



## **The Big Smoke**

*Adrian Matejka*

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**A finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in Poetry—a collection that examines the myth and history of the prizefighter Jack Johnson**

The legendary Jack Johnson (1878–1946) was a true American creation. The child of emancipated slaves, he overcame the violent segregationism of Jim Crow, challenging white boxers—and white America—to become the first African-American heavyweight world champion. *The Big Smoke*, Adrian Matejka's third work of poetry, follows the fighter's journey from poverty to the most coveted title in sports through the multi-layered voices of Johnson and the white women he brazenly loved. Matejka's book is part historic reclamation and part interrogation of Johnson's complicated legacy, one that often misremembers the magnetic man behind the myth.

## The Big Smoke Details

Date : Published May 28th 2013 by Penguin Books

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Author : Adrian Matejka

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## From Reader Review *The Big Smoke* for online ebook

### Michael Brockley says

THE BIG SMOKE is Adrian Matejka's masterpiece. And only his third book. Using a series of poems told from the perspective of Jack Johnson's wife and lovers and, more pointedly from the first black Heavyweight Champion's view, THE BIG SMOKE presents a sharp pocket biography/myth of this legendary and controversial sports hero. Johnson was Muhammad Ali before the turbulent Sixties. A black athlete who dated, bedded, beat and married white women at a time when such behavior could have been dangerous for a man whose grandparents were slaves. These poems exude machismo and a virile confidence. And the book ends far too soon. Matejka's has set a colossal bar for himself.

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### Pete says

another reviewer called this a "verse novelization" and that's actually spot-on. these are not showy lyrical compositions, just matter of fact, unencumbered lines telling the story of jack johnson (impossibly rich as history, a vein of inspiration that matejka works with restraint and a great eye). at first i couldn't see past the humility and plainness of the poetry here but once i slowed down and got into the book on its terms, i started to really dig it. this is sports history, quietly impressive story-telling, a touch of intersectionalism re johnson's lovers -- who have as much of a voice as johnson here -- and the frankness of the racism that johnson faced. people should write more dope historical-narrative-novelistic poetry about undersung american heroes. also there is a leadbelly song about jack johnson being refused passage on the titanic, i learned from this book: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qe5tc...>

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### Michael Nye says

The Big Smoke is the third poetry collection by Matejka. Longlisted for the 2013 National Book Award, this collection is about Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight champion of the world. Told through a range of narrators - Jack, the women in his life (Belle, Hattie, and Etta), and even his own shadow - each poem deepens the reader's understanding of Jack Johnson.

The beauty of this collection is that it is a true collection: the individual poems are sensational, but unlike many poetry collections, there is also a compelling narrative that makes it a book. You read the collection like a novel, but get the impact of precise strong poetry. Each woman has her own voice; each fight is brutal, jarring, and unique; the style shifts from poem to poem as the language requires.

This is a breathtaking, sharp collection from one of the best young poets in America.

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### Justin Martin says

This poem-profile of Jack Johnson aims to correct the record and portray Jackson as both a man abused by a racist system and the willing beneficiary, enabler, and predator of a misogynist one. To do this, it makes

some comparisons that are poignant - the freedom he has beating a white man in the final several page round by round tour de force - and other comparisons that just reduce and stink; there's a horrendous poem in here about cooking for your woman while you beat her, and it wants the reader's shock and nothing else. Letters from his various white mistresses attempt to de-mythologize his heroism and do, slightly, but he is still the relatively uncomplicated, shock-provoking center of gravity around which their poetic voices supposedly have to spin. It's quite a deliberate effort and it's most of the way there, but it wears thin after a while.

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### **Kristy K says**

I didn't know much about Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight champ, and I thought this books of poems about him would be a good introduction. While it was informative I found it didn't hold my attention.

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### **Jen says**

Took this out of someone's hands after they were finished with it.

It's got a really compelling narrative. There is not too much lyricism to it, but it paints an interesting and blunt picture of Jack Johnson's life. Thematically it gets to the heart of ambition and the brutality of seeking success for someone whose life and place in the world was built on how much pain he could take, how much he could distribute to others.

It would be impossible to read any of the poems out of context and really appreciate it, but my favorite poem was Rememory.

