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The Last Boy: Mickey Mantle and the End of America's Childhood. Jane Leavy.
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Reviewed by Steven E. Connelly, Indiana State University

Mickey Mantle displayed awesome power. Fans and fellow players alike marveled at his prodigious feats at the plate, but just as breathtaking as his monumental home runs and blazing line drives was the mysterious force he wielded over fans. Mantle was magic: in his prime he was the very image of the ideal baseball player. He had power, speed, and a strong arm. With it all came an aw-shucks grin that was a perfect counterpoint to any menace his strength might have suggested. Perhaps his teammate Eli Grba summed his aura up best, comparing Mantle to the chorale from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Mickey Mantle was a human *Ode to Joy*. Of course he was flawed: physically and emotionally he was all but crippled. Still, he was a hero, and like all heroes he inspired simultaneous idealization and vilification.

Jane Leavy, in *The Last Boy: Mickey Mantle and the End of America's Childhood*, does an extraordinary job of presenting the whole person. She shows the idol who aroused wonder, admiration, and even worship, as well as the individual Howard Cossell characterized as a "drunken whoremonger." Leavy's portrait of Mickey Mantle is as complete and balanced as has been printed, examining the insecure and morbid Mantle, convinced of his own doom from an early age, yet revealing, too, the fun-loving boyish Mick, who was witty and amusing. She shows the boor and the charmer, the hick and the Manhattan sophisticate. It is a full and sensitive portrayal, and above all it is candid and honest, revealing a complicated human being in all his complexity.

Humanizing an idealized legend is hard work. Ernst Renan's *Life of Christ*, an attempt to recover the human Jesus, is an excellent example. Thomas Jefferson, too, tried to locate the human Jesus, by excising what he judged to be the supernatural and superstitious from the New Testament, leaving the words of an extraordinary, but human, being. A human hero, arguably, is more remarkable than an idealized or supernatural one. And Leavy's Mickey Mantle proves so. She has avoided both hagiography and cynical scandal mongering, and consequently she manages a fresh and sympathetic chronicle which is both human and humane.

Leavy's research in *The Last Boy* is exemplary. It is best illustrated, perhaps, by her painstaking investigation into Mantle's colossal 1953 Griffith Stadium home run, a blast which spawned the concept of "tape measure" homers and altered the game's

Requests for reprints should be sent to Steven E. Connelly, Ph.D., Department of English, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana 47809. Email: steven.connelly@indstate.edu

perspective on power. Central to Mantleology, the home run supposedly travelled 565 feet and was often regarded as the longest home run in major league history. As Leavy makes clear, despite the fact that the home run was not carefully measured and its distance was an arbitrary assertion, when writers and experts began to suggest shortened estimates, it was as if unbelievers were questioning the validity of a saint's relic. Tenaciously, Leavy pursued the truth, stubbornly tracking down sixty-nine-year-old Donald Dunaway, who as a fourteen-year-old truant had retrieved the home run ball, and whose very existence had been questioned by some who doubted the original story of the homer. She also persuaded Alan Nathan, "professor emeritus of physics at the University of Illinois — Champaign-Urbana and chair of the Society for American Baseball Research's Science and Baseball Committee . . . to test the prerogatives of memory and place against the hard discipline of science." Science validated Dunaway's memory, and Nathan's suggested distance of 535 to 542 feet might not measure up to the original myth, but it certainly went well beyond the diminished length major detractors had calculated. Through sheer stubbornness and hard work, Leavy mediated between myth and reality, a process that characterizes the book.

