*A Year of Playing Catch* by Ethan D. Bryan (Zondervan Books, 2020, 226 pages)

Reviewed by Robert Hamblin

Given that so much of the writing about baseball these days treats such troubling issues as race, protests, COVID19, labor disputes, and cheating, it’s a real delight to read a book about the simple joy of playing catch.  But Ethan D. Bryan’s *A Year of Playing Catch* is about much more than baseball.  As Bryan explains, the exercise “transformed into an adventure all about people, an adventure of creating strong memories with family and friends new and old” (95).

    On New Year’s Day, 2018, after a short game of catch with his two daughters, Bryan hit upon the novel idea of playing catch with someone every day of the year, all 365 days.  The commitment led him to travel 12,000  miles through 10 states and introduced him to some fascinating individuals and their personal stories, both heartwarming and sad.

    Bryan’s partners in catch were family members, friends, and strangers—young and old, male and female, athletes and non-athletes, able-bodied and physically challenged.   He traveled with his dad to Dyersville, Iowa, to play catch on the Field of Dreams.  He played catch with a high school classmate in memory of their favorite English teacher and with a young girl who is afflicted with a rare genetic disorder.  Other partners included Bill Virdon, the longtime major league player and manager; Scott Bailes, a nine-year MLB pitcher; Mary Moore, a former player in the All-American  Girls Professional Baseball League (a.k.a. “A League of Their Own”); Bob Kendrick, president of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum; Jim Morris, whose major league pitching career became the basis for the popular movie, *The Rookie*; Little Bear, a teenaged star pitcher for the touring Beijing Shougang Eagles softball team; Crystal Quade, a Missouri state representative; and Rick Grayson, a successful PGA teaching professional. (An appendix to the book lists all 530 participants and dates of the sessions).

    The conversations and interactions with his catch partners gave Bryan valuable insights into such subjects as diversity, parenting, education, religion, art, music, and disabilities, as well as sports.  One of those insights deals with the importance of play in our daily lives.  As Bryan notes, we all need to strive at “creating space for fun to celebrate life with others, stepping away from the screens and constant bombardment of stress and pressure and online vitriol between strangers over every single topic” (135).  He adds, “Play is an audacious act of hope.  In a world that is driven by the bottom line and uber-efficiency, play loudly challenges everyone not to take themselves so seriously.  Play breathes into our broken world and extends an invitation to join the present beauty” (66).

    Another important lesson relates to the benefits of setting goals and working hard to achieve them.  To complete his year-long quest, Bryan had to play catch in winter wind chills near zero, triple-digit summer heat, and occasionally pouring rain.  Scheduling—and sometimes re-scheduling—presented a constant challenge to keep his string of consecutive days intact.  But in the process he found wisdom that he could now direct to others:  “To push themselves to an extreme, to the edge of suffering, to see what they can learn about life and themselves. . . To experience the cathartic joy of doing something hard and seeing it to completion” (72).

*A Year of Playing Catch* is an uplifting and inspirational book, written in an engaging, conversational style.  I think I’ll locate my old glove and a ball and go play catch with a friend.