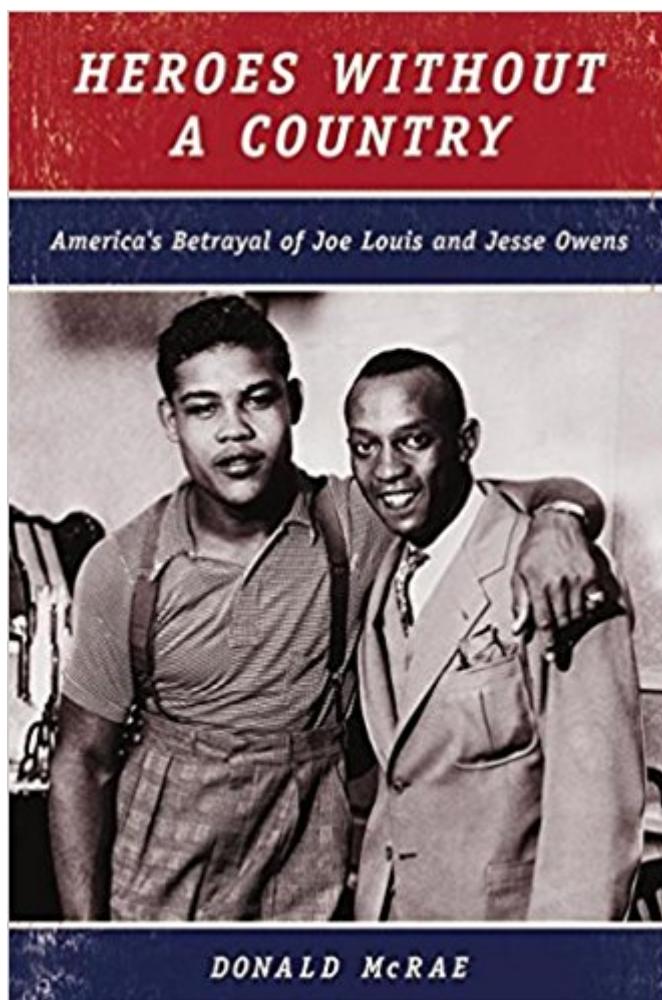


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Heroes Without A Country: America's Betrayal Of Joe Louis And Jesse Owens



Synopsis

"Black men look like they rule sport in America today. It was nothing like that in the 1930s. America was white and that was that. It didn't do you no good to dream of making it to the big time. It was impossible. And then, y'know, along came Jesse and along came Joe." -- Ruth Owens, Jesse's late wifey the summer of 1935, within weeks of each other, Joe Louis and Jesse Owens emerged as the first black superstars of world sport, and their subsequent political and social impact on America was nothing short of sensational. To fans (and even critics) the world over, they seemed larger than life, and yet in their endeavors they were unfailingly human: as vulnerable as they were courageous; as troubled as they were brilliant; as unsettled in themselves as they are now fixed in history.

Scrupulously researched and written in spare, eloquent prose, *Heroes Without a Country* vividly re-creates some of the most dramatic sporting events of the past century. In August 1936, in front of Hitler and an imposing phalanx of Nazi commanders, Jesse Owens, "the fastest man on earth," won an unprecedented four medals at the Olympic Games in Berlin. Two years later, in "the fight of the century," his great friend Joe Louis crushed Germany's Max Schmeling to signal the end of white supremacy in boxing. Like Jesse, Joe had been born to black sharecropping parents in a country demeaned by racism; together their victories became a rallying point for the disenfranchised black population of America. Idolized across the world, they were two young men at the pinnacle of their careers who overcame prejudice and fear to achieve their goals. Yet for both of them, success brought its own perils. In 1938, two years after winning his gold medals in Berlin, Owens was hounded out of amateur sports by the infamously tyrannical Olympic boss "Slavery Avery" Brundage and, facing financial ruin, he was reduced to running for money against dogs, horses, and even his friend Joe Louis. Later the two would be subjected to FBI investigations, harassed by the IRS, and beleaguered by debt and despair. Jesse watched Joe slip into drug addiction and mental illness. In *Heroes Without a Country*, award-winning writer Donald McRae captures the uncanny coincidences and intertwined events that bound these men together -- through both triumph and tragedy -- and provides an intimate and thought-provoking dual portrait of two of the most important athletes of the twentieth century.