IMO, the author is insanely gifted.

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### **Tom LA says**

This is a collection of poems about Jack Johnson, the first black Heavy Weight Champion. I was attracted by the idea. I didn't know anything about Johnson before buying the book, so I went to Youtube where I found a couple of great black-and-white videos of his fights and a documentary on his life. I would recommend those videos, they are such incredible historic documents.

The book is beautiful in its original concept. It follows the boxer's life somewhat chronologically, from his early life to his old age, and in many poems the author uses the first person to get inside Jack's head.

I found the concept of the book to be its strongest feature, because the poems did not give me much except for some information about the life of Jack Johnson. I never felt like I could see the world through Jack Johnson's eyes, or I could really understand his feelings. This was my personal experience of course, but I have to say I couldn't detect much depth, nor was I really touched by the poems.

Then again, does poetry have to be touching? I don't know much about poetry, especially in the English language, but I have to say the free verses in "The big smoke" very often seem just like regular prose. While

I have nothing against that, I'm kind of wondering what is truly "poetic" about this collection.

Like another reviewer said:

"If you just take  
a prose and break  
it up into pieces I  
don't think that you  
can really call that poetry".

I'm afraid that once you start to wonder what contemporary poetry exactly is, you get lost in the labyrinth of literature analysis and criticism, and you starve to death before you can find your way out.

So, let's just leave that one there, and enjoy this admirable work of creativity, words and punches.

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### **Clifford says**

What a wonderful collection of poetry about a surprising subject--Jack Johnson, the first African American Heavyweight Champion of the World.

See my full review at [Review of The Big Smoke](#)

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### **Joey Gamble says**

A collection whose brilliance sneaks up on you like a great left-hook.

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### **Secundra says**

This poetry book is a historical accounting of the boxer Jack Johnson. Before Ali, Thomas "Hitman" Hearn, or Tyson there was Jack. He was the heavyweight boxing champ pre segregation. A black male who worked the ship yard to earn money for his family. He was swept into the initial wave of boxing's evolution from animal fighting to having black males fight for sport (Battle Royal - the opening poem). He continues to fight to stay employed and not go home to a worse whipped by his grandmother. Despite not being able to continue his classroom education, he is aware of the discussions occurring in the black community lead by Booker T. Washington who he was not a fan of.

In "The Manly Art of Self Defense" Jack is exposed to his first paid professional boxer "Chrysanthemum Joe." Boxing was outlawed in Texas. Joe could only come into town under the guise of self defense. He learns the "tightrope" on how to box to appease those who hold the purse strings and jail keys, Jack's boxing talent has him traveling, outside of Galveston, Texas to the north. Starting in Chicago, he begins to acquire a reputation that is picked up by the media. He learns to say the right things to reporters interviewing him and keep his true feelings to himself. Jack also falls in love with a black woman named Clara. When she dumps him not once but twice Jack is devastated. His punches that were dedicated to Clara to show his love for her instead fuel a anger in him that results in Jack never loving a black woman again. Jack is winning fights and gaining monetary status, he owns a car, has fine clothes, gets stopped when he

travels with either of his white girlfriends. He makes his mother proud, who she believed that Jack could be President of the United States, but behind close doors he repeatedly beats and chokes both of his white girlfriends.

There are sections in the poetry collection where one of his girlfriends is interviewed by the police. The police were looking into Jack possibly running a prostitution exercise. Other sections are notes that Jack's initial girlfriends exchange with one another. They discuss how to keep peace between themselves and "Papa" their name for Jack, so they can reap the rewards.

The peak point of this collection is two fold. Jack drops both his initial girlfriends to marry a woman named Etta. She becomes his wife in part to her social status. The second is "The Battle of the Century: Jack Johnson vs Jim Jeffries." Jim was one of Jack's earlier opponents who lost to him. Jim was paid well for the fight and had retired from boxing. A British reporter encouraged Jim to come out of retirement to box Jack again. Jack was tired of boxing and had barely trained for the fight. The advantage was in Jim's favor. The author recounts the fight from both Jim's and Jack's viewpoint. Jim is fighting to bring boxing back to "it's rightful place" Jack is battling Jim, the comments from fans and the reporters and Jim's ring attendants. It is the high point of this book.

