



## Class A: Baseball in the Middle of Everywhere

*Lucas Mann*

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### Class A: Baseball in the Middle of Everywhere Lucas Mann

An unforgettable chronicle of a year of minor-league baseball in a small Iowa town that follows not only the travails of the players of the Clinton LumberKings but also the lives of their dedicated fans and of the town itself.

Award-winning essayist Lucas Mann delivers a powerful debut in his telling of the story of the 2010 season of the Clinton LumberKings. Along the Mississippi River, in a Depression-era stadium, young prospects from all over the world compete for a chance to move up through the baseball ranks to the major leagues. Their coaches, some of whom have spent nearly half a century in the game, watch from the dugout. In the bleachers, local fans call out from the same seats they've occupied year after year. And in the distance, smoke rises from the largest remaining factory in a town that once had more millionaires per capita than any other in America.

Mann turns his eye on the players, the coaches, the fans, the radio announcer, the town, and finally on himself, a young man raised on baseball, driven to know what still draws him to the stadium. His voice is as fresh and funny as it is poignant, illuminating both the small triumphs and the harsh realities of minor-league ball. Part sports story, part cultural exploration, part memoir, *Class A* is a moving and unique study of why we play, why we watch, and why we remember.

### Class A: Baseball in the Middle of Everywhere Details

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Author : Lucas Mann

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## From Reader Review Class A: Baseball in the Middle of Everywhere for online ebook

### Karen says

As a season ticket holder to a team in the same league with the LumberKings, I have been to Clinton, IA for several games over the years. Mr. Mann captures the feel of the place so well...I can't wait to head over there again in hopes of hearing / seeing some of the regulars! Minor League baseball is unforgiving and relentless - this spirit is captured as well as possible (from the outside) by an excellent writer.

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### Matt Ely says

An unbelievably compelling book. The author delivers a thorough investigation into the question of who would work for, play for, cheer for an small ball, single-A club of a weak franchise. In doing so, Mann explores identity, the transforming American economy, American cultural mores and contradictions, and, of course, professional baseball. Nothing is as simple as it appears and the personal nature of Mann's investigation means he's growing as you're reading.

Something about this book took hold of me and won't let go, even months later. An immediate favorite.

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### Aaron Brame says

Lucas Mann spent the entire 2010 baseball season with the LumberKings, a low-A minor league team from Clinton, Iowa. He reports on the state of the players, many of whom are teenagers, scraping by on subsistence wages, sleeping three-to-a-floor in a crummy apartment. Mann gravitates toward the Central American players, incredible athletes who were scouted out when they were fourteen or fifteen years old and shipped to the United States in an unlikely attempt to stand out amongst hundreds of other incredible athletes. When they are sent down or cut, which happens frequently in Class A, it is devastating.

Intertwined with the story of the team are two other stories. The first is of the town itself--Clinton, Iowa, a dying place that was practically choked out of existence thanks to Archer Midlands Poly and scab laborers. The second story is that of the author's haunting past. Mann was a failed baseball player, one of those who had talent, just not enough. He is plagued with doubt and self-consciousness throughout his interactions with the LumberKings players. Adding to this doubt is the memory of his older brother, who died a drug-related death ten years earlier.

The blurbs on the back of the book compare Mann to writers such as Joan Didion and Gay Talese. I'm not sure if that is a fair comparison, but Class A is an incredible piece of reportage and a wonderful, if terribly pessimistic, view inside of baseball.

(See more at [mrbramesblog.org](http://mrbramesblog.org))

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## **Marshaferz says**

I enjoyed reading this, but found it quite flawed. The author never seemed to trust that the story he was telling about the players and the venue of Single A ball was compelling enough, so he felt the need to inject himself and his own doubts about his life into it. (He also felt the need to insert enough gratuitous and inappropriate sexual comments that I can't give this to my kids to read, which I otherwise would have.) All of this distracted from an interesting story, and made me roll my eyes a lot. That said, it was very interesting to see what day to day life is like for these guys and the pressures on them, as well as the stories of the superfans. I did enjoy it, but wanted it to elevate to the next level, and it never did.

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## **Jane says**

I think the author would like five stars, but my stars are for the content a bit more than the writing. I think the editor overlooked a few misplaced modifiers that made me chuckle. Author a little too intent on putting himself and his experience of baseball into the story. That being said, I loved the reportage and the detail about how the players live, the dedicated fans, etc. Would I recommend this? Absolutely, especially to those who love baseball. At times, the author picks just the right anecdote to illustrate the passion that coaches and managers at this level have for the game.