Again and again she meticulously checks, doublechecks, measures, researches, and establishes the facts. Yet, as with that first tape measure home run, Mantle's exploits are never diminished by her pursuit of the actual, for the subjective responses of eyewitnesses are always part of the reality she recovers. Mantle's mammoth home runs in an exhibition game against the University of Southern California in March of 1951 are presented as an example of how "memory calcified into fact and a myth was born." But as she demonstrates how faulty memory might be, Leavy illustrates the powerful effect reality had in reshaping memory. As reliable an observer as USC coach Rod Deadeaux remembered events incorrectly, as Leavy proved by tracking down a two-second film clip in the USC School of Cinematic Art. Memory, she shows, slips easily into myth when the events themselves seem larger than life. One common effect of Mickey Mantle's splendor was to reshape the memories of those about him.

Leavy's frequent efforts at reconciling myth and reality are instructive. Cathy McCammon, a fan, recounted being hit in the head by a Mantle home run as a child, but in fact it was "an errant fungo during batting practice." As Leavy astutely observes, the discrepancy between fact and memory nonetheless failed to diminish the "impact of the moment." The event was dramatic, and dramatic events work powerfully upon participants. Baseball players, weekend warriors, historians, average human beings, all reshape reality into a pattern more satisfying than itself. The process of mythmaking, of reshaping reality, is often an aesthetic one. Leavy records a famous incident Mantle and Whitey Ford recounted to Dick Young the day they were inducted into the Hall of Fame. Mantle, certain he wouldn't be playing, was hung over and asleep on the bench. He was awakened, protesting that he was on the disabled list. Told that he came off the disabled list that day, against terrible odds he pinch hit a home run. "Honest to God, I didn't think he'd make it around the bases," Cletus Boyer said in reference to Mantle's condition. The pitcher, Mike McCormick, would be taunted throughout his career: "Even drunks can hit home runs off of you." And Mantle, showing his talent for the apt observation, announced to the dugout, "Those people have no idea how hard that really was." It is an amusing story, and Mantle, as Leavy discovered, shaped it carefully: "In fact, he wasn't on the disabled list, so he couldn't have come off it. Like all the best baseball stories, this one has aged very well."

Leavy checks. She gathers eyewitness accounts, she interviews participants, but she checks. She checks friends, family, dates, weather, prices, policies, maps, rosters,

statistics, theories, film clips, articles, medical records, audiocassettes, web sites, scholarship, anything relevant to Mickey Mantle. A lover explains how she broke up with Mantle because of his drinking, but Leavy uncovers another version of the event in which Mickey may have initiated the split. Leavy takes very little for granted. Not only is memory often unreliable, it can be a force for transforming reality as certainly as storytelling can be. One of the conceits of the book is Leavy's account of meeting Mantle in 1983 at the Claridge Hotel in Atlantic City to interview him. Her account of the meeting is interspersed throughout the book. It serves as the book's preface and as a prelude to each of the five parts into which the book is divided. Leavy reveals early on that her memory, too, is unreliable: the cashmere sweater Mantle gave her is actually orlon acrylic, and video evidence shows that he didn't give her his sweater, but rather a similar sweater. Though "the story [she] had told so often began to unravel," she declares her belief in memory, even though it is a faulty process. Memory transforms reality into what it should have been.

Mantle's own "memories" were often not what happened but what people told him had happened. His drinking made his memory unreliable to be sure, but so too did repeated accounts of his exploits by others. What he repeatedly heard often became what he thought he had experienced. Leavy illustrates the undependable nature of Mantle's memory. Mantle spoke of a first knee surgery in 1951, for example, which, as medical records prove, never took place. His first knee surgery was two years later. A slothful memory may in fact be an asset for a great athlete. The issue of memory is given an interesting twist, when Leavy probes Mantle's uncomplicated, almost unconscious, approach to hitting. She presents evidence that Mantle was virtually unaware of the hitting process, that he just did it. Both her talent for elucidation and for discovering relevance in unusual places is on display in a fascinating segment on explicit and implicit memory courtesy of Eric R. Kandel, the 2000 Nobel Prize Winner in Physiology or Medicine. In short, Mantle "was an Einstein of implicit intelligence," whose "muscle memory" was an example of a "particular kind of genius." Mantle, like many great athletes, benefitted from not trying to remember how he performed, but from performing.

