

AARP Segunda Juventud

A bilingual magazine

welcome!

english

español

home

games

food NEW

presence

Rx drugs

social security

trends

health

finance

travel

sports

entertainment

contact us

reader services

AARP en español

AARP Puerto Rico

ADVERTISEMENT



PHOTO: PHOTO FILE/MLB PHOTOS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

An Interview with David Maraniss

BY CARLOS J. QUEIRÓS
April/May 2006

AARP *Segunda Juventud* Associate Editor Carlos J. Queirós interviewed Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Maraniss about his latest book, *Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero* (*Clemente: La pasión y el donaire del último héroe del béisbol*) (April 2006).

more

[read a review of clemente](#)
[hispanic hall of famers](#)

Q: What brought you to write this book? Why now?

A: It is a book that I had always wanted to write. I grew up in Wisconsin, rooting for the Milwaukee Braves, but Roberto Clemente was always my favorite player. There was just something about him, this beautiful fury that separated him from all the other baseball players. It was partly the way he played and looked in the Pirates' uniform, but mostly just something that emanated from him that I couldn't fully grasp as a kid. Later in life, I began to understand more about him. By the time I was writing books, I knew that this was a book that I always wanted to write. I'm 56 years old and have been a journalist for over 30 years, and now seemed like the right time.

Q: After the Pittsburgh Pirates' victory in the 1971 World Series against the Baltimore Orioles, Clemente addressed the cameras first in Spanish. Why do you think he chose to do that?

A: I thought that moment was the essence of Roberto Clemente and symbolizes why he is so revered in all of Latin America. He strived throughout his career to get the recognition he thought he wasn't getting. Then he has this one great moment on the world television stage and he chooses to speak in Spanish—to thank his parents and sons, to honor all those that came before him in baseball. It was such an expression of pride in who he was and where he was from that everyone I talked to—especially the Latin ballplayers—both young and old, remembers that moment with great clarity.



Q: Do you think the reception of this book will be different among Latino readers?

A: The feelings for Clemente are incredibly deep in all of Latin America and in Pittsburgh too. There are Clemente devotees

Find articles from current or past issues »



or search

94

Subscribe

Sign up for the free AARP Segunda Juventud.org eNewsletter


Get the Magazine

Not an AARP member? [Join now](#) and start receiving AARP *Segunda Juventud* magazine at home, plus other great benefits.

[Join now »](#)

Already an AARP member? [Click here](#) to start receiving AARP *Segunda Juventud* magazine in your home.

**AARP
Rewards
Platinum
Visa® Card
from Chase**



**Earn
Cash
Back**

click here

**0%
intro
APR***

AARP Financial
Credit Card Services
by **CHASE**

everywhere. He does have a special, deeper, soulful meaning to Hispanics. If in fact I capture that, it might have that special meaning to them. I tried to write a universal story through Clemente, who is a universal character. I wrote for the largest audience possible. I wanted to write about Clemente from the inside out, to make him a real human being for the readers. I also knew that through him, I could write about not only baseball but also the broader story of race and the Latinization of the United States. Anybody who is interested in human nature, motivation, and the dignity of humanity will be interested in this book.

Q: How does writing a biography change your relationship with a figure? Was it difficult since Clemente wasn't alive?

A: I discovered in writing the biography of Bill Clinton that it is actually easier to write a biography of someone who is dead. Although you can't interview them, you have a fuller perspective on their whole life after they're gone and people are more willing to talk about them. I went into this with the prejudice that I loved Clemente as a player, but I'm trained enough as a journalist of 30 years and as a biographer to know that I'm not going to be blinded by anything. I wanted to present the real Clemente. When I first talked to his family about it, I told them about my biographies of Vince Lombardi and Clinton and gave them those books. I said that I'm only there to write the truth, I'm not going to cover anything up, but I'll put everything in context and get as close to the truth of this person as I can. So, if you go into the writing with your eyes wide open, it makes the process easier and that is what I tried to do with Clemente.

Q: How did the family feel about you writing the book?

A: They appeared to be open to it. Vera, his widow, is an incredibly gracious woman. His sons Luis and Roberto have an early copy of the book and I think they've all read it. I think it could only serve to their benefit.

Q: I'm sure there was a lot you couldn't include in the book. Did you purposely leave out anything that could be construed as negative?

A: No. My basic philosophy is that no human being is a saint. Clemente had a lot of wonderful characteristics and some difficult ones. I think people could appreciate him more by seeing his flaws, warts and all. That's the way I try to approach a book.

Q: I had no idea Clemente was such a humanitarian. Do you think this is a side of him people know?

A: People who remember Clemente remember that he died in a plane crash. They might have some sense that it was on a humanitarian mission but probably don't realize the extent of his humanitarian nature. It was deep inside him. He would go out of his way to talk to people and help them, to ask them their life stories, to give them money if they needed it. He visited kids in hospitals without advertising it or having a public relations person telling everyone what he was doing. It was not for show with Clemente; it was part of his being. It's what motivated him to try to form the Sports City for poor kids in Puerto Rico and took him on the mission that led to his death.

Q: Do you think his humanitarian concerns were fueled by his own humble beginnings?

A: It's hard to know exactly how people develop the characters they do. There could be people from humble beginnings that turn into jerks. Some characteristics are just part of that special soul of that human being. But I think that he remembered where he was from and he always felt that he was from the people and wanted to represent the people. He would use that rhetoric. So I think that drove him.

Q: What role did family play in Clemente's life?

A: I think his parents and siblings were incredibly important to Clemente when he was growing up. He didn't have much money, but he did have a very tight family. He talked about family all the time, both the family he grew up in and the family he created with Vera and his three sons. He was always searching for family. There is nothing lonelier than being an athlete on the road for half of your life. Clemente, in almost every city the Pirates visited, created friendships that would develop into a sort of extended family. It was really an important part of his whole being.

Q: You write that memory and myth are entwined in Clemente's story. How so?

A: In so many ways, Clemente's life became mythological. That doesn't mean not true, but that it had a larger mythic sense to it. The way he died as a hero delivering aid to strangers on New Year's Eve in a plane crash. His body never found. He had exactly 3,000 hits—the exact number that is sort of magical to get into the Hall of Fame. There are just so many elements to Roberto Clemente that had that notion of myth to them. He became, in death, larger than life.

Read a [review](#) of *Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero*.

[Return to Top](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



The advertisement banner features a dark red background on the left with the text "Free Shipping" in white. In the center, there is a small image of a woman with glasses looking at a Toshiba laptop. To the right of the image, the text reads "on all Toshiba notebooks when you buy online." Below this text is the website "ToshibaDirect.com". On the far right, there is a red button with the text "Shop now" and the Toshiba logo with the tagline "Leading Innovation >>>" below it.

www.aarp.org | [contact us](#) | [privacy policy](#)
copyright 2007, AARP. All rights reserved.