

IDH 2930 Section 1D18 HNR Read Moneyball
Tuesday 3 (9:35-10:25 a. m.)
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Moneyball includes twelve chapters, an epilogue, and a (for me) important postscript. We will read and discuss one chapter a week, then finish with a week devoted to the epilogue and to the postscript. At our first meeting we will introduce ourselves to each other and figure out who amongst us are baseball fans, who not. (One need not have an interest in baseball to enjoy Lewis or to enjoy *Moneyball*; indeed, the course benefits greatly from disinterested business and math majors.) I will ask you to write informally every class session about the reading. I will not grade your responses, but I will keep a word count. At the end of the semester, we will have an Awards Ceremony for our most prolific writers.

While this is not a prerequisite, I hope that everyone has looked at *Moneyball* the movie (starring Brad Pitt as Billy Beane) before we begin to work with the book.

Moneyball first was published—to great acclaim—in 2003. So the book is fifteen-year's old, and the “new” method of evaluating baseball players pioneered by Billy Beane has been widely adopted. Beane's Oakland A's no longer are as successful as they were in the early 2000s. What Lewis refers to as “sabremetrics”—the statistical analysis of baseball performance—has expanded greatly. Baseball now has statistics totally different from those in place as Lewis wrote: WAR (Wins against replacement), WHIP (Walks and hits per inning pitched) among them. We will open the semester by talking about a Tampa Bay Rays outfielder Kevin Kiermaier, whom the Rays gave a huge contract because they believe they can measure how many games he helps win with his defensive prowess (he's not much of a hitter). At the time Lewis wrote *Moneyball*, even the most confident sabremetericians had not found a way to measure defense. So we will read *Moneyball* not only as an interesting story but also as an historical artifact. How out of date has Lewis become? What can we learn from his outdatedness? Is Billy Beane's the fate of all great innovators?

Billy Beane revealed that much of what passed for talent evaluation in baseball was no more than prejudice; scouts favored players with a certain “look,” and no fat players need apply. Throughout the semester, we (as has Lewis) will move beyond baseball to ask how some of our most important evaluations (SAT and GRE scores, school ratings, judgments of witnesses in criminal cases—she used “aks,” I couldn't trust her) only may appear “bias-free.”

Please bring a pen and paper to all class sessions.

Schedule of Readings:

28 August	Introduction
4 September	Preface, Chapter 1 The Curse of Talent

11 September	Chapter 2 How to Find a Ballplayer
18 September	Chapter 3 The Enlightenment
25 September	Chapter 4 Field of Ignorance
2 October	Chapter 5 The Jeremy Brown Blueplate Special
9 October	Chapter 6 The Science of Winning an Unfair Game
16 October	Chapter 7 Giambi's Hole
23 October	Chapter 8 Scott Hatteberg Pickin' Machine
30 October	Chapter 9 The Trading Desk
6 November	Chapter 10 Anatomy of an Undervalued Pitcher
13 November	Chapter 11 The Human Element
20 November	No Class
27 November	Chapter 12 The Speed of the Idea
4 December	Epilogue and Postscript/ Final Thoughts Breakfast: The Honors Program would like us to share a meal together; let's see what we can work out. Writing awards (including two tickets to the football Gators 2019 home opener).

This is not required reading, but I include below an overview of the course, a version of which has appeared on the Honors web site.

Overview of Michael Lewis's *Moneyball*: Baseball and How We Know

Moneyball, Michael Lewis's account of the iconoclastic achievements of Billy Beane, General Manager of the Oakland A's, hit the bestseller lists in 2003. And it became the basis, in 2011, for a successful movie starring Brad Pitt.

A "can't miss" prospect who missed, Beane has succeeded with the small-market, low-budget A's because he turned against the baseball conventions that made him a first-round draft pick (by the Mets) and set him up to fail. Earlier and more completely than any other team, the A's applied the statistical approach of Bill James to judging both baseball achievement and, perhaps more important, baseball talent. Beane surrounds himself with Ivy League graduates who never played professional baseball, and they grind out data even more esoteric than the on-base percentages that Beane, who appears in *Moneyball* as something of a slave to algorithms, values.

As *Moneyball* became a bestseller, Beane was attacked by baseball writers and insiders for his egotism and self-promotion. In an acerbic Postscript to a later printing of the book, Lewis defends Beane, dismissing his attackers as “a kind of Woman’s Auxiliary” who are not ready for Beane’s innovations and who cannot acknowledge his success. Lewis, then, understands the animus against himself and Beane to be social; a club that benefits from the game had to defame a non-member who broke its rules. This course will propose another motive. Rather than defending a club, Beane’s critics defend a way of knowing. At stake in *Moneyball* is not a way of (baseball) life but an epistemology.

Beane’s actions during the June 2001 baseball amateur draft, surprisingly, were not the climactic event in the movie. By the time the A’s made their second selection in the first round—a selection who would cost around 1.2 million dollars to sign—Jeremy Bonderman, then a high school junior, had risen to the top of A’s Scouting Director Grady Fuson’s list. The scouts loved Bonderman’s easy delivery and ninety-four mile per hour fastball. In the 2001 season Bonderman had gone 3-1 for Pasco (Washington) High School, with a 3.60 ERA and fifty-four strikeouts in thirty-five innings. For Beane, the ninety-four mile per hour fastball notwithstanding, that data base was “next to nothing.”

When Fuson picked Bonderman, he cost himself his job; he so angered Beane that he threw a chair *through* a wall. While the incident aptly culminates Lewis’s portrayal of Beane as a “bit of a maniac,” this course will ask if he actually displayed restraint. Men (and women) have killed for less than being asked to spend 1.2 million dollars on something they cannot see, cannot know. Bonderman was, and remains today, the first player to be selected after his junior year of high school.

As we read *Moneyball*, we will outline the course of Jeremy Bonderman’s professional career—one that, at first, seemed to vindicate the scouts, now seems to vindicate Beane. We also will recur to a “truth” with which honors students at a post-modern university should become familiar: our “ways of life” *are* our “ways of knowing”; we build our social lives (clubs) upon our epistemologies.