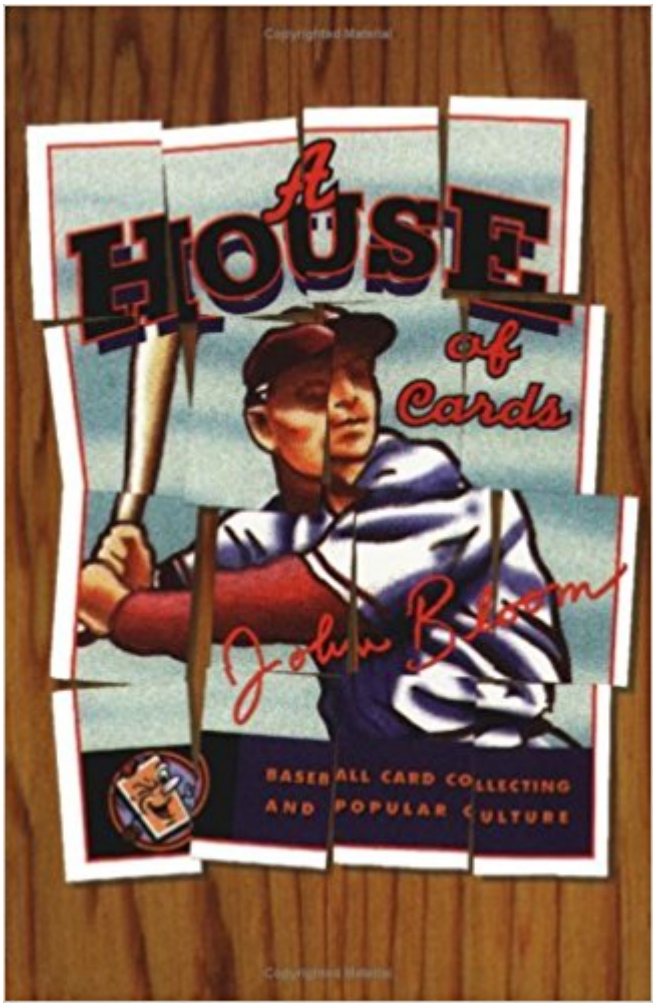
House Of Cards: Baseball Card Collecting And Popular Culture (American Culture)



Synopsis

Presents a study of baseball card collecting in the upper Midwest from the late 1980s into the 1990s.

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Customer Reviews

A study of baseball-card collecting in the upper Midwest becomes ``an ethnographic account of a local fan culture'' by dint of Bloom's wearisome academese. Bloom (American Studies/Dickinson Coll.) latches onto the perhaps obvious premise that ``white middle class men were the primary constituency that comprised the core of the baseball card collecting hobby'' and never lets go. His study covers the late 1980s into the 1990s, after the hobby had been thoroughly commercialized by home-shopping shows on cable television. A hobby with its origins in ``the nostalgia for innocence located in symbols of white middle-class boyhood'' became a big business back in the mid-1970s, when the number of serious collectors grew from 4,000 to 250,000. The Fleer Corporation's successful antitrust suit against Topps opened the door for other companies to produce cards. That, Bloom argues, set off the direct-marketing boom of the late 1980s; baseball cards became the product rather than the incentive to buy a product, such as cereal or gum or cupcakes. Bloom goes on to examine the dynamics of sports memorabilia shows, finding a class structure among the dealers and collectors in their baseball caps and beer-commercial T-shirts. Those he studied ``attempted to make a mass-media form meaningful within their collecting subculture.'' Numbing

statements unfortunately blot out astute, ironic observations, such as Bloom’s noting the annoyance show dealers have with children: What was once a boy’s hobby now has little patience for childish enthusiasms. Not a collector himself, Bloom refers to his interviewees by first names only (``I first learned of Dave when I was interviewing Bob . . .’’), thus giving their statements a confessional edge, like testimony at an AA meeting. Bloom’s occasional cogent observations would be better served by levity and clarity. -- Copyright Ã Â©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Bloom sees nostalgia as potentially a positive force in our lives. The card collecting that we do results in the maintenance of a form of play in our adult lives. We are being active and creative rather that simply accepting adult conventions... But there are negative dimensions to nostalgia, too. Bloom points out that "nostalgia is more often a commentary of dissatisfaction with the present than it is an attempt to accurately understand the past" (p.87). In this context, Bloom finds nostalgia to be as destructive as it is liberating... Having begun the book by announcing himself as an involved observer, Bloom ends by underlining the tentativeness of his conclusions, saying "I see this book as initiating a dialogue about gender identities of men by critically examining an aspect of our culture", viz., baseball card collecting. I found Bloom’s narrative informative and his interpretations thought-provoking. -- Leverett T. [Terry] Smith, Society for American Baseball Research, Bibliography Committee Newsletter, April 1998: 98-2Changes in baseball, American society, and marketing techniques stimulated an upsurge in baseball card collecting in the late 1970s that resulted in a fad that has lasted for two decades. An estimated 4,000 collectors grew to four million by 1989, making baseball card collecting the fourth largest hobby in the United States. Bloom’s book reminds us of how recent the phenomena is and how such a boom creates conflicts among its participants. His book is based on a close reading of collector’s newsletters and magazines, participant observation at baseball card shows and shops where collectors sell and trade their wares, and interviews with about thirty collectors. His purpose is to examine adult sports fan culture as it relates to male gender identity and the concept of masculinity. He succeeds for the most part. Readers interested in the interrelationships among advertising, sports, and masculinity will be amply rewarded by Bloom’s study. Those more interested in the culture of collectors may use his data to compare with other kinds of hobbyists. -- Bernard Mergen, American Studies International, Oct97, Vol. 35 Issue 3, p117.

