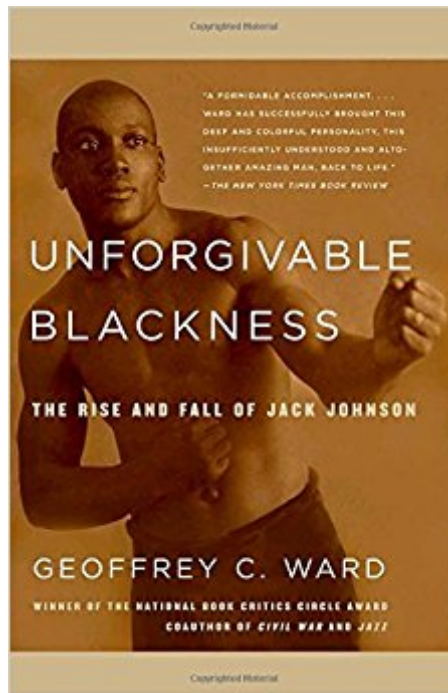




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Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise And Fall Of Jack Johnson



Synopsis

In this vivid biography Geoffrey C. Ward brings back to life the most celebrated African American boxer and the most reviled African American of his age. Jack Johnson battled his way out of obscurity and poverty in the Jim Crow South to win the title of heavyweight champion of the world. At a time when whites ran everything in America, he took orders from no one and resolved to live as if color did not exist. While most blacks struggled simply to exist, he reveled in his riches and his fame, sleeping with whomever he pleased, to the consternation and anger of much of white America. Because he did so the federal government set out to destroy him, and he was forced to endure prison and seven years of exile. This definitive biography portrays Jack Johnson as he really was--a battler against the bigotry of his era and the embodiment of American individualism.

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Customer Reviews

Johnson (1878-1946), boxing's first black heavyweight champion, was a lightning rod for controversy in early 20th-century America. Even many of his fellow African-Americans resented his unapologetic dominance of the ring and steady succession of white girlfriends and wives, viewing his behavior as a setback to race relations. Ward (*A First-Class Temperament*) depicts the fear and resentment Johnson spurred in white Americans in voluminous detail that may startle modern readers in its frankness. Contemporary journalists regularly referred to Johnson as a "nigger" and openly advocated his pummeling at white hands, though ample quotations from supporters in the Negro press balance the perspective. Ward first documents the obstacles the boxing world threw in

Johnson's path (including prolonged refusals by top white boxers to fight against him), and then probes the government's prosecution of the champ under the Mann Act (which banned the interstate transport of females for "immoral purposes") for taking his girlfriends across state lines. Ward brings his award-winning biographical skills to this sympathetic portrayal, which practically bursts with his research—•at times almost every page has its own footnote. Though the narrative drags slightly in Johnson's declining years, the champion's stubborn, uncompromising personality never lets up. Even readers who don't consider this a knockout will concede Ward a victory on points. Photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Jack Johnson's colorful personality and his impact on American racial politics make him a fascinating topic for a biography. Critics were interested in this account of his extraordinary life, but many had complaints. Foremost among these was Ward's failure to provide historical analysis and context. Unforgivable Blackness doesn't ask any probing questions about Johnson's influence or his legacy; even though Ward did his research, those seeking an in-depth examination of his life will be disappointed. Ward may lack a historian's detachment and sense of the larger picture. However, his work succeeds as a compelling portrait of a man determined to transcend his limits. Copyright © 2004 Phillips & Nelson Media, Inc. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

What a fantastic biography - one of the most interesting I've ever read. You get a vivid picture of Jack Johnson - the man, the athlete, and the inimitable personality. Geoffrey Ward paints an equally vivid (and disturbing) picture of early 20th century America, with the scourge of racism running deep in the national character. Jack Johnson was an exceptionally brave and proud person who fought to be his own man, refusing to allow others to dictate his behaviors and life choices. It's too bad he made his statement during an era in which he could expect little support from either race. I'm grateful for the opportunity to have met Jack Johnson through this amazing biography. He's now one of my heroes.

Great book! I often wondered what made The Champ a champion. It was, he was taught, by his mother, that he could be and do anything he would work diligent towards!! He was a believer of equal rights and lived as if equal rights existed. He lived free and happy. Can't wait to read more about Jack Johnson, the great pioneer! Couldn't put this book down until I finished reading it!

