Wolf, Thomas. *The Called Shot: Babe Ruth, The Chicago Cubs, and the Unforgettable Major League Baseball Season of 1932*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023[2020]. 374 pages. Paperback, $27.95. E-book available.

Reviewed by Rachel Franklin.

Babe Ruth’s ‘Called Shot’ is one of the most famous moments in baseball history. In game 3 of the 1932 World Series between the Yankees and Cubs, Ruth allegedly made a gesture out to centre field before hitting a home run in that direction. Thomas Wolf provides an account of this moment in the context of the 1932 season as a whole, positioning “[t]he at bat… as a piece of the larger narrative. A perfect storm of circumstances created the opportunity for Ruth to enact this drama” (278). In doing this, Wolf uses an accessible style, continuing that used in his books co-written with Patricia L. Bryan, *Midnight Assassin: A Murder in America’s Heartland* (2005) and *The Plea: The True Story of Young Wesley Elkins and his Struggle for Redemption* (2022). These books have in common a focus on the telling of stories. In Chapter 18, ‘Legs of Glass,’ he states that “[e]very baseball season is a collection of linked stories” (184), and indeed that describes the structure of the book. The chapters form linked stories that construct a version of the 1932 season and the historical context against which it played out, highlighting the interconnectivity of events, baseball and non-baseball related, inside and outside the ballpark. The introduction sets this up wonderfully, as it notes the socio-economic and political context of the 1932 season.

The book would appeal to readers of baseball history who enjoy statistics and play-by-play accounts of innings. Wolf uses these accounts, along with league tables and comparative stat tables to flesh out the 1932 season. There is an emphasis on records and the importance of statistics to the general success and everyday running of ball clubs. This is not to say, however, that this is a book of numbers. Wolf strikes a balance between statistics and accounts of the behaviour of various players, managers, politicians, etc. who impacted the 1932 season, not to mention the various historical events which impacted those individuals. There are so many different people mentioned within the text that Wolf helpfully includes reminders as to who is who throughout, and the inclusion of photographs allows the reader to put faces to names.

Occasionally, in his accounts of the 1932 season, he uses a self-consciously literary style, which is especially noticeable in Chapter 15, ‘Wicked Chicago,’ where he uses the language one associates with Noir, but with a light, humorous touch. For instance, in focusing on the shooting of Billy Jurges by Violet Popovich he uses the words, “the wounded lovers” (159), “drinking gin and thinking about murder” (157), “married to a hoodlum” (153), and the characterisation of Chicago as, “From its beginning, Chicago had been a rough and charming town, a city of big ambitions where disputes were sometimes settled in episodes of violence” (150). This makes for an entertaining read which clearly demonstrates Wolf’s enthusiasm and affection for his subject, but adds a literary gloss over the grittier aspects of early 1930s Chicago.

Continuing the self-consciously literary aspects of the account, Wolf more than once uses the term “boys of summer,” nodding to Roger Kahn’s 1972 book of the same name, to describe young boys who religiously followed the baseball season. He even names a chapter after the book, detailing a romanticised transformation of the Yankees’ players into “just boys playing a summer game in front of a small contingent of local fans” (200). One of the unintentional consequences of this romanticisation is that the book perpetuates the idea that baseball is a male game. Whilst in a footnote on p328, Wolf nods to works which focus on women in baseball, there is a marked male-normative framing within the book. Young Charles Ireland is described as among “other boys of summer, dedicated young baseball fans, some of them seeing their first Major League game” (247).

Babe Ruth’s ‘Called Shot’ is the moment to which Wolf’s account leads, and it receives all the attention that one might expect, Wolf trying to instil within it all the suspense and drama that one might have experienced watching in the stands that day. However, Wolf also acknowledges how the ‘Called Shot’ has been questioned, ultimately arguing for its status as a ‘story,’ but not in a way which retracts from its importance to baseball history: “Whether or not it actually happened, it has become a cornerstone of Ruth’s legend” (278). Towards the end of the book, Wolf pulls together the various threads of the book wonderfully, something needed considering there have been so many ‘characters’ introduced and events described. However, the positioning of the ‘Called Shot’ as a story and its relationship to so many other events and characters, whilst argued-for well, gives a lie to the title of the book as it is not primarily about that moment in history. Rather, ‘the larger narrative’ involves the aims and fates of other teams during the season, primarily the Cubs, Cardinals, Athletics, and the Senators, as well as the Yankees. The book is about the season as a whole, culminating in that ‘Called Shot.’ Ultimately, however, this is a critique of the title, rather than the book, its style, and the argument as a whole. Wolf’s work is informative, entertaining, and accessible to readers who are not necessarily baseball fans. The book demonstrates those aspects of the game most appealing to its fans (statistics, characters, and its stories), but does so in a way that anyone interested in the social, political, and sporting climate of the first half of the North American 20th century would enjoy.