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## **Andrew Campbell says**

Picked this up even before I knew it followed my hometown Mariners' A-level farm team and up-and-comers like Nick Franklin, Erasmo Ramirez and Tom Wilhelmssen. If it had been about another team, I don't think I would have finished it.

The author is probably too close in age to the players, and not enough of a journalist, to deliver a truly insightful exploration of small-town baseball. Given extensive (and expensive- he even travels to Venezuela) access, he has produced a kind of navel-gazing ode to uncertainty that cannot recommend itself to the average reader.

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## **Mark Sinnott says**

This book tells the story of a small Iowa town and the minor league baseball team that plays there as a journalist spends a season following them both. Mann does a great job at painting the picture of lives of professional baseball players as they follow their dreams of making it to the next level. He also tackles the sometimes sweet but often depressing lives of the people who follow the team in Clinton, Iowa, where pollution, economics and falling population have been troubling the city for the past few decades. Mann does a great job describing the personalities on the team and the personalities of the fans, but also allows for a little of his own personality and history to enter the narrative which gives the book sincerity by adding the author's own insight on the themes it touches on. I enjoyed this book as an honest depiction of all of it's subjects.

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## Mike says

Plenty of people have written The Great American Novel plenty of times (Philip Roth included), and plenty more people will write The Great American Novel plenty of more times. Lucas Mann will be among those candidates.

His nonfiction book Class A is basically practice for that future. Mann moves to Clinton, Iowa, to follow the Clinton LumberKings baseball team for a season. Though this book is ostensibly about baseball, less than 10% of the book's actions actually take place on the ball diamond. Mann instead tells the tale of the LumberKing fans who have been following the team for decades; of the team's players, both promising-future prospects and past-their-baseball-prime hangers-on; of the coaches; of the town of Clinton itself, once an up-and-comer but now a gloomy one-factory town emblematic of America's damaged economy.

Mann has a lot to say about all of it. He's at his best when writing about individuals, sparing nothing in describing the intricacies of their lives, good or bad. There's Joyce, a 50ish single woman who for years has collected mementos of the team and written simple stories about the players. She puts signed baseballs in a one-room shrine in her small house, a Cooperstown of Clinton. She's both a sad and cherished figure. I can see Mann at work on creating a character for a future Great American Novel in the way he handles Joyce.

There's also the dichotomy between the future and past in dealing with the players. Mann spends time driving players around, hanging out with them, even sleeping on their spare couches or floors when they've been out drinking. He profiles Nick Franklin, and up-and-comer who made his debut with the big-league Seattle Mariners not long after Class A was published and captures the youngster's undeniable charisma and self-confidence as well as the naivete which he mostly hides. Contrast him with Welington Dotel, already too old for Class A baseball at 24, who carries himself with dignity and pride while slowly gliding to a future that doesn't include playing baseball.

Mann also mixes in a small bit of memoir, touching on a brother who died of a drug overdose -- in fact, Mann's working on a book about his brother -- and how baseball helped shape his own relationship with his father growing up. Class A is the real top prospect of the 2010 Clinton baseball season. Look for Lucas Mann on the All-Star lists for years to come.

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## Travis Coverston says

This is the first baseball book I have given up on. I tried multiple times to finish it, but it never gets better. There is no direction to the story. There is no focus on a particular aspect of the team. It is more of a memoir for the author as he mixes history of the town, his personal recollections, and anecdotes from a handful of players and Clinton locals. The book isn't about baseball - it happens to be written while observing a baseball team. The author's MFA background is much more prevalent than his baseball knowledge.

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## Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says

I was hoping for an honest tale of a minor league baseball club's season, but what we get in Class A is a confessional tale of a young master's program graduate's season living with the rotating cast of the local team. He lusts after the players, while taking calls from his girlfriend back home. He recalls losing an important ballgame in high school and crying, then imagines that the crusty manager, a 60-ish no-nonsense

former major leaguer, probably cried when he was sent to the minors. A self-conscious and self-involved account that spares no one's dignity, including the author. I liked The Victory Season better.

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### **Pete says**

Tricky one to rate. Some parts are astoundingly good, a kind of hyper-aware experiential journalism that explodes passing moments and sees infinite shades of meaning. Some parts are way overheated and frankly not that fun to read. On balance the spectacular stuff loses out to the gazing-into-everyone-in-the-world's navel stuff. But the good parts are good enough to make me want to read more of Mann as he progresses (this definitely reads like a book a <25 year old wrote). Fair warning: doesn't have all that much baseball in it, for a book that is entirely about a season with a minor league baseball team. Definitely could have been shorter (I think I say that about almost every book)

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### **Joe Martino says**

I love baseball. I love the often heart wrenching drama of minor league ball. I once owned season tickets to a low A team. I love stories about old school towns that are facing reinvention or death.

