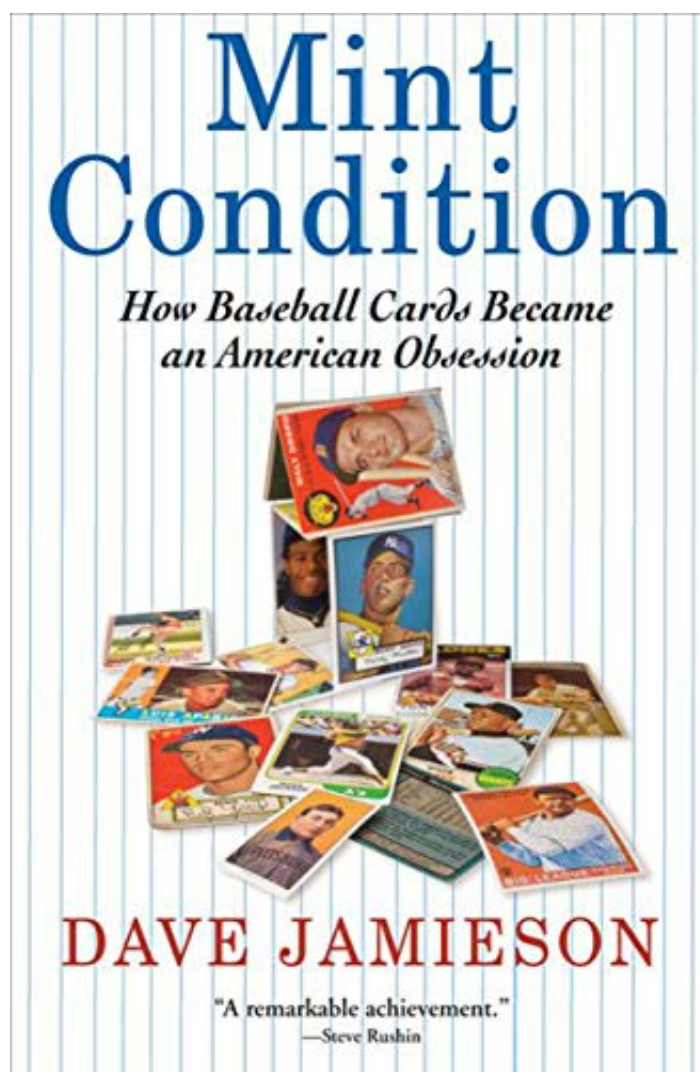


Mint Condition: How Baseball Cards Became an American Obsession

by

Dave Jamieson



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Synopsis

“An entertaining history of baseball cards . . . An engaging book on a narrow but fascinating topic.” —The Washington Post When award-winning journalist Dave Jamieson’s parents sold his childhood home a few years ago, he rediscovered a prized boyhood possession: his baseball card collection. Now was the time to cash in on the “investments” of his youth. But all the card shops had closed, and cards were selling for next to nothing online. What had happened? In *Mint Condition*, his fascinating, eye-opening, endlessly entertaining book, Jamieson finds the answer by tracing the complete story of this beloved piece of American childhood. Picture cards had long been used for advertising, but after the Civil War, tobacco companies started slipping them into cigarette packs as collector’s items. Before long, the cards were wagging the cigarettes. In the 1930s, cards helped gum and candy makers survive the Great Depression. In the 1960s, royalties from cards helped transform the baseball players association into one of the country’s most powerful unions, dramatically altering the game. In the eighties and nineties, cards went through a spectacular bubble, becoming a billion-dollar-a-year industry before all but disappearing, surviving today as the rarified preserve of adult collectors. *Mint Condition* is charming, original history brimming with colorful characters, sure to delight baseball fans and collectors. “Jamieson explores the history of card collecting through an entertaining cast of characters . . . For anyone who can recall being excited to rip open their newest pack of cards, *Mint Condition* is a treat.” —Forbes

