all reifying for a critical mass of New Yorkers the perception that the city's life and culture had indeed run amok. In this reification process, Mahler, himself a journalist, attaches great significance to Rupert Murdoch's takeover of the *New York Post*, with the *Post*'s subsequent "yellow" journalism both embodying and sharpening many a New Yorkers' outrage, all contributing to the election results of the fall.

As a journalist, Mahler readily accepts stereotypic images of various components of his story. If the press of the day called Bella Abzug a leftist, she is then cast so unquestioningly. If the press cast Ed Koch as more right wing, this is also taken axiomatically, with the "proof" of such labeling coming from contemporaneous commentators whose credentials and power to label were apparently not to be questioned. Thus, for example, with Koch's defeat of Cuomo, Beame, and Abzug, Gloria Steinem opined from somewhere on high (p. 302) that the city had lurched to the right. Steinem's words seem blindly taken as gospel. Alternative points that the New York in-crowd had become less genuinely leftist, more purely narcissistic, politically out of touch, and utterly self-serving are not dimensions which journalist Mahler wants to consider in his history. Mahler accepts the journalism, the first draft of history, as history. Tom Wolfe's many clever characterizations never enter the picture; neither do the brilliant insights of a New York (Rochester) analyst of that very time, the late Christopher Lasch, who recognized much deeper currents at work in some of the very genres Mahler considers. Similarly, the then Vermont-based Nobel-laureate Alexander Solzhenitzen spoke at Harvard's commencement less than a year after Brooklyn's blackout riots, pointing explicitly to the New York insurrections as an example of "the tilt of freedom towards evil" among a spiritually vacuous people. With such deeper thinking well established in the existing literature on the events Mahler set out to retell, trivial catch words like "Backlash" and the mere pouty comments of those who were indignant about being on the losing side of an election hardly form much of an analytical base upon which to build a convincing history. Indeed, virtually all of Mahler's sources are purely narrative; his work builds upon no historiography; it is good, lively journalism but little more.

Throughout Mahler's vignettes about 1977 New York, come stories of the N.Y. Yankees. In his introduction, Mahler indeed admits that he was first drawn to write the book because he loves the Yankees and wanted to delve into their '77 season. 1977 marked the Yankees' first World Series victory in fifteen years, the team's longest span of non-championship seasons since their first triumph over a half century earlier. To Mahler, the '77 victory was somehow symbolic of the city's capacity for regeneration. This self-congratulatory theme of regeneration provides an undertone in the book, but it actually lends little but a sense of local cheerleading, fun for provincial New Yorkers, offensive to a few equally provincial anti-New Yorkers, tedious to most others.

The Yankees of the late 70s were indeed a great team, but they hardly brought the franchise back to the level of perennial contender. By 1979, and for the subsequent sixteen years, other

teams--Baltimore, Milwaukee, Detroit, Boston, Toronto--were equally or more dominant in the American League. In contrast, Richard J. Tofel's recent book about the 1939 Yankees (***A Legend in the Making: The New York Yankees in 1939***, 2002) illustrates a winning team that did indeed sustain its ways despite upheaval and tragedy. The late 70s Yankees hardly did that. Their captain (Thurman Munson) died, and they faded. Construing that Yankee team's short time on top to represent some sort of "regeneration" is a bit of a strain. Their brief glory could actually symbolize something more ephemeral than substantive, the very opposite of what Mahler wants to believe. During the Yankees' lean times in the late 60s and early 70s, furthermore, another New York ball team often fared quite well, and at the moment of the Yankees' triumph, the Giants stunk. Mahler misses some of the more complex symbolism that sports provides here. He writes, for example, of the bedlam of Yankee fans in October 1976, pouring onto the Stadium field when a Chris Chambliss home run clinched the Yanks' first pennant in twelve years. He neglected to note one significant thought which crossed the minds of many New York fans as they watched Chambliss ram his way past marauding fans while rounding the bases--that they were witnessing the first New York runner that autumn actually able to break a tackle. New York sports holds much more than the narrow, happy symbolism of regeneration Mahler presumes with his beloved Yankees. How indeed can anyone forge a believable slice of pre-9/11 New York culture without a decided strain of cynicism? Mahler admits he did not grow up in New York. He moved there as an adult in 1990, with his fond memories of Reggie Jackson and the Yankees in tow. With this backdrop, he apparently grasped little of the historical memories that lie in back of many generations of New York sports fans for whom the city's National League presence represents a major legacy in Gotham's sporting and cultural identity. Why else, back in the 1920s, would a fledgling football franchise seeking to build a fan base call itself "Giants" and not "Yankees?" Why, later, did a New York pro football team called "Yankees" fail? Why was it so important that the city quickly regain an NL franchise after the Giants and Dodgers departed? While the Yankees certainly represent a huge part of New York's sport and urban culture, that culture encompasses more than Mahler may realize.

