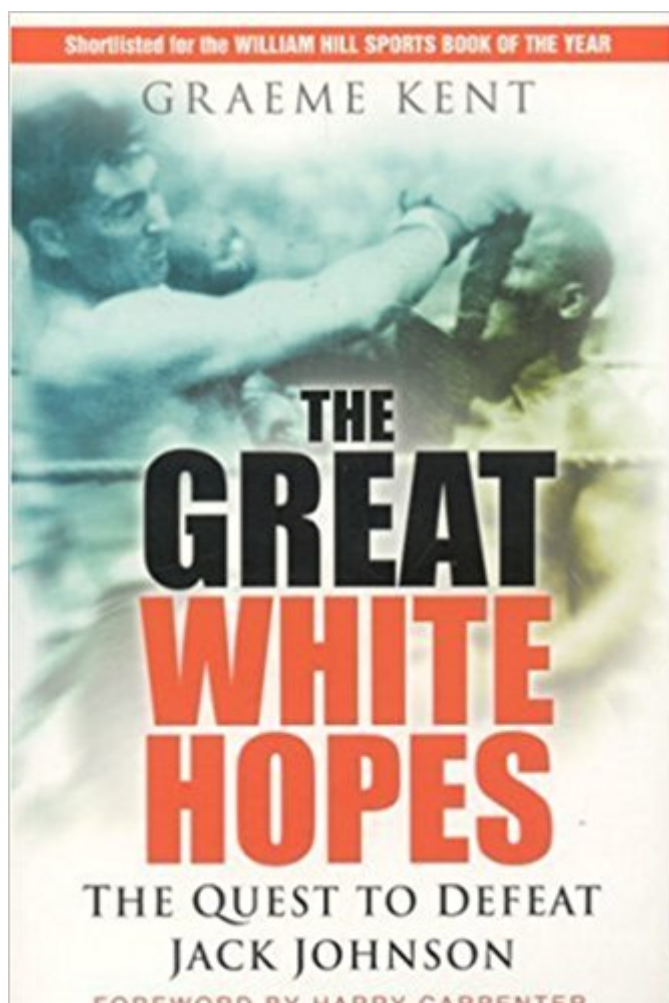


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The Great White Hopes: The Quest To Defeat Jack Johnson



Synopsis

In 1908 talented black US fighter Jack Johnson won the heavyweight championship of the world from the Canadian Tommy Burns. There was an immediate storm of protest. Writers, including Jack London, and politicians feared the accession of the fearless and outspoken Johnson would threaten white supremacy. It was predicted f{ accurately f{ that his reign would lead to civic unrest and race riots. Over the next seven years, more than 30 white fighters tried to beat Jackson, lured by the prospect of fame and a quick buck. It was not until 1915 that Jackson lost his crown, and during the years in between an extraordinary human drama was played out on the boxing world stage. Graeme White tells the full story of the Great White Hopes for the first time.

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Customer Reviews

GRAEME KENT was the head of educational broadcasting and textbook production in the Soloman Islands, a headteacher for 18 years, a scriptwriter and producer for the schools broadcasting department at the BBC. He has written more than 40 non-fiction and fiction books. He has spent years collecting material on the White Hopes from contemporary newspaper accounts and court records.

I enjoyed this book a lot. It was a tremendous read full of stories of the myriad characters from the turn of the century. Jack Johnson is the central figure in the book but not the main character. The author takes the tack of looking at the white hopes who were groomed to take the crown from

Johnson. These fighters tended to be big but technically clumsy and the ones who were unfortunate enough to get into the ring with Johnson tended to have a hard time of it. Being a fan of photos, I would have liked some more pictures to be in the book but that is a minor quibble.

Very interesting point of American history. The book is a mirror of the US society of the time. It is kind of unique to hear from a British perspective. The reader should get use to hear weights in stone instead of pounds. We tend to focus on the American great white hope campaign.... yet heavyweight contenders from Britain, France, South Africa, Russia, and other parts of the world were also playing a role. It also shed some light on fellow great black heavyweight contenders such as Joe Jeannette, Sam McVey, and Sam Langford.

