

Eight men out: the book versus the film



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The book and subsequent film *Eight Men Out* both portray one of the lowest points in professional sports in American history. Popularly known as the Black Sox Scandal, it involved members of the Chicago White Sox baseball team allegedly taking money from gamblers in exchange for purposely losing the 1919 World Series. The actual events and participants in the scandal have been a source of contention ever since, with supporters of several players pointing to statistics that belie the idea some of them purposely played badly. Both the book and the movie present this story through a vast panorama of characters from three worlds: the baseball world, the newspaper world and the underworld. As a result, neither the book nor the movie contain what is traditionally considered to be a protagonist or hero. Rather, both pieces emphasize the complexity of all the characters, rather than the “good” or “evil” of one. By virtue of his medium, an author has more time to evoke resonance and nuance than a filmmaker. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Elliott Asinof succeeds in portraying the scandal with more complexity than John Sayles can in his film. The true story behind what really happened in any actual event is always dependent upon a variety of elements. Since no one involved at any level in this drama can possibly come out looking anything better than unscrupulous or gullible, it should not be at all surprising that any of them might have been unwilling to be completely honest. The statements given by the players to the Grand Jury raised more than questions than answers, and the true story of the gamblers who set the event in motion will forever remain mysterious. That atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty is felt throughout the book and, indeed, lends it a sense of greatness. The reader can never be completely certain how deeply involved in the scandal were such players as Buck Weaver and Shoeless Joe

Jackson. As movies are made for the satisfaction of a mass audience that has less patience with unanswered questions, John Sayles was forced to be less indefinite. The film provides a starker contrast between those players committed to athletic sabotage and those who are assumed to be mere pawns. The difference is not necessarily inspired by art, but economics. The wider the intended audience for a piece, the less likely one is to see nuance and subtlety. Compare, for example, an independent film about a low-budget independent film about a parent/child relationship versus any sitcom. One central similarity between the book and movie is the decision to make pitcher Eddie Cicotte the emotional center. Cicotte, despite being a player for whom there is little doubt he was a willful participant, nevertheless seems to have the best reason of all to do what he did. The book and movie both present Cicotte as the primary recipient of White Sox owner Charlie Comiskey's sensational greed, but also fall short of turning him into a hero. Rather, he was a great pitcher denied a bonus for winning thirty games in a season only because, allegedly, Comiskey ordered him to be benched so he would not have the chance. While both book and movie strive to make Eddie Cicotte sympathetic if not actually laudable, he is used to different ideological aims in the two media. For Asinoff, Cicotte's position is exploited primarily as a figure who is opposition to Charlie Comiskey. In the book, Eddie Cicotte comes across as older and a bit more fragile, an aging pitcher whose arm was the feeling the effects of the thousands of balls he had pitched over the year. Despite the fact that his contributions and loyalty were expressed in a 29-7 record, his bank account did not reflect his part in providing owner Comiskey with a team that many were calling the best. Asinoff's book introduces an element of David versus Goliath with the notable reversal of

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fortune in having Goliath win. Although elements of a socialist struggle between the owners and laborers exist in the book, for the most part, Asinoff aims for strict historical resonance. Jonathan Sayles, on the other, directly attacks the story to comment on a larger socio-economic perspective. Sayles accentuates the ideological distinctions between ownership and the players and then makes a conscious connection between Comiskey and the gamblers; both are exploiting the baseball players and both will wind up free from any serious penalty. As such, what Sayles seems to argue is that it is the American Dream to want to better yourself—and there is little distinction between doing it legally or illegally. Either way, the disenfranchised laborer will always be the one who pays the price for another man's successful realization of the dream. That Sayles is particularly interested in the social stakes that exist in this story can be exemplified in that it is he himself who appears as the character of writer Ring Lardner and responds to the undeserved praise of owner Charlie Comiskey with “ If he is such a fan, why doesn't he pay them a living wage?” Sayles uses Eddie Cicotte to drive home the essential point that had the White Sox owner only paid his employees what they deserved, they never would have had reason to turn to gamblers. The entire scandal could have been avoided. At issue in the specifics of Cicotte, the larger issues of employee relations in baseball and of social stratification cause the disconnect between the American Dream and reality. Baseball has been considered America's national pastime, and holds a special place in the symbolism of America. As the first successful big-time professional sport, baseball was seen to democratize ambition; anyone with talent could become successful playing baseball. Yet this may not be the case. It is of particular interest that the scandal came to be known as the <https://assignbuster.com/eight-men-out-the-book-versus-the-film/>

Black Sox scandal; the events took place before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier. As a result, there are no black players implicated in the scandal, and obviously no black players involved in either baseball management or the milieu of organized crime. At a time when racism was the norm and Jim Crow laws were in place throughout much of America, perhaps one of the reasons why the scandal was such a shock was that all those implicated were white. The outrage may have been sparked not only because it was assumed that, as males being paid to play a sport, these men would have no economic troubles that would force such an extreme action, but also because the men, as whites, could not possibly be criminals. Black men, however, could easily have been. Thus, it was the democratization of the national pastime that may have taken the biggest hit. The fact that these were all white men who would engage in such a troublesome chain of events points to two prime considerations that most people preferred to overlook about professional sports at the time. Becoming an athlete was not necessarily a choice; like enlisting in the army, it often was borne of economic necessity. Most baseball players of the time-as well as now-did not come from well-to-do homes. Rich people rarely pursue a career in athletics. For one reason, becoming an athlete requires dedication, something much harder to achieve when so many distractions are available. But for those whose only distraction is getting enough to eat or getting a part-time job to meet bills, sports become an entry into economic self-determination. This was especially true in the early part of the 20th century. These men had little access to getting good jobs by virtue of birth. In partnership with that is the fact that most of them were not well educated. While players such as Buck Weaver and Eddie Cicotte appear to be far more educated than a backwoods

country boy like Joe Jackson, in comparison to the executive staff working for Comiskey, they were little better off than Jackson. Their lack of a formal education may, in fact, have contributed to the gullibility that allowed them to be manipulated so easily not just by the gamblers but also by Comiskey. After all, the sporting world is primarily a means toward socialization. The initial exposure to organized sports usually occurs at a young age, in a neighborhood environment in which the players share common ethnicities and economic circumstances. This sharing of social factors can work as a driving force toward bonding and as a result it should be surprising that many athletes share common perspectives toward political and social issues. Part of this can be attributed to a lack of education. Eight Men Out is an appropriate title not only because eight of the White Sox players were banned from the game, but because those players are alienated from the rest of society. Whether in the service of the legal chicanery of owner Charles Comiskey or the illegal capitalist endeavors of the gamblers, the players remained on the outside fringes of the system, ready to be exploited at every turn—and with no one to turn to when they most needed help.