Beyond the many levels of symbolism one can construe about New York baseball and sports, the story of the '77 Yankees simply does not present much linkage to the contemporaneous political and social developments Mahler narrates. If he wanted to use a sports event that had some ties to the political outrage that was building in the city, Mahler could have considered the September 1976 Muhammad Ali-Ken Norton fight at Yankee Stadium, before which many attendees were infamously attacked and mugged on the streets as they approached the stadium site in the South Bronx. Mahler is simply in love with the Yankees, and somehow their story has broader meaning for him. While his enthusiasm is unmistakable, the team's significance beyond its own narrative is simply not there. The ending of Mahler's book underscores that, as Jackson and others are cast celebrating their World Series victory, with the discussion never returning to any broader political or social theme. One attempt by Mahler to draw linkages between New York's Yankees and its politics catches him clearly over-striding like an all-too-eager rookie pitcher: The night Abe Beame lost the mayoral primary, he gave his concession speech in the Americana Hotel, the same hotel, Mahler earnestly notes (p. 301), where free-agent Reggie Jackson had signed with George Steinbrenner and the Yankees less than a year before. The alleged symbolism there does not go deep, only foul. There simply is no substantive parallel between the summer feuds of Billy Martin and Reggie Jackson and the autumn debates of Ed Koch and Mario Cuomo. After all, New Yorkers always argue. [They do not! (There, you see.)] Taken separately from politics, Mahler's coverage of

the '77 Yankees covers the well-known stories involving Billy Martin, Reggie Jackson, George Steinbrenner, and others. Billy Martin's alcoholism-driven abusiveness is once again aired. (Martin could indeed take a bad team and make it good, and take a very good team and make it good.) So too are Martin's various fights with Reggie Jackson and others. The fact that drunkard Martin was generally popular with the New York fans is a dimension that Mahler could have linked to the city's 70s- era penchant for celebrating various forms of narcissistic hedonism and violence, but Mahler chose not to develop that point. Meanwhile, there is a certain tension in Mahler's Yankee coverage, as he has to square Martin's popularity with the generally positive treatment he seeks to give Reggie Jackson. Jackson was indeed an awful egotist, a great hitter when he was in a hot streak, a mediocrity otherwise at the plate and always so in the field. In 1999, when Joe DiMaggio died, Reggie Jackson actually tried to claim, with a lifetime batting average of .262, that he should now be appropriately called baseball's greatest all-around living player. Carl Yaztremski, Al Kaline, Frank Robinson, Willie Mays, and Hank Aaron, to name but a handful, spoke overwhelmingly to the contrary, but the claim certainly left no doubt as to the hyperbolic ego of the man. Mahler conveys some of this puffery; still, he largely tries to paint Jackson as true New York hero.

Admitting that Billy Martin was an idol among the city's Archie Bunkers, Mahler attempts to cast some of Jackson's contrasting popularity as a dimension of racial matters. "Reggie Jackson," he solemnly declares in his opening (p. x), "was New York's first black superstar." The sentence did not read "the New York Yankees' ... superstar" just "New York's." This raises many obvious rejoinders. What, for example, of Willis Reed and Walt Frazier, African-American heroes of the '69-'70 NBA Champion Knicks? Even within the world of baseball, Mahler may be too young to remember, but from 1951 to 1957, the city also had a certain hero by the name of Willie Mays. Mays, of course, played for the Giants, and even accepting, then, that Mahler meant to write of Jackson as the Yankees' first black star, there is the point that catcher Elston Howard was the American League's MVP in 1963. Even accepting here that Howard did not rise to the level of a true popular hero among African Americans, Reggie Jackson still remains anything but an easy figure to cast as a Yankee hero to African Americans. Mahler himself actually touches upon some of these points in subsequent discussions (pp. 45, 47, and 56), as Jackson openly stated that he grew up "not really a city boy," "in a neighborhood where race wasn't an issue," and admitted, with a carefree shrug, "most of my friends are white." Jackson hardly fits the African-American hero status of a Muhammad Ali or even of a baseball figure like Dick Allen or Bob Gibson, ballplayers of a slightly earlier time when race mattered far more in baseball than it did either with Jackson or in his heyday. Those of the late 70s who tried to make Jackson a race figure failed; Mahler fares little better.

Mahler's Yankee story, like the overall book, is a good read. As a systematic history, the book does not quite hang together. The Yankee baseball sections simply have no convincingly broader symbolism. The separate New York City political/social history is also an enjoyable narrative, but one that remains open to many interpretations that can go to much greater intellectual and spiritual depths than Mahler endeavors.

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