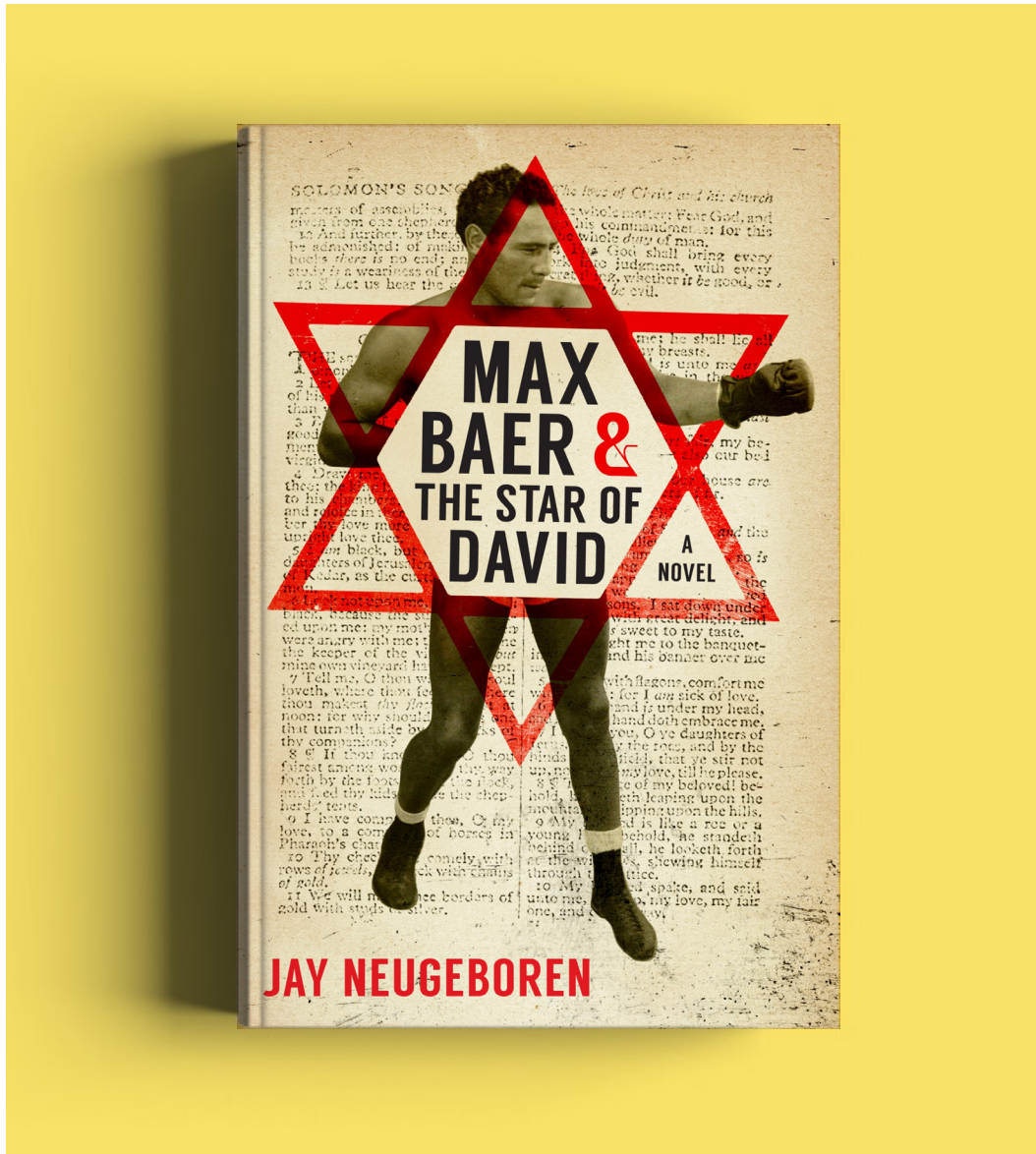


# JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

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# History of Boxing

Boxing—also called pugilism, the sweet science, or the “manly art of self-defense”—is one of the world’s oldest sports. Evidence exists of some form of boxing taking place as early as 3000 B.C.E in Mesopotamia, Asia Minor and North Africa, and it became recognized as an Olympic game by the Ancient Greeks in 688 B.C.E.

