

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Sugar*]

Rough in the Diamond

By Steve Sailer

“SUGAR” IS A CRITICALLY acclaimed indie film about a 20-year-old Dominican pitcher’s minor league baseball season in Iowa. “Half Nelson,” the last collaboration of its married auteurs, Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, brought Ryan Gosling a Best Actor nomination as a caring white liberal teacher in a Brooklyn slum school attended by African-Americans and Dominicans. As numerous Dominican immigrants in New York City are failed minor leaguers, “Sugar” was a logical next film for the pair.

This movie is about a black Dominican, but it was very much made for white Americans. Indeed, “Sugar” exemplifies Sundance movies. It is so sensitive, subtle, soft-spoken, averse to crowd-pleasing gimmicks, and generally beholden to the *Stuff White People Like* rulebook that few ballplayers of any nationality would pay to see it. Dodger slugger Manny Ramirez would snore so loudly through it that the audience couldn’t hear the soundtrack’s climactic song: Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” sung in Spanish.

Boden and Fleck wanted not a tale of triumph but a statistically representative illustration of the typical Dominican athlete’s brief career. We see the young pitcher Sugar (portrayed by Algenis Perez Soto, an amateur second baseman who visibly can’t throw his character’s

supposed 95 mph fastball) at the Kansas City organization’s training academy in the baseball-mad small city of San Pedro de Macoris, birthplace of 73 major league players, including Sammy Sosa. We follow him to spring training in Phoenix, then to Single A ball in Iowa. There he’s lonely because there are no Spanish-speaking girls to chat up. After an injury, he’s demoted to the bullpen. His pride too wounded to return home, he quits the team and hops a bus to the South Bronx, where he pursues a career in illegal immigration.

Although most Dominicans, such as the American-born Alex Rodriguez, are some shade of beige, San Pedro ballplayers tend to be descended from black Jamaicans brought in to chop sugar cane. Last year, the 88 Dominicans made up almost 12 percent of major league rosters, despite the Dominican Republic having only 3 percent of America’s population. The average major league salary is approaching \$3 million, so Dominican big leaguers earn around a quarter of a billion dollars annually.

The young ballplayer claims he’s nicknamed “Sugar” because he’s “so sweet with the ladies,” but Boden and Fleck want their film’s title to convey that by signing so many Dominican teens, baseball teams are, like sugar companies, neocolonialist exploiters. To the filmmakers, American ballclubs are to blame both for exploiting Dominicans and for not exploiting African-Americans. Fleck complains that the black American share “has gone down to somewhere around 8 or 9 percent now, while the Dominican population in baseball has risen dramatically. Major League Baseball has taken money out of the inner cities ... and flipped it into the Dominican Republic, where they can sign players much cheaper.” In the Sundance worldview, whatever happens is

white people’s fault; blacks can’t make choices for themselves.

In reality, while MLB teams would love to employ verbally charismatic African-Americans instead of tongue-tied Spanish speakers, black American kids these days mostly consider baseball boring. The Dominican Republic represents one of the few sizable concentrations of fast and strong youths of West African descent who find baseball more fascinating than basketball, soccer, or cricket. (Also, steroids can be bought legally without a prescription in Dominican pharmacies.)

The real scandal is that big league baseball has facilitated the illegal immigration of tens of thousands of washed-up uneducated jocks. It privatizes profits and socializes costs.

The irony in this trend of dramas striving to be “more documentary-like” is that the best documentaries are far more satisfyingly dramatic than “Sugar.” For example, Werner Herzog’s popular documentary “Grizzly Man” culminates with the annoying protagonist being devoured by a bear. Documentaries that follow somebody as ho-hum as Sugar are unlikely to get widely distributed or even finished.

Boden and Fleck are garnering critical kudos for refusing to create an intriguing plot. Yet they didn’t have to redo “Rocky.” They could have, say, made the kid not a 20-year-old prospect but an 18-year-old prodigy. Once the audience is rooting for him, they could then have yanked the rug out by revealing that the phenom’s agent, like previous Dominican talent hustlers (such as their own technical adviser, ex-Cincinnati Red Jose Rijo), had defrauded the Americans: the sensation’s not 18, he’s really 22, with just a journeyman’s natural talent. Now that would be a story. ■

Rated R for language, some sexuality, and brief drug use.

BOOKS

[*The Eagle and the Crown: Americans and the British Monarchy*, Frank Prochaska, Yale University Press, 240 pages]

From George III to George W.

