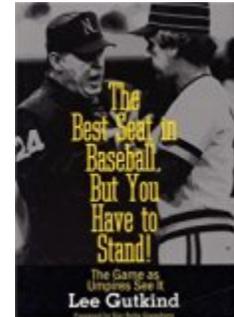


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Lee Gutkind.** *The Best Seat in Baseball, But You Have to Stand! The Game as Umpires See It.* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. 226 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8093-2195-7.

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When Lee Gutkind arranged to spend the 1974 baseball season following a team of National League umpires from spring to fall and coast to coast, he may have contemplated writing a book that would do for officials what Jim Bouton's *Ball Four* did for players. And perhaps he did, at a similar cost; in his 1999 preface. Gutkind writes that two members of that crew, the respected Harry Wendelstedt and the revered Doug Harvey "have never once communicated with me" since the book's 1975 publication. "Wendelstedt even denied that I had traveled with him and his crew" (p. xviii).

Umpires, Gutkind tells us, hate double headers, since they must stand through every inning. Then again, they're not too fond of most players, managers, league officials or fans, not to mention writers. Nevertheless, like reporters, they are supposed to be objective. Like judges, they must rule on what they see. Like policemen, they are asked to keep order. Metaphorically, like military scouts, they are on a continuing reconnaissance of enemy territory, never on friendly ground. They must work as a team if they are to succeed, which may simply mean getting through another game. And yet, they may not even be too fond of each other.

Considering all this, it may be understandable why I kept feeling I was re-reading Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* with a baseball twist. Gutkind describes the tensions within Harvey's crew as they slogged through their season-long campaign. They joke, they tease, they bitch, they scream at one another. The book moves between moments the crew shares before and after games and moments from the private lives of its members—Harvey, Wendelstedt, Nick Colosi and Art Williams. The turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s did not leave

baseball untouched, not even the world of the men in blue. Art Williams was the National League's first black umpire and the only African-American official in the Majors in 1974. He was also, Gutkind writes, "the man the National League owners and coaches had last year called the worst umpire in the league," or were there racial overtones in this judgment, as far as [Doug] Harvey could make out. Pure and simple, Williams was not a very good umpire and Harvey and Wendelstedt, the two best in the league, had been teamed specifically to work with Williams and help him improve" (p. 33).

The dilemma is that Williams was rushed to the Majors to satisfy government demands only to be faulted for his lack of experience and confidence. Harvey and Wendelstedt, committed to their jobs, to being as good as they can be, and to being respected for what they do, worry endlessly over Williams' continuing lapses in concentration. His performance reflects on all of them. At one point, depressed over the long season and Williams' lack of progress, Wendelstedt frets, in Gutkind's words, that the "high standards necessary for superior accomplishment in his profession" were to be sacrificed or temporarily set aside for the sake of racial equality" (pp. 151-52). It is with some relief that we read how by season's end Williams improves and earns his colleagues' grudging praise. In fact, everyone is relieved. However, this fitting conclusion does not erase the memory of the pressures brought to bear on the crew. Harvey's obsessive need for perfection, Wendelstedt's enormous appetites and emotions, Williams' peculiar mixture of frustration and quiet dignity all stand out in retrospect. So, too, do the little rituals of dressing, preparing baseballs, gossiping about players and managers, killing time. A pension plan and salary increases have improved the umpire's lot consider-

ably over the last twenty-five years. But this worthwhile reprint of Lee Gutkind's *The Best Seat In Baseball, But You Have to Stand!* reminds us how slowly some things move, how some things do not change. Umpires go on doing much the same things that they always have done, keeping order, rendering judgment. Then again, Harvey and his crew would probably be delighted to know that these days there are very few double headers.

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