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Book Review: *Shoeless Joe and Ragtime Baseball*

Scott D. Peterson

Wright State University - Main Campus, petersonsco@umsl.edu

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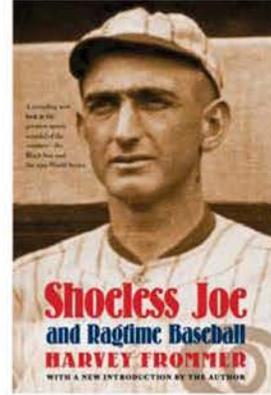
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shoeless joe and ragtime baseball

Reviewed by Scott D. Peterson, University of Maine

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As Harvey Frommer indicates in the new introduction to this old tale, some stories will never go away and the 1919 Black Sox scandal is one of them. In *Saying It's So*, Daniel Nathan argues that this particular tale has been retold every generation because it is so central to America's culture and history. Instead of letting it go, we've got to dust it off and tell it again (and again) in the form of non-fiction, fiction, and film. Frommer's book, which was recently reissued just 16 years after its last release, focuses on the life and times of the slugger from Greenville, South Carolina, but the tragic end of the story is never far from the mind of the reader who is familiar with the drama's final act. Jackson's fate to be left out of the Hall of Fame – despite playing a flawless 1919 World Series and a career batting average that is third all-time – is uppermost in Frommer's mind and the new introduction makes the purpose of the book clear: to tell the full story of Jackson's life so that one day he can take his place in Cooperstown with the other baseball immortals.



Along with including the transcript of Jackson's 1920 grand jury testimony, Frommer sprinkles his text with quotes from key figures (Kenesaw Mountain Landis, Connie Mack, Hugh Fullerton) and excerpts from newspapers of the day (including game accounts and poetry) to capture the flavor of "ragtime baseball." These elements make up the book's greatest strength, but they also represent its greatest weakness because Frommer neglects to cite the sources of these quotes, forcing the researcher to go to Fleitz's book, *Shoeless*, which includes full scholarly apparatus.

That quibble aside, there is no substitute for a person's own words to get a sense of his makeup. For example, Jackson's down-to-earth nature is evident in the following quote about the 1911 batting race: "A story that was heard a lot was that Ty Cobb bulldozed me by getting my goat in a conceived plan to ignore me in Cleveland in that important series. That's just a lot of hooey. Ty was able to beat me out because he got more hits than I did" (38). Although

Frommer tells us Cobb had mythologized this batting race by claiming he'd psyched Jackson out, the quote we get from Cobb is "I had to fight all my life to survive. They were all against me . . . but I beat the bastards and left them in the ditch" (39) – which seems to have nothing to do with the batting title, unless Jackson was one of the ones Cobb left in the ditch. Nonetheless, Jackson's use of "bulldozing" is worthy of note here since it's an example of baseball slang that dates back to the game's "bad old days" in the 1880s, when teams – including the one captained by Charles Comiskey – engineered wins by "kicking" with the umpire and stalling with late leads to get the game called due to darkness. These tactics were called "bulldozing" in the papers, but since Jackson couldn't read, he must have heard the term somewhere along the line, proving that it was still in use a quarter century after it was coined as a piece of baseball – and by extension, American – language.

Setting the stage for the 1913 season, Frommer mentions the organization of the Federal League – a third major league that was started in an attempt to break the monopoly held by the other two – suffragettes marching on Washington to win the vote for women, the ideal American beauty and character of the "Gibson Girl," electrified scoreboards hanging outside newspaper offices, and popular songs titles from the day. All of these elements go far to set the scene for a reader who is unfamiliar with the America of nearly a century ago. Readers wishing to see a similar slice of life from that era can go to *You Know Me Al* by Ring Lardner, which is set in 1913 and also tells the story of a young man breaking into baseball as he tries to make his way in the world. Lardner gets as much or more mileage out of the songs by having Jack Keefe make several references to "I Love My Wife (But Oh You Kid)" – including postscripts about his admiring fans and the sweet family house he imagines back in his hometown of Bedford, Indiana.

Predictably, Lardner figures heavily in Frommer's treatment of the 1919 World Series, singing his famous song about blowing ball games as he lurches through the special Pullman car of the White Sox. What has always bothered me about the Black Sox is the colossally bad decision-making from all sides and I felt no differently when I got to the train wreck waiting at the end of Joe Jackson's story. As a member of the generation that grew up with Eliot Asinof's take on the tale, I am spurred by all the usual stories of Comiskey's stinginess and would like to know why he acted like that, especially given his history as one of the National League stars who threw in with John Montgomery Ward and the other players who attempted to take control of their own work by forming the Brotherhood League in 1890. Did the move to ownership turn Comiskey into just another

corporate raider or was he jealous of the "higher" salaries of his players? The story becomes all the more tragic when Frommer reveals how Comiskey presented each of the "Square Sox" with a check for \$1500 in 1920 to make up the difference between the winner's and loser's shares of the 1919 World Series (148). This behavior is more in keeping with what one would expect from a former player, but it's also a case of too little – about \$500 if the actual difference is factored in, as Frommer points out – too late to prevent a needless tragedy.

The foregoing discussion, however rambling, should show that there is more than enough material in Frommer's book to engage baseball fans and students of American history. Perhaps we will yet see Joe Jackson take his place in the Hall of Fame due to the efforts of Frommer and others – along with a World Series won by the Chicago Cubs (8 to 5 says Jackson makes it there first).

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