In the introduction to his biography of Jack Johnson, Geoffrey C. Ward indicates that his primary source was newspaper articles. And indeed, this biography reads much like a very long newspaper account of the life of Jack Johnson. This isn't good or bad, but an apt description of what it is like reading this biography. In fact, Ward has done a commendable job in weaving what he had to work with into a very readable, informative, and enjoyable work. Jack Johnson was the boxing world heavyweight champion from 1908-1915. And he was the first black heavyweight champion, which dominates the story of his life inside the ring and out. Johnson became heavyweight champion at a time when boxing was just barely out of the bare knuckle era, and while more organized as a sport, was still a rough and tumble and often illegal activity. Boxing, even as it is today, was often surrounded by unsavory characters. During that era throwing fights for money or to set up matches wasn't uncommon. Johnson learned his craft literally starting from the bottom up in local tough man or boxing contests and his skills eventually lead him to the top of his sport. What make Johnson's story so interesting are two things - race and his profligate lifestyle. Race played a key role in his life even though he himself ignored race and didn't let it interfere with how he behaved or what he did. He often sported white women on his arm and eventually married a white woman, and did not defer to anyone, black or white. This made him an even more incendiary figure for the race conscious press and America at the time. Many white heavyweights wouldn't fight Johnson - most notably Jim Jefferies who held the title at a time when Johnson was the obvious deserving opponent for a shot at the champion. Eventually Jefferies retired and "conferred" his title on Tommy Burns, a bulked up white middleweight. Johnson chased after Burns and through the pressure of the press he eventually landed his title shot and dominated his lesser opponent, winning the heavyweight championship of the world. This eventually lead to one of the most pivotal heavyweight boxing matches in history - and certainly the most pivotal fight of Johnson's career - a match with former heavyweight champion Jim Jefferies. Jefferies was obviously reluctant to come out of retirement to fight the new champion but pressure from friends and many in the press and boxing world, who didn't want to see a black man hold the championship, more or less forced his hand. The fight eventually took place on July 4, 1910 in Reno, New Mexico. Thousands were in attendance but millions throughout the country waited for the result. Johnson dominated Jefferies through much of the fight, eventually knocking him out in the 15th round. Johnson's win legitimized his title as heavyweight champion. Unfortunately, it also touched off violence against blacks throughout the country. Jefferies' utter defeat also lead to a search for a "great white hope" to defeat Johnson. Eventually, Johnson was beaten by a huge but less skilled Jess Willard in Havana, Cuba on April 5,

1915. Johnson probably lost as much because of age, he was around 37 at the time, and the rather unfortunate events in his life from the time of the Jefferies victory to his match against Willard in Cuba. During that time he appears to have spent most of his money, married a white woman who eventually committed suicide, and married another white woman against the violent protests of her family. This led, in a rather convoluted way, to his fleeing the country with his new wife in tow after being brought up on charges of violating the Mann Act. During all this time, and the only reason to mention the ethnicity of his wives, was the vilification Johnson received in the press across America and the hatred he engendered among some, including those in law enforcement, who wanted to bring him down. Thus, Johnson had to go through convoluted negotiations and travel arrangements to even defend his title again Willard in Cuba. Eventually, Johnson decided to come back to America but had to face a jail sentence, which he served. After getting out of jail, broke because he spent most of his money, he mostly earned a living through boxing exhibitions and similar activities. Johnson's lifestyle some would call raucous. He made a lot of money for his era and he spent it freely on clothes, cars, and the women he kept as companions some of which were prostitutes or former prostitutes. One can look up to Johnson for not letting racism stand in the way of living his life the way he wanted to live it and kowtowing to no one. One could also look askance at his philandering, spendthrift way of life, but who are we to really judge? Undoubtedly Johnson brought some of his problems on himself. Also undoubtedly he was treated unfairly because of the era in which he lived in. Had Johnson lived today he might get some negative press, but more likely he would have a legion of fans who willing to overlook some of the things he did in his private life. Cars were relatively new invention in early 1900's and Johnson loved cars and bought several of them. He often liked to drive fast. This too eventually caught up with him as, while speeding, he swerved to miss a truck and rammed his car into a tree. He died in 1946 after an adventurous 68 years. Note this book is the companion to Ken Burns's documentary of the life of Jack Johnson using the same title. I have not viewed the documentary yet but plan to.

Growing up in the Midwest, we knew nothing about Jack Johnson. Joe Louis alone appeared as the iconic boxing champion we kids admired. Even our parents and grandparents seemed to know nothing about Johnson. However, at this moment, my 86-year old father is reading this book. Perhaps I bought for it him to redress past oversight. Only through the stage play and film, "The Great White Hope" did we gain an introduction to the man Jack Johnson. Ward's book fills a goodly number of historical gaps, and even when specifics are ambiguous (Johnson himself offered several versions of his life's events), the larger picture of an individual denied his fundamental humanity

emerges. This is no mere hagiography of the man. Johnson, always clearly self-confident, is present in the pages with his failures, foibles, his faults. But a generation or two passed him over, shut him out of their memories, failed to add his powerful presence as heavyweight champion to stories told to newer generations. The reason for this oversight was fear. Johnson's insistence upon his manhood, as much or more manhood than his contemporaries, was a fearsome thing for black men to display to a grudging public. Choosing one's own style of abundant living or selecting a woman of one's desiring, regardless of her color or the constraints of custom, ran powerfully against the expectations of black subservience. Whites feared this usurpation of their presumed universal entitlement, and among blacks too there were those who feared what form white revenge might take against them because of Johnson's perceived impertinence. Ward offers readers a recapturing of gloomy early 20th Century racial politics combined with Jack Johnson's poised and mesmerizing stance against a world replete with overwhelming refusal to understand and accept him. He fought for and won the heavyweight championship not to represent black hopes and ambitions against whites (though these hopes were surely buoyed by his unprecedented victories). He joined the fray as simply one man against another man, pitting wit, style, grace, and strength to win. Although DNA now provides unassailable scientific proof for the insignificance of skin color in the human species, at the turn of the 20th Century, Jack Johnson proved this with his fists.

Superb biography. Great service. DLG

Item on time and as described.

Excellent book. A must read for any lover of history. Boxing or otherwise. It makes a man who has been dead 60 + years now come alive before your eyes.

Terrific Read! Historic! Painful! Inspiring!

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