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Customer Reviews

After learning that the Olympic track star Jesse Owens once raced against the legendary heavyweight champion Joe Louis, McRae, a freelance writer living in London, set out to find what prompted such an unlikely pairing and to trace the arc of the two men's lives. The result of McRae's research is a powerful and moving story that documents how these two black stars struggled to reconcile their fame and success in the sporting arena to the discrimination faced by black Americans across most parts of the country. The answer to why Owens raced Louis is simple—Owens needed the money and Louis was more than willing to help out his friend. After refusing to continue a barnstorming tour following the 1936 Olympics, Owens was banned from continuing his track-and-field career as an amateur and turned to other ways to cash in on his notoriety. Following the collapse of several promising ventures, Owens took to racing horses and working at other odd jobs. Louis had no problem earning money as a professional fighter, but he had trouble keeping it. He spent freely, paid large sums to his promoters and handlers, and ended up owing the IRS millions in back taxes. Despite their money woes (Owens's financial situation improved over the years), the men slowly worked to break down racial barriers, and for that they held a special place in the hearts of most black Americans. McRae evinces a deep appreciation for the burdens fame bestowed on Owens and Louis and shines a well-deserved spotlight on two of the most prominent Americans of the 20th century. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

“A powerful and moving story...” (Publishers Weekly)
“A terrific read...tells an important story.” (Library Journal)
“Richly detailed...a compassionate case history.” (Austin American-Statesman)

Don McCrae, a white South African who once taught English in Soweto, turned his curiosity about a

news story regarding a race between Jesse Owens and Joe Louis into a beatifully written,detailed story of two men from Jim Crow Alabama,who are both symbols of achievement-and of unique targets.In Owens case,just after the '36 Olympics-and obviously well before the current "rules" regarding "amateurs",Owens was forced to race horses,Joe Louis,etc. to make a living and investigated by J. Edgar Hoover;Joe Louis was hounded-below the belt-by the IRS.Obviously,there have never been bigger lb. for lb. black-or American sports heroes-and McCrae seems to make this argument contrasting the era of Louis and Owens with the era of Ali and the Smith-Carlos protest at the 1968 Olympics.This should be required reading,particularly for todays professional-and "amateur" athletes.

Very good story of parallel careers, both Owens & Louis never got their due.

Great product, great service

REVIEW NOT COMPLETE YET.

Although the previous professional editorial reviews provide a fair description of this book, it's necessary to emphasize what an important piece of work this is. *Heroes Without a Country* is at times inspiring and uplifting, and at other times infuriating and saddening. The hatred and hypocrisy that Joe Louis and Jesse Owens had to endure throughout their lives and careers are staggering. Not only does this book discuss the achievements and struggles of these two great athletes, but it also provides a clear, unflinching portrait of what it was like in the apartheid of the South during the '30s and '40s--a reality that many would shy away from. Both Louis and Owens deserve to be considered on the same level of talent as other greats such as Michael Jordan and Muhammad Ali. This book shows these men's strengths, their problems, and their triumphs, all of which played out in the midst of the racism of a country that could not accept them for who they were.

Donald McRae, a white man from "Mandela's South Africa," interest was piqued after hearing Owens' wife tell a story about a 60-yard dash between Owens and Louis in 1938. The author used that vignette as a basis for further research into the parallel lives of the two, and this book is what followed. It is an interesting, canonical, and thus not a very brave book. Interesting in the sense that it almost gets the "front story" correct, but then it proceeds to leave out the back story entirely. Being an immigrate, from an Apartheid-based country himself, we can almost give him the benefit of the