The first official records of a boxing match dates to 1681 in Great Britain, when the Duke of Albemarle arranged a fight between his butcher and his butler for entertainment. This early form of boxing was done with bare knuckles, and had few, if any rules. In 1743, champion John ‘Jack’ Broughton devised the first set of rules for boxing, earning himself the title of “father of boxing.”

The 1800s saw increased formalizing of boxing, with the London Prize Ring Rules in 1838, followed by 1867’s Marquess of Queensberry rules. These rules, written by John Chambers under the patronage of the Marquess of Queensberry, are still in effect today to govern modern boxing.

Boxing struggled for legitimacy into the early 20th century. However, by the 1920s, professional boxing had become the preeminent sport in the United States. Boxing champions became national superstars, and boxing matches were huge events that had the nation talking. By the 1930s, the United States was the center of the boxing world, and a big fight could draw tens of thousands of people. Two of the biggest fights of the 1930s were Max Baer v Max Schmeling and Max Baer v James Braddock.

Boxing hit something of a lull with the Second World

War, as young men were mostly enlisted with the war effort in some capacity. The evidence of corruption that had started to become evident in the 1930s increased, and the mob’s involvement was in full force in the 1940s. Boxing continued to develop, with more racial and cultural diversity evident. The 1950s were considered a golden age for boxing, with television screens increasing the audience to millions. However, boxing’s audience was beginning to decrease around the late 1970s, with public broadcasts turning into pay-per-view and the focus becoming more about the casino world.

## The Sweet Science

Boxing became known as the “sweet science” from articles written by Pierce Egan, a British sports-writer, in the early 1800’s. He followed and wrote on bare-knuckle boxing, among other sports, and compiled his articles into a collection entitled *Boxiana; or Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism*. In his articles, he referred to boxing as the “sweet science of bruising”. *Boxiana* was brought back into public awareness by A.J. Liebling of *The New Yorker* who named his 1956 book on boxing *The Sweet Science*, in tribute to Egan.

# JBC Book Clubs

## Discussion Questions

1. Why did the author choose to explore Max Baer through the eyes of his long-time friend, rather than as a first person?
2. Look at the inscriptions and chapter headings that were chosen by Horace Littlejohn Jr. Why do you think he chose each? Why do you think the author chose them?
3. Joleen and Horace both have a particular, very formal way of speaking. Beyond their inherited pride of their family's literacy, what's behind their manner of speech? How does their speech contrast to Max's? To what effect?
4. The diary that Horace Jr. presents is one that Horace dictated to Joleen. Do you think Joleen is a reliable transcriber? What makes you think so, or what makes you doubt it?
5. Why do you think Max chose to wear the Star of David? Was it part of a publicity ploy to bring in a Jewish audience or do you think he identified as a Jew in some way? Why did he continue to wear the Star of David throughout the rest of his career?
6. Both Horace and Max recognize a reflection of Max's vicious qualities in Joleen's character. Is her determined thirst for vengeance similar to Max's revenge in the ring, or is it of a different nature? Is her way of coping with the pain of others (or that she has caused) to "continue to rain down blows upon a strong man made increasingly helpless by these very blows" (p. 22) as Max does?
7. Max frequently contends that he doesn't like fighting (p.56). Given that, why do you think he continues

in the ring?

8. Horace includes one anecdote from Horace Jr.'s childhood, about Joleen's decision to stop going to church (p. 80-86). What is her reasoning for this? What is she trying to teach her son?
9. Hawkins Johnson repeatedly points out Horace's blindness. Aside from his failing eyesight, in what way is Horace blind? To what?
10. Over the course of the novel, Horace commits a number of sins of biblical proportion. Does this alter your view of him? Do you believe him to be as upstanding and naive as Miss Hemon perceives?
11. Why does Joleen choose a Star of David to carve into their headboard rather than some other symbol?
12. Who is the main character of this story? Which character acts as its focal point?

### **Bonus:**

Watch Ron Howard's film, *Cinderella Man*, about Max Baer's title fight against James Braddock. What do you think of the portrayal of Max Baer in the film? How does it differ from the novel? Why do you think they chose to characterize him in that way? Read the article about Max Baer that appeared in Slate (see Related Reads on p. 11 of this guide). Do you agree or disagree with the writer's evaluation?

