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'The Catcher was a Spy': Moe Berg's double life as secret agent

Baseball pro Moe Berg wasn't much of a star in the diamond but he was an MVP in the theater of war, risking his life behind enemy lines as an Allied spy. Berg traded in his catcher's mitt for a trench coat and a high-stakes mission to monitor-and assassinate, if necessary-the Nazis' chief nuclear scientist. His amazing story is dramatized in the stranger-than-fiction espionage thriller "The Catcher Was a Spy," starring Paul Rudd, Paul Giamatti and a host of other big names, and opening in US theaters on Friday.

"This is a weird World War II story that no one really knows about," director Ben Lewin ("The Sessions") told a preview audience in Santa Monica, southern California, earlier this month. "You unpeel the onion and it's more and more puzzling and fascinating." A secretive and eccentric man with a steel-trap intellect, Berg was born in Harlem, New York, in 1902 to a pharmacist and a housewife.

He studied at Princeton, where he was notorious for his mastery of a reputed 12 modern and ancient languages, often practicing Sanskrit from behind home plate during training sessions. Berg played shortstop in the minor and major leagues before switching to catcher, appearing for several top teams



In this file photo actors Paul Giamatti and Paul Rudd attend the 'The Catcher Was A Spy' Premiere during the 2018 Sundance Film Festival at The Marc Theatre in Park City, Utah. — AFP

including the Boston Red Sox and earning a law degree on the side from Columbia University.

Assassination mission

His spy career started on a 1934 goodwill baseball tour in Tokyo alongside Babe Ruth

and Lou Gehrig. Berg put on a kimono and sneaked onto a hospital rooftop to film the harbor and Navy shipyards. Years later, after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, he showed his footage to President Franklin Roosevelt's Office of Strategic Services, which later became the CIA. Historians say Berg believed

his material was used to plan the first US aerial attack on Japan, in 1942.

This has never been confirmed, but the OSS was impressed enough to send him on courses in lock-picking, pyrotechnics and killing. The agency arranged for Berg to attend a Zurich lecture by Werner Heisenberg, the Nobel Prize-winning quantum physicist in charge of Nazi attempts to create an atom bomb, to assess how close they were. He arrived with a gun in one pocket and a cyanide pill in the other, with instructions to assassinate Heisenberg if the scientist appeared to be on the cusp of a breakthrough. Berg got no such impression and later decided against an assassination attempt during their one and only meeting, as they walked in the direction of Heisenberg's hotel after a social event.

'Enigmatic'

"There was a real meeting between Berg and Heisenberg. Nobody really knows what happened or what was said," Lewin said. "People who were given accounts of that meeting, pretty much like us, made up the content. What we know is that both men walked away alive." Based on Nicholas

Dawidoff's bestseller of the same name, the movie boasts a star-studded support cast that includes Guy Pearce, Sienna Miller, Jeff Daniels, Mark Strong and Tom Wilkinson.

Some filming took place at Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox, but most scenes were shot over 32 winter days in Czech Republic capital Prague. Berg left the CIA in 1954 and never worked again, beginning a nomadic existence and living on the hospitality of friends and family. He died at the age of 70 and remains the only major-league player whose baseball card is on display at the headquarters of the CIA.

Rudd told the Internet Movie Database at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah, where the movie premiered in January, that there were still many unanswered questions about Berg. "This is an interesting spy story in that it's very cerebral, it's not James Bond," he said. "A lot of the action is what's going on in people's minds." — AFP

Anger mounts in Hollywood over Fox immigration coverage

"Modern Family" co-creator Steve Levitan became Tuesday the latest in a string of Hollywood figures berating Fox over its news division's coverage, announcing he was quitting the entertainment giant. Much of the anger has centered around Fox News's reporting of US President Donald Trump's move to forcibly separate migrant children from their parents at the southern border, which some see as deliberately misleading.

Levitan tweeted that the cable station's "23-hour-a-day support" of the gun lobby, conservative conspiracy theories and President Donald Trump's falsehoods were "harder to swallow every day as I drive onto that lot to make a show about inclusion." "I look forward to seeing #ModernFamily through to the end and then, sale or no sale, setting up shop elsewhere," he said. Levitan, who won five consecutive Emmy Awards for the long-running ABC sitcom, had already announced that next year's 10th season would be the last, with his 20th Century Fox Television contract due to expire.

Fox News-which didn't immediately respond to requests for comment-is often criticized for its coverage, but the reverberations are rarely felt in the corridors of parent company 21st Century Fox. On Monday, Levitan publicly supported actor and filmmaker Seth MacFarlane's comment that he was "embarrassed" to work for Fox. Fox News anchor Laura Ingraham has come in for particularly vociferous criticism after she described detention centers holding 2,000 immigrant children at the southern border as "essentially summer camps."

Both Ingraham and fellow anchor Sean Hannity-seen as one of Trump's closest unofficial aides-have been hit by advertiser boycotts. "Ghostbusters" and "Bridesmaids" director Paul Feig, who made "Spy" and "The Heat" for the studio, also criticized the news coverage. —AFP



In this Dec 5, 1968 file photo shows jazz singer Nina Simone in London.



In this handout photo made available by Nancy Pierce shows the interior room of the home of jazz singer Nina Simone in Tryon, NC.