Today's technological approach to hitting, Leavy suggests, might enable researchers to answer "Harvey Kuenn's cry to the heavens: 'How can a man hit a ball that hard?'" She attempts to answer it, with her interrogations of Kandel and of Greg Rybarczyk, mechanical engineer and home run researcher, whose three decades of considering the question led him to conclude that Mantle was both magical and artistic. Seeking the specifics, Leavy commissioned Preston Peavy, "techno-savvy hitting coach, to analyze Mantle's form, using the visual-motion analysis system he created for his students at Peavy baseball in Atlanta." She includes Peavy's analysis in an appendix and recommends two web sites where interested readers can view the kinematics created from film and video clips of Mantle's swing. Such attention to detail is frequent.

Mantle's extraordinary skills are chronicled and skillfully dissected; so too are the injuries which dogged him almost from the outset of his major league career. Beginning with the ur-knee injury in the 1951 World Series, Leavy painstakingly pieces together a gloomy narrative of physical disaster, employing commentary from teammates, trainers, physicians, contemporary newspaper accounts, and any source material her creative detective work can uncover. From a medical history filled with lacunae and misinformation, she manages to elicit an educated diagnosis of Mantle's first knee injury from Dr. Stephen Haas, the medical director for the NFL Player's Association. The conclusion, that Mantle played two full seasons on a severely damaged and unstable knee, highlights the admiration his teammates ceaselessly expressed for Mantle's

courage and his constant willingness to play with pain. Mantle's fortitude on the field was much admired, and with good reason. He was described as a "neuromuscular genius" by Haas, and trainer Joe Soares said, "Mickey has a greater capacity to withstand pain than any man I've ever seen. Some doctors have seen X-rays of his legs and won't believe they are the legs of an athlete still active." Leavy documents the awe Mantle inspired on the field for his performance and his grit. "He was a hero in the clubhouse because of the respect the other players had for the way he played the game — not just his ability but the intensity he played it with."

Mantle had one well-documented ambition which he fulfilled beyond question: he wanted to be a good teammate. By all accounts he was a great one: "In the locker room, where everything is exposed, he was seen as 'the best teammate ever,'" according to Leavy. She gathers plenty of evidence: kindness to rookies such as Tom Tresh and Bobby Cox, who was given Mantle's first class seat on the first plane flight of the year in 1968; welcoming new teammates, as when he placed a soda and a flower in Bob Turley's locker; making things easier for the Yankee's first African American player Elston Howard, supporting him by refusing to attend an Augie Busch cocktail party which excluded Howard; invitations to dinner for slumping teammates; "adopting" teammates, such as Joe Pepitone, with whom, after Pepitone's divorce, he shared his St. Mortiz suite for a year. He gave Jerry Lumpe and his family the use of his house in New Jersey rent free. Mantle had an earned reputation for being inconsiderate of the feelings of others, but that reputation existed only outside the clubhouse. Inside he was seen as empathetic, "one of the most decent guys I've ever met," his teammate Mark Freeman said. And Tony Kubek noted that one player who called him after his father died was Mantle. When Roger Maris was dying of cancer, Mantle called him once a week every week for two years. Teammates appreciated the fact that Mantle never expressed anger at anyone other than himself. "He never showed anyone up, never called anyone out, never blamed anyone but himself." Mantle was a teammate for life, too. When the memorabilia industry exploded, Mantle included his old teammates in signings, shows, and fantasy camps, sharing the spoils with them.

If he could appear rude and unkind, even insulting, in public, he was frequently compassionate and benevolent in private. He often tipped magnanimously, \$50 on a cup of coffee, \$200 on a sandwich. He gave a homeless man \$100, "in the dark so no one knew," Kubek observed. He visited kids in the hospital on the q.t. He stopped on the highway and emptied his wallet, probably over a thousand dollars, for a family stranded beside a disabled automobile. After home games, Mantle was the only player to go to the family room and say hello to the wives and children of the players, a minor but representative action. Leavy never suggests that his good deeds compensated for, or even moderated, his thoughtless ones. She merely presents evidence for both and leaves judgments to the reader.

