

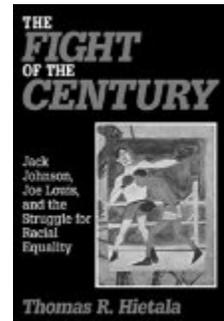
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas R. Hietala. *Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002. 386 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7656-0722-5.

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## Not Running, Not Hiding

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Thomas Hietala's *Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality* is a fascinating historical treatment of how two black boxing champions, Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, affected and reflected racial attitudes in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Hietala mixes an array of anecdotes with historical record to keep his book moving through three hundred and eighty-six pages.

Jack Johnson's quest for and conquest of the heavy-weight boxing title in 1908 stimulated a search for a "Great White Hope," a term penned by none other than American writer Jack London. Racial theories of the time, which included the "small crania" and "arrested cognitive development" with respect to blacks were further reinforced by Tom Dixon's racist novel *The Clansman* and later D.W. Griffith's film, *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Johnson was undaunted, however, and lived by his own code inside the ring and out. He smiled at vanquished foes, cavorted with prostitutes, drove fast cars and married a white woman at a time of brutal lynchings and when many states outlawed interracial marriages. Johnson's defeat of two white champions frightened a public that saw Johnson as a dangerous symbol and challenge to white political and social authority. Johnson antagonized not only whites but also many black intellectuals who thought that Johnson's public personae and unapologetic lifestyle tended to reinforce the worst white

stereotypes about blacks.

Hietala's research is exhaustive. He devotes individual chapters to the racial context of the times that Johnson and later Joe Louis, lived. Hietala's rich trove of anecdotes makes the *Fight of the Century* not only informative but also highly entertaining. My personal favorite was a story about the aftermath of black pride following Johnson's one-sided defeat of former champion and Great White Hope, Jim Jeffries, who was coaxed out of retirement to "redeem" the race. A young man named Open Mouth Rainey reportedly "...sauntered into a local grill and told the owner he wanted 'a cup of coffee as strong as Jack Johnson and a steak as beat up as Jeffries'" (p. 42). Open Mouth paid for his request, however. The owner shot Open Mouth five times. But it was Johnson's defeat of Jeffries on July 4, 1910, that made July 4 a unique holiday for the black population in America.

In some cases, Hietala details events that are important for the historical record but become difficult for the reader to follow. The long sequence of Johnson's trial under the Mann Act, for example, is lengthy and confusing. Additionally, the reader would benefit from even more biographical information about Johnson's early years. Nonetheless, Hietala does a masterful job of illustrating how Johnson became a lightning rod for the racial conflicts and paradoxes in America at the turn of the twentieth century. He quotes Billy Lewis of the Indianapolis Freeman as saying that Johnson had committed "...a trin-

ity of unpardonables making for sin triplicate: His chief sin is being a Negro. Next he whipped a white man. Next he married a white woman” (p. 91).

Johnson’s rise and fall set the stage for the next black champion, Joe Louis. Louis’s managers and trainers were well aware that a sober, god-fearing image was critical to Louis’s acceptance as a black champion. In one of many anecdotes illustrating Louis’s popularity, Hietala recounts the story of James McKnight. McKnight peddled his bicycle for eight days from Detroit to New York City to see Louis fight Primo Carnera in 1935, setting a new cross-country bike record in the process.

Hietala details how race, in Louis’s case, ultimately became less important than patriotism and nationalism as exemplified by his two fights with German heavyweight Max Schmeling. With the specter of war looming over America in the personae of Adolph Hitler and the theory of Aryan supremacy, a united America ultimately transcended many racial divisions. Louis had suffered his first defeat ever at the hands of Schmeling in 1936. Louis later won the heavyweight title, knocking out James Braddock in 1937. Louis’s epic rematch with Schmeling in 1938 was the shortest heavyweight title bout to date; he knocked out Schmeling in one round. America celebrated Louis as an American hero, while Berlin cut the radio feed before German listeners could hear Schmeling counted out.

Louis enlisted in the army in 1942 and served through 1946. He boxed exhibitions and served in a variety of public relations capacities. Louis even interceded on behalf of a young black serviceman who was facing a court martial because of insubordination. After the war the young serviceman changed the course of sports history; his name was Jackie Robinson.

Hietala’s book gives evidence that although Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt may have seemed progressive with respect to race, that they also kowtowed to Southern constituencies on critical race issues. He also details the gruesome crimes against and lynchings of blacks by whites that took place in many parts of the country and gives the reader an economics lesson on housing in the inner city. The fact that the

War Department ordered the Red Cross to separate black and white blood supplies will appall many readers not familiar with race history in America. Hietala’s analyses are well written though he sometimes skips back and forth between events in the fighter’s careers, confusing the reader on chronologies. Hietala’s chapter 8, entitled “The Harder They Fall” is a beautifully written chapter about the decline of Louis’s public image after revelations of his extra-marital affairs many years after his career was over. His discussion illustrates the difficulty writers and historians have in judging and evaluating public figures from previous eras when access to new information and changing moral standards create new cultural contexts.

Finally, for the ardent boxing fan, Hietala amasses some fascinating coincidences, linkages, and historical facts. The Louis camp, for example, spurned Jack Johnson when he offered to help train Louis. Incensed, Johnson counseled Schmeling on Louis’s vulnerability to the right hand. Schmeling repeatedly staggered Louis with his overhand right and ultimately knocked him out with his right hand in their first fight in 1936. The father of James Earl Jones, the actor who played a fictionalized Jack Johnson [Jack Jefferson] in Howard Sackler’s Broadway play in 1968, *The Great White Hope*, had been a sparring partner for Joe Louis. Heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali was one of many attendees who was impressed by Jones’s performance in *The Great White Hope* in 1968, and commented on parallels between himself and Jack Johnson.

Hietala’s book is a powerful, readable, fascinating study of American race relations in the first fifty years of the twentieth century, suitable for scholars and readers of American History, American Studies, Sport History and Sociology, Ethnic Studies and boxing history.

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