Birthplace of singer, activist Nina Simone to be preserved

The dilapidated wooden cottage in North Carolina that was the birthplace of singer and civil rights activist Nina Simone now has the protection of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The trust said in a news release Tuesday that it will develop and find a new use for the house in Tryon where Simone was born in 1933.

Last year, four African-American artists purchased the home. National Trust President and Chief Executive Officer Stephanie Meeks says the trust will work with the home's new owners and the community to honor Simone's contributions to society and to "inspire new generations of artists and activists." The three-room, 660-square-foot (60-square-meter) home went on the market in 2016. Simone's original name was Eunice Waymon. She died in 2003 at the age of 70. — AP



In this June 27, 1985, file photo, Nina Simone performs at Avery Fisher Hall in New York. — AP photos



In this handout photo made available by Nancy Pierce shows the birthplace of jazz singer Nina Simone in Tryon, NC.

Artist buried for three days under busy Australian road

An artist has emerged from three days entombed in a steel box under a busy Australian road in a performance billed as a tribute to victims of totalitarian violence. Mike Parr, 73, fasted during his time underground, with oxygen pumped into the 1.7-metre (5.5-foot) by 2.2-metre container to keep him alive as traffic drove overhead. He had bedding, water, a waste bucket, a sketchpad and pencils for the stunt in Hobart, part of Tasmania state's annual Dark Mofo festival, which celebrates darkness through large-scale public art, food, film and music.

"The anxiety of the artist's disappearance is the point of the piece," organizers said. It was also an attempt to highlight "the shadow cast by the genocidal vio-

lence of 19th century British colonialism in Australia", they added. Parr, who had been buried with only a small light, clambered out of his prison on a ladder late Sunday after heavy machinery carefully removed the asphalt that had sealed him in. He exited without saying a word or acknowledging a crowd that had gathered in the rain. He is expected to detail his experience in a public forum yesterday. "He is an endurance performance artist and he's been doing this for many years, so his body is quite used to doing this," Dark Mofo curator Jarrod Rawlins told reporters. —AFP



This handout photo shows performance artist Mike Parr, 73, sitting in a coffin-like steel box as he is entombed under a busy road in Hobart, Tasmania. — AFP

Fans grieve as detectives search for XXXTentacion's killers

For hours, the fans came in a steady stream to mourn and pay their respects at the spot where rapper XXXTentacion was gunned down, some leaving behind expressions of sympathy along a fence and on the sidewalk. No arrests have been announced in the shooting of the 20-year-old rapper, who Broward County sheriff's officials say was ambushed by two suspects as he left an upscale motor sports dealership Monday afternoon in his electric BMW. His attorney, David Bogenschutz, said investigators told him the 20-year-old rapper, who pronounced his stage name "Ex Ex Ex ten-ta-see-YAWN," had visited a bank shortly before the shooting and possibly withdrew cash to buy a motorcycle.

That brought a parade of mourners Tuesday to the spot behind Riva Motorsports where XXXTentacion was gunned down, not far from where he grew up in Lauderdale. They placed candles, flowers and teddy bears on the sidewalk near where the rapper known by his fans simply as "X?" was shot. They decorated 100 yards (91 meters) of sidewalk with chalk art including messages of sympathy and loss such as "Feel for you XXX" and "4evr Young."

Myles O'Hara, 17, and Aaron Gavin, 20, sat on the curb, solemnly staring at the ground, mostly ignoring the people who moved past. They said they admired XXXTentacion because he was a local kid who rose from rough circumstances and was making a positive contribution. "He had some legal allegations before, but the last year he had only been a positive influence on people's lives, making hit Billboard songs," O'Hara said. "He has been a kind person. You

could look at his face and smile and he was just a normal kid like us ... His style is almost hard to explain. He had an angry tone. He meant everything he said, even the most simplistic words. It just came off his tongue like nothing. He was speaking his mind."

Gavin said unlike other rappers whose songs emphasize buying expensive merchandise, XXXTentacion rapped about his emotions. "X talked about how he felt instead of materialistic things like owning this car, this house, this house," Gavin said. Brandon Lang, a 29-year-old magazine owner, said XXXTentacion may have had an angry persona in his performance, but in reality he "did good things," pointing out that he had come home to perform in an upcoming charity show.



A fan rap singer XXXTentacion pauses by a memorial, Tuesday outside Riva Motorsports in Deerfield Beach, Fla, where the troubled rapper-singer was killed the day before. — AP

Pot smoke

"He had all these mistakes that could have wound up defining him but he didn't let that happen," Lang said. "That is why he is connecting to all these kids because these kids are going through a really sad time, a sad world. He taught them how to cope." In Los Angeles, hundreds of fans turned Melrose Avenue into a mosh pit in celebration and mourning of XXXTentacion late Tuesday night. In an impromptu memorial outside a Hollywood bike shop, fans filling the street and dancing on rooftops shouted along with his songs beneath a cloud of pot smoke.

A big painted sign in the shop window read RIP XXX followed by hearts. Police closed off the street and let the party grow to nearly 500 people before calling for the crowd to clear out. The entertainer, who sported dreadlocks and facial tattoos, was a rising star. He notched a No. 1 album in March with his sophomore effort "???" and had a top 10 hit with "Sad!" but was facing trial on charges that he beat up his pregnant girlfriend. His brief career was marked by controversy. In 2016, he was arrested on charges including home invasion for a 2015 incident, and less than a month later was jailed on charges that he attacked his girlfriend, who was pregnant at the time. Later, he faced more charges including witness tampering. —AP