

*Joe Louis: Hard Times Man.* By Randy Roberts. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. xiii, 308 pp. \$27.50, ISBN 978-0-300-12222-0.)

Through the economic decay of the 1930s and 1940s, through Jim Crow racism, through the national frustration with the shelled husk of American life and a vague national ideal barricaded against the encroaching hoard of fascism, there was Joe Louis. Randy Roberts's impeccable new biography of Louis and his sport provides a necessary new account of Louis's role as connective tissue for the frayed ends of his age.

In Roberts's hands, Louis is neither a poster boy nor a victim. Louis was a creature of the Great Depression. He fought because there was nothing else to do, no work to be had. He became competent because the numbers men who thrived in the 1930s on the backs of those who were hard up and feeling aimlessly for hope used their purse strings to convince a trainer to work with him.

He was also a creature of boxing itself, its respectability forged by the likes of John L. Sullivan and the circumference of its possibilities for black fighters marked by the antics of and backlash against Jack Johnson. To that end, Louis was coached both within the ring and without to be a model citizen, to be the anti-Jack Johnson. Joe Louis was not a creation, however—a Frankenstein's monster that bent to the will of handlers only to become an icon by default. Louis was, by nature and intent, already the anti-Jack Johnson, crafted in that crucible of race, poverty, and masculinity that belied Ann Douglas's *Terrible Honesty* (1995).

Louis's quick rise to the top of the boxing ranks was facilitated by the tattered state of the sport, and by 1935 he was a revelation to black America, a signpost of possibility and a representation of everyone's better self. Joe Louis was hope, manicured and nattily attired. Every punch was a Darwinian argument for the necessity of dignity, the power of equality.

For white America, the admiration for Louis came in fits and starts. When he defeated the Italian giant Primo Carnera, for example, he was a massively talented fighter who made similar Darwinian arguments for the United States. Even so, white America would keep Louis's success at arm's length. If boxing was a

measure of social order, then Louis's somber, quiet demeanor was hiding nothing more than a revocation of the entire system. He was a representative of the country when necessary, an animalistic throwback to a dark age at other times.

Roberts's expert account proves the necessity of a nuanced evaluation of a fighter and a sport that are often painted with a relatively broad brush. From Louis's fights with Max Schmeling in the late 1930s to his work for army recruitment at the onset of World War II, Roberts demonstrates the kinetic, constantly evolving relationship between Joe Louis, boxing, and the many Americas (and worlds) that followed boxers' every move. The story does not end well. Louis had myriad problems in later life, when his fighting prowess—and thus his role as a representative, a commodity—had faded. He was, in the end, cursed by a population's lack of nuance in memory. Roberts, however, rightfully finds it—and gives it back.

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