Sort review

“The definitive history of baseball cards. . . . As much fun as opening a pack of baseball cards and discovering a Mickey Mantle.”—Forbes “A phenomenal primer in the pitfalls of personal investing and the dangers of believing something is valuable just because everyone says it is (see: Tickle Me Elmo, Retired Beanie Babies).” —Boston Herald “An entertaining history of baseball cards . . . an engaging book on a narrow but fascinating topic.” —Washington Post “Nostalgic and quirky.” —New York Post “Jamieson chronicles the story of baseball cards with skill and bounce ... It's a blast for collectors of all stripes.” —Austin American Statesman “Jamieson explores the history of card collecting through an entertaining cast of characters—the visionaries and villains who turned a gimmick designed to boost tobacco sales into a billion-dollar industry. . . . The pictures in Jamieson's book are captivating, a veritable art gallery of the industry from its infancy in the 1800s to the slickly produced versions of today.... For anyone who can recall being excited to rip open their newest pack of cards, *Mint Condition* is a treat.” —Forbes.com “By the early 1990s, baseball card manufacturers were printing 81 billion of the things a year, or 325 for every man, woman and child in the U.S. . . . Of course it ended badly. How and why is the subject of Dave Jamieson’s absorbing *Mint Condition*.” —Bloomberg “In this compelling book, journalist Jamieson tracks the history of baseball cards from

their late 19th-century beginnings to the present, covering the controversies (e.g., card forgeries), the rivalries (e.g., between companies issuing cards, and between rival collectors), and baseball cards as investments. . . . This very satisfying account of the development of baseball cards and our attitudes toward them is highly recommended even for those casually interested in sports or collectibles.” —Library Journal

“Engaging, informative, and full of unexpected pleasures, *Mint Condition* deserves a spot on any baseball fan’s bookshelf. Dave Jamieson has hit it out of the park.” —Cait Murphy, author of *Crazy ’08: How a Cast of Cranks, Rogues, Boneheads, and Magnates Created the Greatest Year in Baseball History*

“*Mint Condition* kept me spellbound and couch-bound for two days. Its pages are redolent of basements, bubble gum and bachelorhood. They teem with artists, innocents and charlatans. Dave Jamieson fit a century-and-a-half of Americana on the back of a baseball card, a remarkable achievement.” —Steve Rushin

“An engaging, playful and well-reported history of baseball cards, and how they went from being a premium in packs of gum to collectibles selling at six-figure prices at the world’s auction houses.” —Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

“A thoroughly compelling, entertaining and sometimes tragic read, [*Mint Condition*] will provide even veteran collectors with new insight to the hobby they love.” —Voice of the Collector

“A definitive history of both a pastime and an industry. For those of us who grew up collectors--and still feel a sentimental attachment to those seventeen utterly worthless Dan Plesac rookie cards gathering mold in our basement--this is the book that explains everything.” —Michael Weinreb, author of *The Kings of New York and Bigger than the Game*

“An interesting examination of a hobby that turned into big business and then fell back to earth.” —Charlotte Observer

“A fascinating history of a once-vital tradition.” —Robert Birnbaum, *The Morning News*

“The only history of baseball cards that matters.” —Kriston Capps, DCist.com

“Jamieson elucidates with smooth prose and fascinating tidbits of historical trivia just how the production of baseball cards became a major industry ... Jamieson peppers his narrative with stories of the eccentric characters and colorful personalities ... The book is an essential read for the baseball fan or anyone who remembers ripping into a wax pack, hoping that their childhood heroes would be found inside.” —Brett Savage, *New Jersey Monthly*

About the Author

When award-winning journalist Dave Jamieson’s parents sold his childhood home a few years ago, he rediscovered a prized boyhood possession: his baseball card collection. Now was the time to cash in on the “investments” of his youth. But all the card shops had closed, and cards were selling for next to nothing online. What had happened? In *Mint Condition*, his fascinating, eye-opening, endlessly entertaining book, Jamieson finds the answer by tracing the complete story of this beloved piece of American childhood. Picture cards had long been used for advertising, but after the Civil War, tobacco companies started slipping them into cigarette packs as collector’s items. Before long, the cards were wagging the cigarettes. In the 1930s, cards helped gum and candy makers survive the Great Depression. In the 1960s, royalties from cards helped transform the baseball players association into one of the country’s most powerful unions, dramatically altering the game. In the ’80s and ’90s, cards went through a spectacular bubble, becoming a billion-dollar-a-year