Leavy certainly gives Mantle's dark side its due consideration. She recounts numerous episodes of drunken and boorish behavior, including her own experience with both during her 1983 Atlantic City interview. She details his shameful treatment of his wife Merlyn, his affairs and one-night stands, his mistresses ("business managers"), his shabby conduct toward fans and admirers. Mantle was often aware of his own failures. When George Lois, trying to shepherd Mantle to the airport lost track of him, he eventually found Mantle lying in slush by the curb, his face in the gutter. Mantle said to him, "Fine place to be for America's hero." The story of Mantle's alcoholism is in many ways sadly typical; his friends enabled him, his children joined him in his illness, and eventually he died of it. And in his long journey through it, he often transformed from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde. "When he was the good Mickey, he was funny, friendly,

generous, kind, gracious even. But he could turn on a dime," according to John Lowy, co-owner of Mickey Mantle's Restaurant on Central Park South. Lowy noted that once he turned into bad Mickey, he didn't change back.

Leavy never implies that Mantle's behavior was excusable, let alone forgivable. She describes it, reports it, conveys the opinions of others. But she may also account for it, in part at least. "Long after they were separated," Mantle and Merlyn watched a TV show about "a child who was sexually molested." He revealed to her that his older half-sister had begun abusing him around the age of 4 or 5. Leavy discovered that he had revealed "pieces of the story" to at least four other friends, and that he had been abused as well by older boys. His friend Mike Klepfer said Mantle never revealed the details and would get drunk any time the subject came up. Characteristically, after uncovering as much material as she can, Leavy consults an expert, Richard Gartner, psychologist and author "of the definitive work on the subject, *Betrayed as a Boy*." One suggestion was that because so many of Mantle's boundaries had been violated, he felt it was okay to violate the boundaries of others. Through the experts, Leavy notes that Mantle shared a cluster of symptoms with survivors of childhood abuse: "sexual compulsivity or extreme promiscuity; alcohol or substance abuse; difficulty regulating emotions and self-soothing; bed wetting; a distorted sense of self; self-loathing, shame, and guilt; a schism between a public image and the private self; feelings of isolation and mistrust; and difficulty getting close to others." Leavy points out that today "many victims of childhood sexual abuse are diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder" and that one of the clinical criteria for diagnosing it is "a sense of a foreshortened future." She adds no comment, but Mantle's sense that he would die young is, of course, notorious, and *The Last Boy* deals extensively with the consequences of this obsession for him.

Leavy is more than a talented and scrupulous researcher. She is a fine writer as well, generally achieving a clarity that makes the book exceptional reading, whether she is describing clubhouse antics or scientific research. She can be literary, as when she alludes to Yeats's "The Second Coming" describing Mantle's first panic attack: "The center could no longer hold." Or, quoting the poet Gail Mazur to illustrate the attitude of Red Sox fans toward Mantle, and again to "capture the import" of Mantle's retirement: "the order of the ball game . . . is not the wild fields we wander in." She quotes past laureate Robert Pinsky's approval of Mantle's obscene but funny response to a Yankee P.R. questionnaire. And she herself, borders on the poetic now and again, as when she describes Mantle's futility against Koufax in the 1963 World Series: "Mantle's shadow clung to him as he trudged away from greatness . . . The shadow of his former self embraced him, neither trailing behind nor pointing the way forward." Or, writing about the fateful moment in the 1951 Series which crippled Mantle, "The collision of fates is almost operatic, triangulating the future of the game."

