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Foreword Review HISTORICAL

Max Baer and the Star of David: A Novel

Jay Neugeboren
Mandel Vilar Press (Feb 11, 2016)
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A former boxer crosses paths, and lines, with the notorious Max Baer, in this imaginative semihistorical novel.

With *Max Baer and the Star of David*, Jay Neugeboren creates a pair of distinctive fictional characters and deposits them into the life of the legendary Depression-era boxer. The writing is strong and the characters memorable, though the novel focuses little on its presumed subject.

Despite the title, Baer is only a side character in the story. The book includes the key milestones in his boxing career—the fight that killed Baer's opponent Frankie Campbell, the clash with German fighter Max Schmeling from which the book gets its title, the surprise loss to James Braddock—but little time is spent on these events. The same is true of Baer's romances with famous actresses, and even the career of his actor son. Instead, Baer's life is mostly used to provide an outline for the story of Neugeboren's fictional narrator, Horace Littlejohn.

The book really belongs to Horace. A former small-time boxer, he poses as the husband of his sister Joleen, and their relationship crosses the line romantically. The duo meet Baer and become his friends and lovers, living with him and observing the details of his career. Meanwhile, secrets between Horace and Joleen, including family trouble from their childhoods, challenge their relationship.

Though the "historical" part of the historical fiction is a selling point for the book, it serves as a double-edged sword at times. Baer's real-life exploits provide great fodder for a story, but they're sidelined here, so there isn't much for the audience looking for a Max Baer story. Much about his character, such as his pansexuality and the affairs with the Littlejohns, is fictional rather than historical. On the other hand, Neugeboren writes a charismatic, quotable, and memorable version of the boxer who could justify far more focus than he gets in this story.

Still, Neugeboren's prose is strong, and the characters feel believable despite heightened circumstances. The Littlejohns are well developed. The real story of *Max Baer and the Star of David* is Horace's. He confronts family patterns and fights some important battles outside the ring. The author tells this story well.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Spring 2016)

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