industry before all but disappearing, surviving today as the rarified preserve of adult collectors. Mint Condition is charming, original history brimming with colorful characters, sure to delight baseball fans and collectors. From Publishers Weekly It's a form of megalomania, of course, one famous card collector once said of his hobby—and, as Jamieson explains, there are plenty of people willing to cash in on collectors' obsessions; the secondary market for baseball cards may be as much as a half-billion dollars annually. It used to be even stronger: Jamieson got interested in the history of baseball cards when he rediscovered his own adolescent stash only to find that its value had plummeted in the mid-1990s. His loss is our gain as he tracks the evolution of the card from its first appearance in cigarette packs in the late 19th century through the introduction of bubble gum and up to the present. The historical narrative is livened by several interviews, including conversations with the two men who launched Topps (for decades the first name in cards) and a collector who's dealt in million-dollar cards. Jamieson also digresses neatly into curiosities like the Horrors of War card set, the legendary Mars Attacks, and a profanity-laced card featuring Cal Ripken's little brother. It's a fun read, but it also shows just how much serious work went into sustaining this one corner of pop culture ephemera. (Apr.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate kindle_edition edition. From Booklist *Starred Review* Every time a rare baseball card brings a million-dollar price at auction, thousands of aging former collectors wistfully recall shoeboxes full of rookie cards and wonder if they lost a fortune when Mom cleaned out their rooms. The answer, according to Washington-based, award-winning journalist Jamieson is . . . probably not. Jamieson doesn't supply lists of valuable cards (there are collectors' journals for that); rather, he chronicles the history of collectible cards, profiles a few unique collectors, and tracks the development of the hobby and ponders its future. He profiles Jefferson Burdick, an almost forgotten man who donated what was probably the greatest collection of baseball cards ever assembled to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art over the course of a decade before his death in 1963. In tracing the history of collectible cards, Jamieson shows the extraordinary lengths to which the early cigarette and card companies went to separate young boys from their money, a penny and then a nickel at a time. A not uncommon tactic was to issue incomplete sets to keep collectors fruitlessly buying in search of a card that didn't exist. This is a fascinating history that encompasses not only the nuances of serious collecting but also the business machinations and card-marketing strategies that contributed significantly to the rise of the cigarette and gum industries. Superbly informative and entertaining. --Wes Lukowsky --This text refers to an alternate kindle_edition edition. Read more

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What people say about this book

ewomack, "Provides a great history of cards, and also what can happen when big money invades a hobby.... Buying collectibles from one's youth will not reverse the natural aging process in any way whatsoever. Given some of the astronomical, and often outright outrageous, prices demanded for some old mass produced products, buyers almost have a right to expect them to perform such miracles. In a cruel twist, items that once provided entertainment for kids, such as trading cards, video games, action figures, etc., later became costly "investments" entirely out of reach of any kids, past or present. Not to mention that these once enjoyable and usable things often get encased, presumably "forever," in numbered and graded plastic cases and then become "useful" only for their perceived "value." In many other respects, this process renders the sealed items useless. People will pay the heftiest premiums for untouched things that no one ever used for their original purpose. These arguably neglected things, things that didn't entertain anyone in their own day, become as precious as medieval reliquaries. Though this relatively recent phenomenon of worshiping unused things, and now intentionally inaccessible and unusable things, defies logic in many ways, unsullied items from the past also provide the highest nostalgic payback. They allegedly look just as they would have to people of their times, or, most importantly, as they would have to their buyers as children. The price of nostalgia remains incalculable and appears without limit. Illusions of recapturing youthful vigor or forever lost times, or simpler hopes of vast riches, seem to underlie the sometimes reckless speculation in items once meant for temporary mass consumption. The market has since built "collectibility" into itself, as just about everything produced comes with the word "collectible" somewhere in its description. As older and once uncollected products took on the aura and value of collectibles, companies began to exploit the supposed future collectibility of current items. Now economies everywhere seem oversaturated with "collectible" things. Those who collected sports cards in the 1970s and 1980s, likely as children, may identify with the strangeness of "locking up" items for eternal preservation. Many at that time who bought wax packs off drug store shelves, complete with that inedible, and by then unnecessary, "gum," likely never thought of the cards having "value" beyond the mere completing of their sets or obtaining their favorite players. As to their condition, only egregious creases or tears caused outright rejection. Trades typically happened card for card and the idea that these pieces of fragile cardboard might have actual monetary value in the world at large seemed ridiculous. But then the great speculation of the late 1980s and early 1990s happened and sports cards, particularly baseball cards, took on the aura of blue chip stocks. People started "investing" in cardboard in hope of paying for their children's college education or their own retirements. Given soaring card prices, along with the market's generally short financial memory for speculative bubbles, it made sense at the time. Then a number of things happened to send these once treasured relics literally, some would argue inevitably, into the wood chippers of radio stations. For some, they even became objects of scorn. Anyone before that time who put their collections aside and lived