The Last Boy does have a few glitches. The absence of notes, which would enable readers to place quotes in context and to identify sources, is certainly chief among them. At times it's unclear whether Leavy is quoting from a previous book on Mantle or from a recent interview. This lack of documentation is occasionally exasperating. The book's form, while interesting and frequently effective, is disconcerting, especially when one of the significant days seems to be a puzzling or trivial choice. Leavy, as thorough a researcher as she is, also has a few curious deficiencies, as when she refers to "a football player named Tommy McDonald," when McDonald was one of the greatest players of the era, an All-American with a personality to match. Or when she fails to mention that Mantle's good friend and fellow alcoholic Pat Summerall was an NFL player as well as a television announcer. Two headlines from *The Sporting News*

illustrating the Mantle–Maris home run battle in 1961 are incorrectly dated 1957, the kind of glaring error which can cause one to mistrust more obscure dates and events. The chapter “In the Ground,” for example, is dated May 20, 1952. Mutt Mantle died on May 6 and was buried on May 9. May 20 is never mentioned, and quick research indicates that the Yankees played in Chicago that day, a fact which has no place in the episode at all, and a game which is mentioned nowhere in the book.

Rare quibbles aside, *The Last Boy* is a poignant and enlightening book. It may not deal overtly with the end of America’s childhood, but it does portray the fate of an icon in a transitional era. Mantle’s story is presented primarily against the backdrop of the last half of the twentieth century. Leavy does interweave Mantle’s story with social history. She characterizes Billy Martin’s famous Copa birthday party as “the day sportswriting began to grow up,” for example, explaining the maturation thus: “The era of hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil could not withstand TV’s increasingly intrusive cathode glare or the skepticism of an irreverent cohort of young sportswriters for whom questioning authority was a generational prerogative.” One of the pleasures of this book is Leavy’s knowingness, her presentation of salient and instructive facts. The reader learns that the day Mantle played his first World Series game *An American in Paris* opened at Radio City Music Hall and “parking meters were installed in downtown Brooklyn, adding insult to the injury of a heartbroken borough.” And during Mantle’s final season, on May 30, 1968, one of his best days coincided with the 100th celebration of Memorial Day as well as the day the Beatles began recording the *White Album*. Such information clearly illuminates and informs the social changes from beginning to end. Facts are symbolic as well as revelatory. The theme of the gap between myth and reality is represented in one of sport’s most compelling emblems, the Yankees’ interlocking NY, “appropriated from a medal presented to a New York City cop shot in the line of duty in the Tenderloin District — while shaking down the owner of a local saloon.” Leavy exhibits a keen eye for the telling detail.

Mickey Mantle is never diminished by Leavy’s reconciliation of idealization and fact, of myth and reality. If anything, he is exalted in his humanity. Near the book’s end she references Mantle’s funeral: “Bob Costas gave the eulogy, speaking for the child he once was. The children we all were before Mickey Mantle forced us to grow up and see the world as it is, not as we wished it to be. Costas remembered him as ‘a fragile hero to whom we had an emotional attachment so strong and lasting that it defied logic.’” For most fans of the Mick, that emotional attachment survived Mantle’s imperfections, and *The Last Boy* ultimately pays tribute to and celebrates a complex humanity that transcended self-destructive, often tragic, behavior. To say that someone’s behavior was all too human is usually a negative judgment, implying that the person has behaved badly, has succumbed to temptation or to weakness. Jane Leavy vindicates the human in *The Last Boy*. Mickey Mantle, as she shows, certainly did his share of succumbing, he surely displayed an abundance of weakness, but he generated an unfathomable joy in those who loved and admired him. Mickey Mantle was puzzled by it, he sometimes regretted it, but as with heroes throughout history, as with greatness in all realms of behavior, he had that rare quality, the power to make people feel that life can be wondrous and astonishing. In her acknowledgments, Leavy expresses the hope that she kept her promise to Mantle’s family “to return his humanity to him in full.” She did, and that is the grand accomplishment of this book.