

Allen, Maury. *Jackie Robinson: A Life Remembered*. N.Y.: Franklin Watts, 1987. Pp. ix, 260. Illustrated. \$16.95.

The fortieth anniversary of Jackie Robinson's historic breach in 1947 of the color line in modern major league baseball occasioned numerous commemorative articles in the popular press as well as recent book-length studies ranging from Harvey Frommer's facile *Rickey and Robinson: The Men Who Broke Baseball's Color Barrier* (1982) to Jules Tygiel's authoritative *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (1983). Why, then, this offering by Maury Allen, veteran sportswriter for the *New York Post* and prolific author of popular sport books including eight "autobiographies" and biographies of New York Yankees?

"There comes a time in every writer's life when he sits down and writes the book he must," avers Allen. "My idea for the book was really born on that day in

1947 when Robinson played his first game at Ebbets Field, and it was destined to become an almost-constant goal of my writing career” (p. viii). Would that it were so. There is no indication that Allen, a Yankee beatwriter, was especially concerned with or knowledgeable of Robinson’s career as he offers no personal insights or information about the man or player. Basically, the book is a fast-paced biography wherein a cursory narrative ties together remembrances of Robinson solicited mainly from family, friends, teammates, and opponents.

An “oral biography” fashioned from eye-witness observations can be revealing if done carefully, but Allen’s effort falls flat. Instead of intimate glimpses into what made Jackie run, we have here a series of superficial, guarded, heavily repetitive testimonials to his athleticism, competitiveness, and courage. The problem is three-fold. First, more interested in obtaining for-the-record quotes than conducting penetrating interviews, Allen made no effort to probe beyond banal comments. Second, for too many interviewees, too many years had gone by and too many interviews had been given. Even those close to Robinson tend to remember him more as myth than man, and their comments predictably are prosaic and premediated: The Pee Wee Reeses and Roy Campanellas have said many times before all they are going to say about Jackie Robinson. Finally, and most important, Robinson was an intensely private person whose only true friend and confidant was his wife, Rachel. Clearly, none of his teammates (save for the late Gil Hodges?) and associates really knew the man; as Larry Doby, the first black in the American League, understated: “Jackie was not an easy man to know” (p. 62).

Allen’s book is deficient as biography precisely because Robinson is remembered but not revealed. The reader gains no sense of what made him from an early age so competitive, so intense, so proud, so sensitive to racist slights and slurs (real or imagined), and so determined to fight racial injustice in all its forms. Would that Mack Robinson, still resentful about his lack of personal athletic recognition, or Willa Mae Robinson Walker, had been close to their famous brother. Would that Rachel was willing to tell all.

Still, some people are more perceptive and thoughtful than others. Especially valuable are the comments of Richie Ashbum, Joe Black, Bobby Bragan, Roger Craig, Larry Doby, Carl Erskine, Spider Jorgensen, and Warren Spahn—each of whom has a sense of history. Jorgensen, for example, noted that worse than the name-calling and hate-mail was “the pressure to play well because the whole world was watching. That’s what made it really rough. There was no such thing as just have a good day or a bad day on the field. Everything was measured against history” (p. 82). “He always felt he was part of history [and] had a large ego,” recalled Doby. “Jackie appreciated and discussed his place in history and thought of himself in the same light as Paul Robeson and Joe Louis” (p. 62). That Robinson was acutely aware of his place in history is revealed in a photograph, seemingly insignificant at first glance as it is an obviously posed picture of him reading a book to his family. But if the photograph was contrived, the selection of the book was purposeful and spoke volumes about the man—the great Civil War novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*.

The most poignant feature of the book is the sharp contrast between Allen's emphasis on Robinson as a pioneer of racial integration and the ignorance of the man and his legacy by many of today's black youth, be they patrons of the Jackie Robinson Community Center in his home town of Pasadena, or major leaguers like Vince Coleman ("I don't know nothing about no Jackie Robinson") (p. 12) or Dwight Gooden ("I'm not sure I know who he is . . . Am I supposed to know him?") (p. 244). As Joe Black, Robinson's teammate and one of the early blacks in the majors, put it: "For a black kid not to know Jackie Robinson and what he did is very disturbing to me. Jackie was a major influence in the lives of many blacks in this country, on and off the ball field. Not know Jackie Robinson? That's almost like not knowing your own family" (p. 65).

It is unfortunate, given his lament about Robinson's relative historical obscurity with the public, that Allen fails to explore Jackie's relationship with the press. That few of today's youth, black or white, know little if anything about Robinson and Doby but much about Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth and numerous other immortals of "white" baseball is due in large measure to the fact that the Caucasian Lords of the Pressbox embraced them, embellished their deeds, and promoted them during and after their careers as athletic heroes. On two occasions Allen hints at the answer—that sportswriters were unsympathetic to Robinson's militance on racial issues, frustrated by his determination to use fame as a forum for serious discussion of social issues instead of dispensing quotable quotes, and angered by his selling the exclusive story of his retirement to a magazine instead of announcing it to the press corps. Retaliating with negative commentary and neglect after his retirement, white sportswriters, aware of Robinson's historical importance, refused to place the crown of cultural hero on his militant black brow. Allen committed a major error in not seeking remembrances of Robinson from his fellow journalists, for to the sporting public it is the sportwriter, not the historian, who judges historical importance and canonizes sport heroes.

In a sense, this is an historic offering from Maury Allen. Whereas his books about Lou Piniella, Reggie Jackson, Billy Martin, Roger Maris *et al.* contain the "inside" perspectives of a beatwriter yet are essentially one-dimensional hagiographies, Allen, cognizant that Jack was no mere jock, made a concerted effort to provide historical context for Robinson's life. The historical dimension adds significantly to the book, although historians will wince occasionally and regret that Allen did no discernible research for the book other than conducting interviews. His debt to previous writers is evident and acknowledged, especially Tygiel, whose book unfortunately is identified only by subtitle. Those familiar with Robinson's life will find nothing new and little that is insightful here, but for that ubiquitous creature, the general reader, seeking an introduction to Robinson, this is a sprightly written, informative "good read."