doubt and thus forgive him for overlooking the much more important back story. His version of the "front story" is the old enduring canard that the "South did it." As if, were it not for the white racism in the South, the U.S. would be a perfectly non-racist country? Would that it were so. That is equivalent to saying that "post-Mandela's South Africa" also is non-racist. I have been to South Africa post-Mandela, and it is not so there either. Both, the "South did it" and there is no racism now in South Africa, are convenient and overused tropes slipped-in to cover up the sins of the past. When Owens returned from Berlin and Louis fought Max Smelling, they both resided in the North, not in the South, which was only slightly less racist than the South. Now, arguably the tables have turned. It is true now that the South on balance is probably slightly less racist than the North, and post-Mandela South Africa, is only slightly less racist than during the days of Apartheid. Only on the surface has the old generic brand of South African Apartheid diminished. The all-black shanty towns still encircled all of South Africa's major urban areas. I have seen how at five O' clock, within minutes, Pretoria turns back into "black town." Here, the author correctly follows, in parallel, the lives of these two bona fide U.S. champions -- black men who "in name only" will remain "U.S champions" for all times. The basic outline of the author's narrative is essentially correct and is this: Louis and Owens were both born in Southern towns only eight months apart. They both stuttered. Their respective families migrated to the North in the twenties. Their heroics challenged both Hitler's version of Aryan white superiority, and importantly (and this is the missing back story) also the American version of same. Despite their heroics, neither had a secure enough place in the American cultural system to "trade on their heroic and patriotic deeds," something that a "real hero" gets for free. As a result, they both ended up paupers on America's mean streets. The irony of all ironies is that Max Smelling, the Nazi representative who won and then lost the crown to Louis, was given a Coke Cola franchise by a U.S. company and became a wealthy man who in the end helped defray the cost of Louis' funereal. Indeed, the fact that their heroics (under the banner of the American flag) also challenged the American brand of Arianism -- the U.S own self-styled version of white supremacy -- which arguably was and still remains as virulent as Hitler's brand of Arianism, IS the missing back story. It is the missing part of the narrative that our post-Apartheid South African friend avoided entirely and thus in my view, did not get the narrative entirely correct. Being an immigrant, perhaps Mr. McRae is unaware of the fact that we blacks all know this narrative, his "front story," "by heart." It and other similar stories are an integral part of our hidden cultural outsider upbringing. Until the present mega-star era, what we had seen happen time and time again was that black "American" sports heroes were summarily given their respective fifteen minutes of glory in the sun, and then quickly shuffled off stage and back into the closet in their assigned "places" in

America's Apartheid society "where they belonged" -- never to be heard from again. That is to say, like the rest of the blacks in the USA, who remain "in" but not "of" America, these men too were just two of thirty million, also clearly without a country. If this sound like so much hyperbole, then surely the author has seen how Americans root for any white European team but their own, whenever the Williams sisters, their own American representatives, play tennis; or how Muhammad Ali was sidelined and then hounded during his most productive boxing years, only to succeed in beating the American Apartheid system at its own game and making whites like him despite themselves. Now, in his latter years, Ali has been adopted as "America's Black Teddy Bear, carrying the Olympic Torch, ect. as if the vicious white hatred directed at him had never happened at all? We know this "front story" so well because it has been repeated many times -- in other books and by other black athletes -- who followed in the same distressing footsteps. Mike Tyson comes immediately to mind, even though "Iron Mike" was more an American villain and embarrassment than an American hero. He justly earned and deserved the treatment that Owens and Louis got for just being born black in the wrong country. Not to belabor the point, but the narrative should have been about connecting up the "front story" with the "back story," which in the U.S., even as we have a mulatto President, is always a case of the glass being half empty or half full. Three stars.

we are talking less than a Hundred Years ago which wasn't that long ago at all.we are only talking about almost 70 years back.it's scary to think that two of the Greatest Athletes Ever were treated so badly stateside. Joe Louis was a Great Champion& he did everything to distance himself from another Great Black Champion Jack Johnson because of the Politics&Hated that went down.and the sad part Joe Louis still never was accepted. same thing with Jesse Owens.this brother won Medals&Faced Hitler face to face&didn't back down.but Being the Best still only meant 2nd Class Citizenship in America.it's truly sad&they aren't ever given enough due now as we speak about the Greatest Athletes Ever. personally what Jesse Owens accomplished in the face of Hate with Hitler was right there with Jackie Robinson&Larry Dolby breaking the Color Line in Baseball IMO. Joe Louis the Brown Bomber was one of a kind as well. just remember this wasn't that long ago.

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