I love the angle that Mr. Kent uses to tell this story. Jack Johnson is the main character but not the main topic. This is the only book that I have found that goes into depth about the white challengers and would be challengers for Johnson's heavyweight crown.

Artist Andy Warhol would have run out of supplies if he needed to paint the mostly tomato cans that were vying to be the Great White Hope. In an interesting angle, author Graeme Kent profiles many of the white boxers that were battling to be the heavyweight contender to dethrone the great champion, Jack Johnson. The trail spans the globe; the United States, Canada, England, France, South Africa and Australia. Hate fueled by racism has no boundaries. The pretenders came from all walks of life - everything from pro wrestlers to those who had their past created by their promoters - and oftentimes competed in tournaments to crown the "White Heavyweight Champion." There are fixed matches, unscrupulous cornermen, a match highlighted by a biting incident, gloves filled with material so the punches were like puffs and several deaths inside the ring. The irony is the hate grew to such levels in the United States that quality black fighters had to leave for Europe to have any chance of getting an opportunity to compete, while white European fighters were coming stateside to try and build their reputations inside the ring and with the media. Kent presents excellent background information on the history of the era, along with following up on what happened to many of the fighters later in life. Johnson looms large in the story, but is not the focus of the book. The section on Jess Willard alludes to Johnson's later contention that he took a dive to drop the belt in a deal to return to the United States and not face the trumped-up federal charges that had forced him to flee the country. Kent pretty much dismisses the "dive," citing Johnson's declining ring skills and age. I contend that Johnson was tired of living abroad and the pressure of having a government and

racist society made him pursue the only means to bring this period of his life to a close; agree to lose the title. Willard emerged from the mass of white fighters, but could hardly be considered championship-quality. His career was nearly over when he quit in the ring during a match and had an opponent die in another fight. He was not considered a great title holder then and his lack of skills were exposed when Jack Dempsey defeated him for the crown. Though black fighters could possibly compete for championships in the lighter weight divisions, the victory by Willard closed the door on black heavyweights having a chance for ring immortality until the emergence of Joe Louis. Johnson had the savvy to become the greatest heavyweight champion ever, but he could not defeat a larger opponent that still plagues society today.

Kent has a vivid writing style as a boxing writer. This in itself is a talent that seems more and more exclusive, as more restrictions and criticisms are levelled at the sport (give me boxing over ultimate fighting any day). I laughed out loud a few times; some of the boxers and the people who associated with them are the stuff from which so much fantastic fiction has been drawn. And the account of the period when managers and promoters seized their charges and gave them exotic names is brilliant. It's not a bio of Johnson, although he is the central figure, and stories of his life in and out of the ring course through the book. There's also a potted history of the emergence of boxing as a sport, and thumbnail sketches of its popularity in the key markets of Australia, The U.S., The U.K., and France. It is true that not everyone depicted fought Jack Johnson, but it seems that all of them wanted to. In any case, they were all noteworthy fighters in the orbit of this earth-shattering champion, who could not be beaten. I learned a lot about how racism was a savagely motivating factor in sports at the time. Indeed, the outcomes of the JJ years-- the colour bars and so on-- lasted up until after the Second World War.

Well written book on a time period in our Country that is not one we can be proud of. When Jack Johnson, boxing's first black heavyweight champion ruled his division, the cry for a "white hope" athlete to re-claim that cherished title engulfed the Nation and Europe. The pot-of-gold awaiting a fighter that could take back this prize for the white race drew some of the shadiest managers, promoters, and backers in the history of sport. The author gives us great detail about the young men that aspired to become the man to beat the great fighter Johnson, and the men that set the "white hope" campaign into action. I really couldn't find anything that the author left out, it's a terrific read and one that is a must for any fan of boxing. If you watch or follow boxing and don't know much about this period in our Nation's history then you really owe it to yourself to pick this book up, you

won't want to put it down.

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