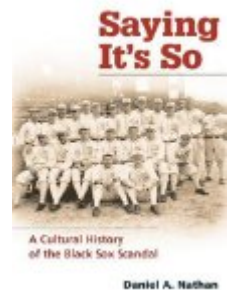


Daniel A. Nathan. *Saying It's So: A Cultural History of the Black Sox Scandal.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. 285 pp. 95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-02765-9.



Reviewed by Trey Strecker

Published on H-Arete (February, 2003)

Cheaters Cheating Cheaters

It's so. Daniel A. Nathan's *Saying It's So: A Cultural History of the Black Sox Scandal* brings the eye of an alert cultural critic and historian to diverse narratives of 1919 World Series and its aftermath to explore "questions about historical representation, narrative, and collective memory" and to investigate how we construct meaning (p. 6). Another remarkable title in the University of Illinois' Sport and Society series, *Saying It's So* offers a superb example of the scholarly study of sport, and, hyperbole aside, it is quite possibly the best book about the Black Sox since Eliot Asinof's *Eight Men Out* (1963).

Nathan's cogent analysis opens with "history's first draft," chronicling how the daily newspapers around the country reported the scandal as "a labyrinthine story of deception, betrayal, and moral disorder" (p. 11). In the social climate of post-World War I uncertainty, tales of the Black Sox intersected several cultural concerns, including "the 'cleanliness crusade,' crime, anti-Semitism, middle-class masculinity, social class, labor relations, and the role of the mass media"

(p. 12). Nathan demonstrates how the news media's construction of the fix created "a stage on which the era's version of (white) middle-class masculinity was challenged, vigorously defended, and ultimately reconstituted." This "masculine melodrama" disseminated a value-laden morality play, asserting that dirty ballplayers corrupted America's once-pure sport (p. 36). For Nathan, these narratives of baseball's contamination served both as a cautionary tale to socialize young men and boys and as a classic crime story; in both, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis banishes the guilty players to purify baseball and restore order and moral rectitude:

Landis, in short, provided baseball with the stern paternal guidance and masculine vigor that it (apparently) lacked, a deficiency that some argued had provided an opening to corrupt gamblers and crooked ballplayers in the first place. Frequently referred to as baseball's dictator, Landis can also be seen as baseball's surrogate father-figure, a strict disciplinarian who would not stand for insubordination or moral laxity from wayward ballplayers (i.e., "boys") (p. 64).

Contemporary press accounts displayed little compassion for the ballplayers and, in conspirator Abe Attell's words, offered simplistic stories of "cheaters cheating cheaters" (p. 34), choosing to ignore labor-management conflicts and professional baseball's lengthy association with gambling. According to the dominant narrative of the scandal, Nathan explains, "eight ballplayers had defiled the national pastime, they were to be punished accordingly, their legacy was nothing less than shame" (p. 58).

In this vein, Nathan's study compares F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Nelson Algren's "The Silver-Colored Yesterday," as well as Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* and Asinof's *Eight Men Out* to highlight how these texts engage our collective memories and counter-memories of the scandal. Even as early narratives condemned the ballplayers for their ignorance and their immorality and as Landis promoted the dominant version of the fix as the official history of the baseball establishment, counter-memories emerged that challenged this "hegemonic version of the Big Fix": "For those who saw him as a convenient scapegoat, as a sacrificial lamb, as an icon of victimization—exploited by Comiskey, ensnared by (Jewish) city slickers, punished extralegally by Landis—Jackson evoked powerful and resilient counter-memories of the Black Sox scandal" (p. 88). In one of the book's many highlights, Nathan's detailed critique of *Eight Men Out* documents how Asinof's rhetorical decision to view the scandal as a tragedy cast the Black Sox as victims, betrayed by the gamblers, the baseball owners, the legal system, and the media. Nathan argues that Asinof's book marked a major shift in how we understand the Black Sox, constructing a more complex and ambiguous narrative that distributes responsibility for the fix as well as the cover-up.

As Nathan skillfully unpacks the strategies journalists, historians, novelists, dramatists, and filmmakers deploy to represent the scandal, he does not plumb the past for the "truth" about the

unmediated event. Rather, *Saying It's So* investigates how each specific representation of the fix "reshapes, omits, distorts, conflates, and reorganizes the past" (p. 7). We will never know whether Joe Jackson asked to be benched before the first World Series game or whether he played to win. What makes Nathan's work so compelling and fresh is that his interest lies not in rehashing the inscrutable event but in understanding "the social utility" of the stories we tell about it (p. 217). To this end, *Saying It's So* focuses on the producers of these cultural narratives, including histories by David Q. Voigt, Harold Seymour, and Benjamin Rader, novels by Eric Rolfe Greenberg, Brendan Boyd, Harry Stein, and W. P. Kinsella, films by Ken Burns (*Baseball*), Phil Alden Robinson (*Field of Dreams*), and John Sayles (*Eight Men Out*), and cultural phenomena like Pete Rose's betting and banishment, the 1994 baseball strike, and Cal Ripken's streak of 2,131 consecutive games. Throughout this ambitious study, Nathan explicitly values texts which convey the complexity of the past and distrusts seamless historical narratives that "esch[e] complexity and depth," challenging Ken Burns' rendition of the fix in *Baseball* as "simplified and superficial [...] saturated with nostalgia and suffer[ing] from a paucity of analysis, precisely the inverse of what baseball history needs most" (p. 205-07). Amen.

Well-written and well-researched, *Saying It's So* is that rarity: an entertaining academic book. It should be able to reward students and scholars of baseball history and American popular culture. "As a fable of lost innocence, as a masculine cautionary tale, as a historical reference point for contemporary crises," the Black Sox scandal remains an oft-told tale in the American imagination, a contentious cultural site where the tug between social reality and representation, between the past and the present, manifests itself (p. 218). Thus, of course, even as he reminds us of the ongoing social efficacy of the Black Sox stories,

Nathan's narrative participates in the cultural work it critiques.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://www.h-net.org/~arete>

Citation: Trey Strecker. Review of Nathan, Daniel A. *Saying It's So: A Cultural History of the Black Sox Scandal*. H-Arete, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7256>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.