In short, I like all the different parts of this story and was really expecting it to be something great.

Sadly, the book never actually becomes greater than the sum of its parts or even as great as those parts. It has potential, to be great. And to be fair, it's hard for me to explain my "meh" response to the book. The author just never drew me in. He has some real moments where he really shines.

In one section he talks about the different types of fans that exist on the sports frontier. This section is excellent. Unfortunately, those sections of excellence have wide swaths of mediocre to poor pros between them.

If you are a hardcore baseball fan, you may enjoy this book. If you have some experience with the dying town or minor league ball, you may enjoy this book.

It's not really bad, it's just far from great.

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### **Andrea says**

Oh, I wanted to like this book. I wanted to be the awesome wife reading a cool book about baseball. And I LOVE baseball. But I couldn't finish this book. The writing style is a bit too introspective, abstract, and stream-of-consciousness to really get into the story. And the demise of the town of Clinton, the logging industry replaced by huge, stinking factory towers, was more depressing than it was integral to the story of baseball; though I'm sure the Mann's persistent mention of the factory was meant to haunt readers, the way it haunts the town, it just became repetitive. Overall, the tone of the book suggested that Mann thought of himself and his own musings on baseball as more important than the team he was observing.

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### **Jay says**

This had a lot of things going for it in my book but it didn't deliver. Mann purportedly writes about the Clinton LumberKings, a Class A minor league baseball team in Iowa. I grew up in a small Mississippi river town about 20 miles downriver from the LumberKings stadium. I like learning about baseball below the

majors and about the area I grew up in. The book covers both, but I found very little depth. Instead of a book on baseball, this is better described as a mix of personal narrative, some focused on baseball from the perspective of a (very) small market team fan, some focused on describing a town on the decline for a century. The most prevalent word in this book is “I”. As for the baseball, Mann picks out four players and describes his interactions with them, how the fans react to them, and how they are treated by the coach and team. Strangely for a baseball book, you don’t even know the names of a majority of the team. I expect baseball books to have some interesting game descriptions, but this book in total covered just a few innings and a few at bats and a few defensive plays with the poetry that baseball can conjure. I think Mann can “do” baseball writing, but he didn’t do very much of it here. There is no appendix showing the team’s record or roster, no list of other teams in the Midwest League, no index. What you do get is a feel for the life a minor leaguer lives -- sharing dumpy apartments, eating fast food, living it up at riverboat casinos, not getting too close to your teammates, waiting and hoping for the call up, but often getting the other kind of call. And Mann does cover the lives of the Latin players well, even describing his visit to a Venezuelan baseball camp attended by one of the LumberKings. But these are parts of a whole that doesn’t coalesce.

Instead, we get Mann thinking about his past. And we get pages of his analyzing the town and the team’s fans. Unfortunately, this wasn’t interesting, and was off the topic promised by the title and subtitle of the book. Oddest thing I read was the mentions of naked ballplayers in the locker room. Mann repeatedly reported on the nude men he saw, and the way he writes it you can picture him staring and in shock that they let him in the clubhouse. By the end of the book, I thought perhaps therapy was warranted.

A lot of this book was about the decline of Clinton itself, from an extremely rich and thriving city at the turn of the century to a worn down town of 26,000 with one big factory. Mann relates very little positive perspective on the plight of the city. Mann was born and raised on the East Coast, and I sense a stereotypically superior attitude in his descriptions of the “poor” Midwesterners of Clinton. If he had written this book about an East Coast Class A team, would it have been as dreary and hopeless and repetitive? I doubt it. Mann would have looked for and found something hopeful to write about, which he didn’t do here.

Mann was attending the University of Iowa Writers Program when he wrote this book. Another book about a Midwest League team, Waterloo Diamonds, was written a few years back by Richard Panek, who was in the same program at the time. I found Panek’s book to be an excellent description of a team’s season, of the business of baseball, and of a city fighting for hope. “Waterloo Diamonds” is a story of an underdog deserving of redemption. “Class A” mostly just is reporting decline with an overabundance of navel-gazing.

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## Brian says

Lucas Mann tries to tell the story about the Clinton LumberKings in Clinton Iowa and give an insight in the 2010 team along with the fans that follow them. The book reads like a disjointed journal and stream of consciousness thoughts about getting drunk and high with the players as they try to “find themselves” and figure out if they have a shot at the big leagues. The book bounces back and forth between fans, players and a despairing story about the fall of Clinton Iowa and the devastation being brought on by the corporation in town. Overall the book lacked focus and never really seemed to reach a resolution on anything and despite having followed all of these people for a year little is definitely learned about them. Overall just too disjointed for me to really get behind and enjoy.