



## A Timeless Classic on Hither Lane

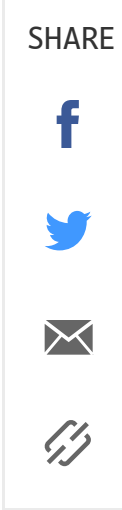
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# The Salt of the Diamond

A look back at the 1947 World Series—in which Joe DiMaggio and Jackie Robinson played—focusing on six of its unsung heroes. Edward Kosner reviews ‘Electric October’ by Kevin Cook.



PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE

By **Edward Kosner**  
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SAVE PRINT TEXT



Of all sports, baseball lives the most in its past. Those meticulous statistics help, of course. And the fact that, over the years, the game has attracted more gifted writers than any other, from Ring Lardner to John Updike, Robert Coover and Philip Roth. Random baseball moments—not just epic coups like Bobby Thomson’s 1951 “miracle” home run—persist in memory long after they should have evanesced.

Kevin Cook’s heartfelt and entertaining “Electric October” is ostensibly about the 1947 World Series between Joe DiMaggio’s Yankees and the Dodgers of Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese and Dixie Walker. The book is really about the lost drama and culture of mid-20th-century baseball still embedded in the minds of old-timers.

A onetime editor at Sports Illustrated, Mr. Cook doesn’t focus on the stars DiMaggio and Robinson. Instead he tells the stories of two baseball lifers—the Yankee manager Bucky Harris and the Dodger skipper Burt Shotton—and four bit players: Yankee journeyman pitcher Bill Bevens and Dodgers pinch hitter Cookie Lavagetto, who broke up Bevens’s no-hitter in game four; Al Gionfriddo, a diminutive scrub who kept Brooklyn in the series with a sensational catch in game six; and George (Snuffy) Stirnweiss, a Yankee infielder who was labeled a “cheese champ” for having won the 1945 American League batting title in the depleted wartime majors.

As a boy in the Northwest, Bevens was so poor that his Christmas present one year was the chance to fire one shot from a neighbor kid’s BB rifle. He grew big, becoming a star high-school athlete but a hard-luck major leaguer. Lavagetto came from Oakland. Talented enough to hang on for 10 years in the big leagues as a player, he was savvy enough to last 17 more as a coach and manager. Bevens had a good year for the Yankees in 1946, winning 16 games, and a mediocre ’47, but Harris started him in game four at Ebbets Field with the Yankees leading the series, 2-1.