healthy lives outside of the card market likely missed the catastrophe. The author of the fascinating historical survey "Mint Condition" fell into this category and a startling realization apparently inspired his deep investigation into the root causes of the late twentieth century "card mania." Though it does cover many non-sports cards, it focuses almost exclusively on baseball and says next to nothing about football, hockey or basketball cards. The book reads like an exploratory history wrapped around a tiny memoir. The introduction tells the author's own tragic tale, one that many can probably relate to, of how his childhood "cardboard treasures" turned out to have little to no value in the early twenty-first century. Reunited with the thousands of cards he collected in the 1980s, he had hoped to finally reap the long-awaited profits that he remembered the once regal market proffering. He encountered something quite different and the profits, or lack of them, proved severely disappointing. The market seemed to have completely collapsed. Numerous dealers had vanished, online auctions featured desperate pleas to sell lumbering piles of cards for measly sums, the dealers he managed to find told him that his stash had no value, and one even refused to look at them. Another dealer told him the hobby had become "complicated" by big money, an overwhelming amount of sets and auction scandals. While the author's "valuable" childhood cards had aged in a distant closet, kids had moved on to other things, such as playing video games or collecting Pokémon or Yu-Gi-Oh cards. In other words, the industry had somehow completely alienated its traditional core demographic. It instead attracted affluent adults who wanted to relive the days when cards spoke directly to them. To find out what happened, the book looks back to the origins of baseball and the cards that helped popularize it. That requires traveling back to the 19th century. "Peck and Snyder," a very early sporting goods store, manufactured America's first known baseball cards in 1869. Used for promotion - or, in today's vernacular, "swag" - they featured pictures of entire teams. Soon, cards as inserts played a role in boosting cigarette sales. An ambitious James Duke put photos of famous alluring actresses on ads for his cigarettes. Satisfied with the results, he then inserted pictures on cardboard into individual packages and ingeniously numbered them so people would want to "complete the set." This simple gimmick boosted sales beyond expectations. Actresses, mostly scantily clad, and athletes, subjects then considered "uncouth," produced the most sales. Other companies soon copied Duke's scheme, including Allen & Ginter, who featured baseball players in 1888 and an interesting and scandalous "Women Baseball Players" series that showed women dressed far too tightly for late nineteenth century sensibilities. "Old Judge" then raised the bar by releasing a card for every major league player. Cigarette sales, even to children as young as 10, skyrocketed. But printing cards also ate into precious profits and, as retaliation against "this picture-giving business," multiple companies formed the American Tobacco company, or trust, in 1889 and put an end to cigarette cards for a few decades. As antitrust legislation began to threaten the Tobacco industry, cards reappeared in 1909 with 15 brand names. Known as the T206 series, it ran from 1909 to 1911 and produced the hobby's most worshiped card, the T206 Honus Wagner. For reasons unknown, and still disputed, the card only saw 100 or less printings. The legend that Wagner had it intentionally