By Andro Linklater

FRANK PROCHASKA offers a provocative thesis in *The Eagle and the Crown*. To the customary list of legacies left by the British after independence—language, the common law, representative government—he argues that we should add a predilection for monarchical rule. Much of his book is devoted to the not very interesting effusions of royalty fervor that periodically swell the bosoms of nominal republicans. But this froth, he suggests, is thrown up by a more subversive undercurrent. For all their pride in being “citizens” rather than “subjects,” Americans hanker for the firm smack of command from a monocratic sovereign. It is a desire planted in them by the extraordinary powers granted to the president by the Constitution, and since 1789, it has been fostered by the explosive increase in the reach of federal authority.

The argument begins with the monarchical mood that infected the Founding Fathers in their deliberations on the president’s role. As Benjamin Franklin Bache observed in 1797, the designers of the Constitution “dismissed the name of king, but they retained a prejudice for his authority. Instead of keeping as little, they kept as much of it as possible for their president.”

They did so despite being aware of good republican alternatives. A classical education had made most delegates to the Constitutional Convention familiar with the examples of an assembly-led democracy in Athens and the Roman

republic’s reliance on consuls to head the government, while James Madison, at least, had also studied the contemporary model of republican Switzerland’s cantonal confederation. And from far away in Paris came Thomas Jefferson’s advocacy of senatorial oversight to guide the Republic’s destiny.

Nevertheless, according to Madison’s notes, what concerned delegates was the extent of the elective monarch’s powers, not whether the post should exist. To quote Bache again, they created a constitution before they had “sufficiently *unmonarchized* their ideas and habits.” The anomalous outcome was a republic that invested its chief executive with the sweeping authority of Article Two of the Constitution, to be commander in chief of the armed forces, to make treaties, to issue pardons, to appoint supreme court judges and “all other officers of the United States,” and to take whatever other action the president deems necessary to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution.”

With the detached wisdom of his 82 years, Benjamin Franklin justified the decision on psychological grounds. “It will be said that we do not propose to establish kings,” he commented. “But there is a natural inclination in mankind to Kingly Government. They had rather have one tyrant than five hundred. It gives more of the appearance of equality among Citizens, and that they like.” There was good reason both for Adams’s proposal that the president should be addressed as “His Mightiness” and for Jefferson’s acerbic remark that “We were educated in royalism; no wonder if some of us retain that idolatry still.”

According to Prochaska’s argument, the planting of that seed explains the apparently illogical attachment to the folderols of British royalty felt by otherwise republican citizens. The Constitution encourages it as insidiously as it breeds respect for Magna Carta.

Prochaska illustrates the strength of this attachment with examples that range from Washington’s rationale in 1789 for the coronation-like ritual of his inauguration—“it was taken from the

Practice of that Government under which we had lived so long and so happily formerly”—through to *Time* magazine’s all-time record sale in 1997 of 1.2 million copies for an issue devoted to Diana, Princess of Wales.

The Victorian era provides the richest material. The author cites an editorial from the *Richmond Whig* on the eve of the Civil War: “To be under the dominion of a lady like Queen Victoria, distinguished by every virtue, would constitute a favorable exchange for the vulgar rule of a brutish blackguard like Lincoln.” With satisfying symmetry, he finds that remark balanced 30 years later by New York mayor Abram Hewitt paying grateful tribute to “our Queen” for personally preventing “the motherland” from giving formal recognition to the Confederacy.

By the end of the book, when Prochaska quotes Walter Bagehot, editor of *The Economist* and author in 1867 of the incomparable study *The English Constitution*, it is difficult to be sure whether the remarks apply to the east or the west coast of the Atlantic: “So long as the human heart is strong and the human reason weak, Royalty will be strong because it appeals to diffused feeling, and Republics weak because they appeal to understanding.”

Despite the author’s evident intelligence and assiduous research, his case is weakened by serious flaws. Perhaps because the book is also aimed at a British audience, it focuses on the celebrity sizzle of royalty’s appeal rather than the meaty constitutional questions posed by the investment of sovereignty in one individual. Its evidence is largely anecdotal, culled from letters and newspapers, and of necessity highly selective. At first glance, the thousands that mobbed the future Edward VII in Chicago in 1862 seem impressive testimony to royalty’s pulling power, except that in the same city just as many people crowded in some years later to see Buffalo Bill Cody. The affection felt for Victoria was undoubtedly genuine, but with Britain supplying almost half the United States’ imports and consuming about one quarter of its exports, how much of