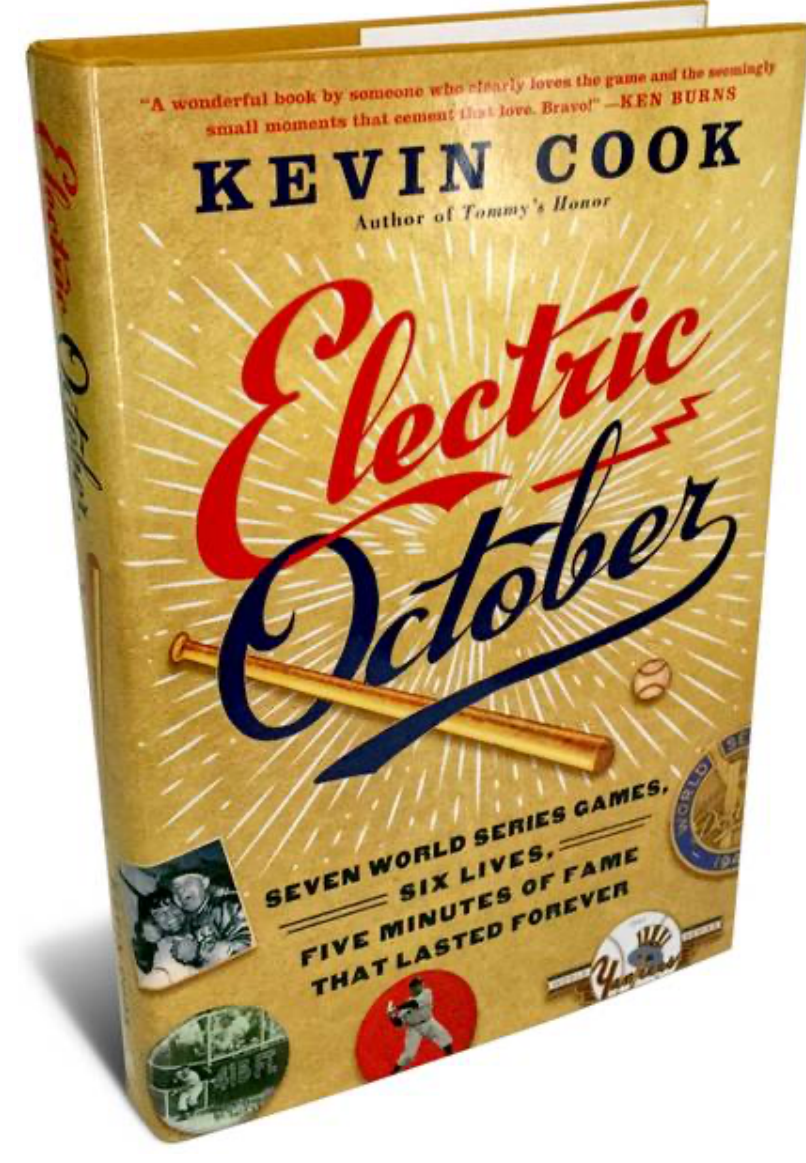


PHOTO: WSJ

### ELECTRIC OCTOBER

By Kevin Cook  
*Holt, 289 pages, \$30*

By 1947, Lavagetto was 34 and stuck on the Dodgers’ bench. But with two out in the bottom of the ninth inning, Shotton sent him in to pinch-hit against Bevens, who was one out away from the first no-hitter in Series history. He’d walked 10 Dodgers, though, and two of them were on first and second.

Mr. Cook is especially good at describing what happened next: Ahead of Lavagetto 0-1, Bevens threw a fastball high and outside—and Cookie hit it off the right-field wall. Two runners scurried home as Bevens trudged off the field. Red Barber, the Dodgers’ announcer, writes Mr. Cook, “called the sound that followed ‘the biggest explosion of noise in the history of Brooklyn.’ The Dodgers mobbed Lavagetto. . . . In the broadcast booth, Barber reverted to his Mississippi roots: ‘Well, I’ll be a suck-egg mule.’” Bevens and his wife drowned their sorrow in a Manhattan gin mill.

Neither Bevens nor Lavagetto ever played another big-league game after the Series, but they were bound together forever—mugging for photographers on the anniversary of the game and at old-timers days. Lavagetto, Mr. Cook writes, had become “a human highlight.” Bevens hated every minute of it.

Gionfriddo mostly rode the Dodger bench until Shotton sent him in as a defensive replacement in the sixth game with Brooklyn leading, 8-5. Gionfriddo, 25, a coal miner’s son from Pennsylvania, was barely 5-foot-6. He was a classic “4-A” player, a star in the high minors, marginal in the bigs. The Yankees had two on with two out when DiMaggio sent a towering drive toward the low fence in left-center field. Gionfriddo scampered back, seemed to stumble, lost his cap—and caught the ball inches from the bullpen. DiMaggio kicked the dirt as he passed second, and the Dodgers survived to play game seven. Gionfriddo went back to the minors and lived to be 81, autographing pictures of his miracle catch until the end.

Stirnweiss is remembered, if at all, not for his 1947 World Series play but for his death at just 39. With the major leagues back at full strength after the war, he reverted to form: a slick-fielding banjo hitter. The Yankees traded him away in 1950, and he was out of baseball two years later. One September morning in 1958, Stirnweiss was commuting on the Jersey Central railroad to his job with a shipping company when the train plunged off a trestle into Newark Bay, killing him and 46 others. The headline on one obit read: “STIRNWEISS, BATTING CHAMP.”

The 1947 rival managers fared better. The Yankees won the ’47 Series but fired Harris after he failed to win the pennant in 1948. He had started his career as the “boy wonder” player-manager of the 1924 World Champion Washington Senators and ended up now, a generation later, as the general manager of the Boston Red Sox. Seeing his hands shake, Sox great Ted Williams complained that Bucky was a drunk. In fact, he was secretly suffering from Parkinson’s disease. The talk kept Harris out of the Hall of Fame until his son, a federal judge in Washington, lobbied him in two years before his death in 1977.

Shotton took over the Dodgers in 1947 when bad-boy manager Leo Durocher was suspended for various transgressions. Durocher came back in ’48—and promptly defected to the rival Giants, so Shotton came back to Brooklyn for three more seasons, including another pennant.

Mr. Cook’s narrative is splendid, but the subtext of his book is even better. As the stories of his six subjects show, baseball careers are a remarkable succession of triumphs and failures, opportunities grabbed and missed, connections and unpredictable reconections—a proxy for life itself. Perhaps that’s why baseball’s memory is so long and so richly rewarding.

*Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.*

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