withdrawn to discourage kids from smoking, though a fantastic story, remains controversial. The invention of "bubble gum" in 1928 led to a vicious market for children's "pennies" and "novelties" differentiated the voluminous brands. Fleer began with a comic strip wrapper and Goudey countered with the popular "Indian Chewing Gum" cards that depicted Native Americans, but not always favorably. In 1933, Goudey's "Big League Chewing Gum" cards dominated the gum market, but no one could find card number 106. Though the company never admitted it, many accused Goudey of excluding that card to drive kids into a wild completion frenzy. If so, it worked. Parents who complained received a now very valuable "Nap" Lajoie card that resembled the 1934 series. Bowman had entered the gum market in 1929 with "Blony" and cards inevitably followed, most notably the violent and popular 1937 "Horrors of War" series that claimed to promote peace. Baseball nearly vanished during World War II, but Bowman continued to profit from gum and cards, despite scarce resources. The post-war years began with "the card wars" between the fiercely competitive Bowman and Topps. After a few flops, Topps took an immense risk and signed deals with baseball players who already had exclusive deals with Bowman. When the famous 1952 Topps set appeared in stores, Bowman sued, but the case found that players should decide their own publicity. Bowman gave up the fight in 1956 and sold their rights to Topps, making them into a virtual monopoly that would last for decades. They kept an ominously tight grip on the market. Only Ted Williams relented and signed with Fleer for a single year in 1958. The resulting set, 80 cards of Ted Williams, stands as one of the industry's most awkward creations. Topps released two famous non-sports sets in 1962, the gruesome "Civil War News" and the even more gruesome and racy "Mars Attacks." Around this time, baseball players received no revenue from card sales, prompting Marvin Miller in 1968 to convince players to not renew their fixed payment contracts with Topps. They agreed, unionized, renegotiated, and "group licensing was born." Fleer saw its chance and won in court, which forced the union to allow other companies to print baseball cards by 1981. In that same year, despite fears of overload, kids bought up all of the Topps, Fleer and Donruss cards produced. Topps's fierce monopoly had officially ended, but the healthy competition seemed to actually increase interest and sales. Around the same time, adults began treating cards as commodities not only to collect, but to "invest" in. Price guides with grading standards appeared in the late 1970s and values rose steadily. Investment firms bought Topps and Donruss, rookie cards became a hype and counterfeits began to appear, most notably the 1987 Don Mattingly rookies created by a 14 year old. It fooled most experts, but not Paul Sumner, whose ability to identify fake Mattingly cards led to the founding of Upper Deck in 1988. Raising not only printing and quality standards, they also added holograms to every card to foil counterfeiters. Their risky move of featuring then unproven Ken Griffey, Jr. as card #1 of the premiere set paid off in droves. No one knew how many cards each company actually printed, but estimates ran into the millions. Given those numbers, cards couldn't really qualify as "scarce," but people bought them like precious rarities nonetheless. Then in 1989, a missed obscenity on a Billy Ripkin card provided the best bad press possible for the hobby, but it ultimately led to the sale of Fleer.

Investors now controlled most of the hobby and it grew to unsustainable levels throughout the early 1990s. The rarest cards and sets sold for hundreds of thousands and even millions of dollars through auction houses such as Sotheby's. "Cardboard gold" became the ubiquitous tagline. Inevitably, fraud and counterfeiting became increasingly rampant, leading to the rise of third party grading, but some have claimed that altered cards can go undetected even by grading services. The debate continues to rage. The rally crashed with the highly derided baseball strike in 1994. To many, greed seemed to infect both the sport and the card hobby and people dumped their cards en masse. One radio station announcer promised to burn any cards sent to him and he received so many that fire marshalls prohibited him, so he switched to a less dangerous, but still effective, wood chipper. The industry had released some 350 sets in 1994 alone, supersaturating the market and adding to the resentment. To keep remaining buyers interested, valuable "inserts" provided an "illusion of scarcity" and transformed the hobby arguably more into gambling than collecting. People starting buying cards for the inserts and the cards fell to the side. This practice reached its pinnacle in 2003 when Donruss carved up a 1925 Babe Ruth game jersey, arguably an act of historical vandalism, and sold its 2100 tiny bits in packs. Donruss, then in the hands of investors, defended it as "the reality of the free market and the reality of capitalism." By the end of the book, things don't look too good for the hobby. The speculators have taken over and exploited the nostalgia of moneyed adults, the FBI performed some investigations, and children have found other, and more affordable, things to do. The author implores Topps to "restore cards" rather than reinvent them, and to make the hobby accessible to children again by bringing back its lost social dimensions. Whether kids still want baseball cards at all remains a larger question, as they apparently want other cards. Along with that, a culture shift seems to have taken place, in that everything seems to have become "collectible" in today's America. Collecting something for its own sake, without any regard to "value," seems extremely challenging after a hobby experiences a rampant speculative episode. Can cards even go back to those quaint days when kids flipped, wrote on and handled them with what now seems like reckless abandon? Could anyone see them as valueless playthings ever again? In short, has the hobby crossed a line that it can never "uncross?" As potential support for that claim, Covid-19 conditions seem to have reignited some of the investment zeal that the hobby lost, though nothing compared to the 1980s and 1990s. But one could say the same for almost all collectibles during the pandemic. Only time will tell whether it all ends up as a temporary spike or as an outright revival, but sports cards seem to look more and more like artifacts of generational interest, though the efforts of Jefferson Burdick did bring some attention to major museums. The "famous" cards, such as the T206 Wagner, remain outliers and appear outside the hobby mostly due to their insane auction prices. Another major event looms as Major League Baseball announced that it will end their decades long relationship with Topps and begin anew with Fanatics beginning in 2022. Few saw that coming, especially Topps. Though the book obviously couldn't cover such recent developments, people infected with "the collecting disease" should read "Mint Condition" for its interesting historical information, many unforgettable stories

and also some perspective on what can happen when big money invades a hobby.”

