

The Facts on Moe Berg

Reviewed by
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One has the distinct feeling that only the United States of America could have produced Morris "Moe" Berg, a prodigiously gifted and complex man whose true life, were it ever adequately written, would put most thriller authors out of business.

He was born in New York in 1902 of immigrant Russian-Jewish parents. He managed to get into Princetown, survive the anti-Semitism of the Ivy League, master a bewildering array of languages, get a law degree from Columbia, play big league baseball for 15 years and perform heroically as an American spy in World War II.

The surface facts of Moe Berg's life—and surface acts are about all one gets from this biography—are out of Ring Lardner in collaboration with Eric Ambler. The baseball years became a saga of skill, patience and that selflessness that makes a fine athlete identify himself with the collective of the team. Moe was a so-so hitter, a slow runner but a superb catcher—a position he fell into by accident. He played with several major league clubs and one minor, but the Boston Red Sox gave him his true baseball home. As his physical powers faded, he became a great teacher of younger ball players.

During the off-season months, Moe Berg practiced law with a Wall Street firm, travelled about the darkening world of the 1930s and learned. Newspapers were his passion. He read them in

Book World

MOE BERG: Athlete, Scholar, Spy. By Louis Kaufman, Barbara Fitzgerald and Tom Sewell.

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a dozen or more languages and held the conceit that a newspaper was dead for him if somebody else read it first.

Recruited by the OSS via Nelson Rockefeller's Office of Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, Berg slipped into Yugoslavia to assess the comparative strengths of Tito and Mihajlovic, was parachuted into Norway to find out how much heavy water was being produced for the Germans at the Rjukan plant and undertook numerous risky missions to contact (or in one case, try to kill) German atomic scientists working on the bomb for Hitler.

When his espionage career began is uncertain—he was photographing the Tokyo skyline during a baseball goodwill tour of Japan in 1934—and when it ended is also unknown. After World War II he was in eastern Europe trying to find out about Soviet atomic progress and he did a brief hitch with Von Karman's NATO advisory group for Aeronautic Research and Development. He died in 1972, still a loner and a mystery to his friends.

What made Moe Berg valuable as an American spy, obviously, was his combination of languages, awesome intellect and physical conditioning. But those gifts, like the facts of his extraordinary career, are just part of the surface.

A thousand questions about the man's inner reality swarm around the mind as one reads this clumping biography. What made him run? What intricate twist-

ings of compulsion created Moe Berg's profound reticence and, thus, his isolation from his fellow beings? He never married; the authors suggest several passionate love affairs, but reveal nothing. What were Moe Berg's politics, his feelings about being a Jew? Whom did he hate, love, envy and admire? Why did he do what he did?

Unhappily, the three authors of this biography leave all the real questions unanswered. Indeed, this is a maddening book because it takes a rich, fascinating life and treats it like a railroad timetable. If there is a victory in the work of Fitzgerald, Kaufman and Sewell, it is over any curiosity they may have had about Moe Berg the man. One of the most intriguing Americans of the 20th century is rendered here into a cigar store Indian.

The authors have done a great deal of factual research. They talked to a great many who knew Moe Berg, including his brother (and Michael Burke who, to my own knowledge, is one of the more perceptive observers of his species around). But—like the man who spoke many languages and couldn't say anything sensible in any of them—the facts lead them nowhere in the biographer's task of probing the *why?* that lies beneath the *what?* of a subject's life. Fitzgerald, Kaufman and Sewell have a prose style reminiscent of Di-Gel commercials.

Moe Berg deserves the full treatment of a serious biographer. One hopes he gets it someday.