Read this book if you meet ALL of these criteria:1. You collect baseball cards or collected in the

early 90’s2. You can take someone indirectly picking at card collecting as a hobby3. You could read a really long sociology journal paperIf you can’t take any of those points then it might not be for you. I had a bit of trouble with point 3, but I toughed through it. It has some interesting points about why people collected baseball cards (or still do) and will raise questions in your own mind on why we are so interested in sports and collection possessions in general.

Collecting baseball cards evokes memories of crisp wax paper; the assault of a preadolescent nose with the aroma of sickly sweet, often stale, powder-sugar coated bubble gum; the thrill of your first Ted Williams card; and of clothes-pinning your sixth Pedro Ramos in your bicycle spokes.In stark contrast, Bloom’s book portrays collectors in the angry, white man role; discusses the collector’s insecurities about their rapidly declining social position; their disturbing attitudes toward blacks and women; and their apparent inability to get a date in high school. Why is Bloom saying such disparaging things about the people who collect baseball cards? Bloom spent some time in the late 1980s attending baseball card shows in Minnesota. His observations at the shows, sports card shops, interviews with hobbyists, and secondary research, form the basis for this adaptation of his doctoral thesis. Baseball card collecting can evolve from a children’s hobby to an adult’s business. But the hobby took on an entirely new dynamic during the Reagan years. Many American boys collected cards, and in the economic boom of the 1980s, price’s escalated, and collectors found (if mom hadn’t gotten there first) treasure troves in long-forgotten, old shoe boxes. Unfortunately, many believed, including Bloom, that the newfound wealth corrupted the hobby. Bloom’s typical adult collector is white, male, and lower-middle class. In turn, Bloom blames these card collectors for failed marriages, deceit, deception, the manipulation of children, the exclusion and derision of women, and distancing the races. But is the assertion valid that adult collectors are sexist, merely because the majority are male? Similarly, are they racist because a majority are white? Is the fact that Mickey Mantle’s 1952 Topps rookie card sells at a higher price than Willie Mays’ 1952 card, justifiable evidence of racism among the collecting enthusiasts as the author brazenly maintains? The impact and social ramifications of collecting baseball cards appear to be stretched beyond the realm of plausibility to make an alarming, though questionable, point. Is it possible that collecting bits of cardboard, emblazoned with the images of childhood heroes, really be the cause of this much social discord? But the author has missed a critical point. Bloom states that the cards, in and of themselves, "are of no real consequence." Most collectors would vehemently disagree. Baseball cards derive their value by resurrecting the reminiscences of the collector’s youthful heroes. There is a collective social memory which envelops the collectors and their cards. The fact that trade

guides indicate that selected cards may have some extrinsic value is nice, but for the majority of collectors, not paramount. The same native affinity does not permeate collecting spoons, stamps or coins, or even football or basketball cards. The fact that these collectibles are baseball cards matters a great deal.

As a baseball card collector for over 20 years, I have read countless articles in countless publications about baseball cards and card collecting. Almost every one of the has focused on either the financial aspects of the hobby or on how great it is to be a collector. John Bloom has written a thought provoking and academic book which examines WHY we collect.While I do not agree with some of the authors positions, specifically about race and homoerotocism, I feel that they are well thought out and presented. His description of the MCC, a card collectors club, is very similar to my own experiences in the two clubs to which I have belonged in the past, and offers a unique look at the pettiness and power struggles that often arise in these organizations.Many collectors and hobby writers came out very strongly against this book, but I think that many of them looked at Blooms' conclusions as an attack on the hobby of card collecting. They are not.While the academic tone of the book can make it difficult to read at times, the insights that it offers and the fact that it at least makes the reader THINK about the nature of collecting are reason enough to read "House of Cards".

Bloom's well-researched study of baseball collectors in the 1980s is a wonderful text for studying and teaching about masculinity and popular culture. His book raises important questions about the crisis of masculinity in the latter part of the twentieth century, and the ways that popular culture practices like baseball card collecting both challenged and, ultimately, shored up traditional gender boundaries between men and women. Bloom's work also focuses extensively on the issue of nostalgia, particularly the idealized memory of 1950s American boyhoods. An accessible and engaging tone makes this a fine text to use in popular culture classes or in gender studies classes.

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