Mark Luebker, “FLASHBACK! Lots of stuff I didn't know about my childhood (and again later) hobby. Nice overview of how baseball cards came to be and the collapse of the collectors' market after the excesses of the 1990s. I stopped collecting in the 1980s, but even then it was more into it for the collecting and nostalgia than any notion of investing. For me, the important thing was getting all the Minnesota Twins (or Washington Senators) to complete my late-1950s and early-1960s team sets. The author seems to be on the same wavelength, so if you are too, you'll likely enjoy this book. (And it was very cool to discover the origins of the 1962 "Civil War News" set and see some of the unused card designs that Topps came up with over the years.)”

Daniel Rosenberg, “Highly recommended for anyone interested in the hobby. What a well-researched and nicely-written book. I've been collecting baseball cards since the 1970s, and I learned a lot reading this page-turner. I'd recommend it for anyone who's interested in the hobby. Interestingly, the author comes to the same conclusion I reached about the baseball card industry over a decade ago: It needs to go back to the way it was, with fewer sets, fewer "insert" cards and cheaper prices. And bring back the bubble gum and cardboard.”

Marlin T. Carlson, “This book is graded GEM MINT/PRISTINE 10!!!. Wow - if you want to be schooled in the history of baseball/trading cards from their inception: tobacco cards, Cracker Jack cards, bubble gum cards, etc., this book will have you mesmerized! The history of cards is well described in chronological order so it provides a smooth transition from one generation to the next from vintage cards through the "Junk Wax" era to the modern day! We highly recommend you read "Mint Condition" if you enjoy the hobby and/or collect baseball cards in general. This book will not disappoint you!”

Cole Brown, “A Story that Needed to Be Told. This book sat on my wish list for months. I delayed purchasing it because while I loved collecting baseball cards as a kid I figured there was no way an entire book about baseball cards could be enjoyable. I was dead wrong. While the idea of baseball card history sounds rather dull, Jameison makes it humorous, entertaining, and insightful. He does so by displaying the historical import of certain card sets (arguing, for example, that cigarettes owe their American success to baseball cards), interviewing those who played key roles in the creative and business growth of baseball cards, and giving us an up-close look at the most eccentric collectors and dealers. He writes as one who, like me, loved the hobby of collecting and trading cards as a child in the 80's -- only to eventually give up on the hobby when baseball cards became so expensive and overproduced that children could no longer participate in the same way. As such, I felt as if he was investigating on my behalf and speaking on my behalf throughout. That said, if you enjoy quirky American history, business case studies, or interesting characters you should find the book a quick and fun read. Even if you were

not a card-collecting child in the 80's.[...]"

Bill Dolworth, "Profiting From The Collector's Disease. This is a wonderful book on many different levels. I was surprised to learn that baseball cards have been in existence since the 1860s. The book explores, in a very entertaining way, the marketing of cigarettes and gum by packaging them with collectible cards; images of baseball players being by far the most popular. The author also tells fascinating stories of the men who significantly contributed to the hobby: the entrepreneurs, the collectors, the creative teams and in later years the speculators. The story of how one company became a long running monopoly in the industry and how that monopoly was broken by the head of the baseball player's union was engrossing. The chapter on a contemporary baseball card dealer who warns buyers about doctored cards, can be read in a new light, since he recently admitted to trimming the sides of the world's most famous and valuable baseball card."

Richard Morrison, "Superb guide, beautifully written. This book is indispensable for anyone who collects baseball cards. I was pleasantly surprised at how well written Mint Condition is, the result of Jamieson being both a professional journalist and a knowledgeable collector. As a former newspaper editor myself, I have no patience for boring writers but there were no dull sections in Mint Condition. My only quibble: There should have been a few paragraphs explaining why it's okay to restore an old painting or a vintage automobile, but it's not okay to clean, trim, smooth or otherwise improve the condition of a vintage baseball card. (For that matter, coin collectors have never adequately explained to me why it's taken for granted that cleaning or "whizzing" a coin lowers its value). I would love an updated commentary in light of the 2012 Black Swamp Find."

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