This book won the Anisfield-Wolf poetry prize in 2014. It is a beautifully gateway book into poetry and the sweet science of boxing.

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### **Shawn says**

What an incredible collection. No wonder it was a National Book Award finalist. If you're looking for lyrical poetry, look elsewhere, but if you want a raw, gritty collection full of imagery and emotion that pack a punch (pun only slightly intended), this is definitely for you. I knew very little about Jack Johnson before reading, but now I feel like I have strong sense of him as a person and his tumultuous relationships; I couldn't tell you his biography or anything, but the poet has clearly done his research. What I like is that the poems don't all put Johnson on a pedestal. Yes, he rose from nothing and made a name for himself through boxing, but he was also an incredibly abusive man, and Matejka explores both sides thoroughly. Even if you, like me, are not a fan of boxing, I say give this a read because it's awesome.

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

I picked this up because it was longlisted for the National Book Award in Poetry in September 2013.

Honestly, to really get into this you would first need to care about Jack Johnson. I think if you had that baseline, reading a book of poems about his life and background might be an interesting way to go. Poetry is so subjective and this just isn't for me.

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### **Ryan Louis says**

Maybe I'm so trained to think of writing as linked--narrative arcs, sustained arguments, developed

characters--that I find most non-linear or truncated forms of reading to be difficult. And perhaps this is what keeps others from reading poetry (or short stories), too? I'm trying to decide whether I loved this collection so much because it does [sort of] conform to a chronological narrative in order to make its larger arguments about race, sport and American history...or...because it is just. So. Good.

Matejka's collection, a finalist for the Pulitzer in 2014, covers a lot of ground in a mere 100 pages. It contains two concepts extremely relevant to contemporary tastes: an ambivalent treatment of the antihero (Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight champion) and an open conversation about racial [dis]parity. It is also, obviously, a poetic history (the "notes" and "acknowledgement" sections at the end show a breadth of research, thinking and consulted media).

The poems are jarring at times (juxtaposed domestic and sport violence) while sweet and beautiful at others. The climax of the "narrative" comes in a series of thirteen poems, each about one round in the world championship match between Johnson and Jim Jeffries. But instead of being an intense rise to climax, I read each slow--as if a once furious song is ebbing toward ritardando.

Though I find it difficult to watch an actual boxing match, I am enamored by them. I find the sport/spectacle/ballet to be fascinating. If digging into its philosophical implications sounds like a good time (which, of course, I do), consider reading Joyce Carol Oates's masterful series of essays, "On Boxing."

Wince, look away; then realize boxing is probably the closest thing we have to a metaphor for the "modern" era.

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### **D.A. says**

There's something sublime about this collection of poems concerning Jack Johnson, the heavy-weight boxer who became a world champion and became a beacon for young people seeking racial equality and the chance to rise to their own achievements, whether in sports, the arts or the arena of American politics. Johnson is a complex man, and these poems do not shy from the deeply revealing moments of triumph and regret that fill his story. Adrian Matejka's lines pack punch, and the message of the book is hope. Recommended for young readers as well as older--there's something in this book for everybody. Matejka has broken open the conventions of dramatic monologue into an energetic, real-time sequence inside the boxing ring. Johnson becomes a witness to history and racism in the US. "I was there, so I know what's true," he says, echoing Whitman. An inspiring book in every sense.

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### **Mitzi says**

This book excited me more than any other to teach high school English. Just imagine the different ways you could go with an accessible book of poetry about the first black heavy weight champion who went from rags to riches, has gold teeth, reads Shakespeare and goes to the opera, likes fast cars, and has a turbulent relationship with his wife, who is white. Matejka does an excellent job of capturing the voices of all the different players. By the time I was through with this book, I had a deep sense of who Jack Johnson was, not just what he did. A little more research on the Internet helped me to appreciate the poetry even more. I especially liked "Cannabilism" about Galveston after the Great Storm, "Equality"...a car race that paralleled his fight with Ketchel in the ring "Out of the Bath"...which is an intimate picture of his relationship with

Etta; and of course "Fight of the Century"...a round for round description of his fight against the "Great White Hope", Jim Jeffries, and echoes the rhythm of the fight.

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