# Grape and Pomegranate Yogurt Parfait

The *Song of Solomon* inscriptions that open the chapters refer to milk and honey, grapes, and pomegranate. This recipe includes all of these biblical ingredients!

## Ingredients

2 cups of plain yogurt or Greek yogurt

1 1/2 cups of grapes, halved

1/2 cup of pomegranate arils

1/4 cup of honey

Pomegranate molasses (optional)

Granola (optional)

4 small bowls, parfait glasses, or cups

1. Divide yogurt among the glasses, and top with grapes and pomegranates.
2. Drizzle honey (and pomegranate molasses, if using) over.
3. Sprinkle with granola as desired and serve!

# Cinnamon Magic Custard Cake

Boxing is often called “the sweet science” (see the history of this name on p. 3), and this cake is its own sweet science. “Magic” or “Intelligent” cake originated in Romania, and is a single batter that bakes into three separate layers— a dense, almost fudgy layer, a custard layer, and a sponge cake layer. This is due to the density tower that forms when the heavier ingredients sink to the bottom, and the lower baking temperature that delays coagulation and therefore allows the layers to form.

## Ingredients

1/2 cup melted butter

2 cups lukewarm milk

4 eggs, separated

1/8 teaspoon cream of tartar or 4 drops of white vinegar

1 1/2 cups powdered sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla

2 1/2 tsp cinnamon

1 cup flour

1. Preheat the oven to 325° F, and grease or parchment line an 8”x8” baking pan.
2. In a small bowl, mix the flour and cinnamon. Set aside.
3. Combine egg whites and cream of tartar or vinegar, and whip them until stiff peaks form.
4. In a separate bowl, beat the egg yolks and sugar until light.
5. Mix in the butter and water for about two minutes, then add in the flour mixture and mix until evenly incorporated. Slowly beat in the milk and vanilla.
6. When everything is well mixed, fold in 1/3 of the egg whites with a spatula, and repeat two more times until the egg whites are all folded in. Batter will be thin and possibly lumpy.
7. Pour the batter into the cake pan, and bake for 45-60 minutes, until top is golden brown and the cake is barely jiggly. Cool the cake before cutting.

Optional: dust with additional confectioner’s sugar to serve.

# Menu: Boxing Party Snack

As you talk about Max Baer's and Horace's lives in and around the world of boxing, snack on the kind of menu that you might serve at a party to watch a boxing match. Or create your own Happy Hour, which was originally the name for social gatherings on the U.S.S. Arkansas in 1913, and included boxing matches.

Nachos

Pizza

Salsa and chips

Hummus and vegetables

Chili

Popcorn

Beer

# Visiting Scribe Essays by Jay Neugeboren

As part of Jewish Book Council's Visiting Scribe series on The ProsenPeople blog, Jay Neugeboren writes on his Jewish heroes and writing Max Baer. His posts are available on the Jewish Book Council website and reprinted in full here.

## My Jewish Heroes

When I was a boy growing up in Brooklyn in the years following World War Two, the two great loves of my life were reading and play ball. I'd go to the library at least once a week, take out four books—the maximum number allowed—and read them, return them, and take out four new books. When I was 8, I wrote my first novel—a 70 or 80 page book about a family of pigs (decidedly un-kosher, my boyhood imagination, since we observed kashruth in my home!) that my mother typed out for me, and from which I read a new chapter every Monday morning to my fourth grade class.

When not reading, I spent as much time as I could playing ball. I lived during the years of the great Brooklyn Dodger teams, and within walking distance of Ebbets Field, and so I got to see my heroes—Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese, Carl Erskine, Duke Snider, Roy Campanella—play several times a year.

And at least equal to the Dodgers were great Jewish athletes, living and dead, I read about, and by reading about them could believe it possible for a Jewish boy not only to become a star athlete, but while doing honor to his heritage also become famous in a world where Jews could generally go as far as their talent and hard work could take them and, thus, become more truly *American*.

The list was long, and frequently had personal connections. In baseball: Hank Greenberg (who refused to play on Yom Kippur, and married the daughter of the family that owned the Gimbels department store), Andy Cohen (the first Jewish player on the

New York Giants), Saul Rogovin, Al “Goodie” Rosen (who played for the Dodgers, but wasn't as good as future Hall of Famer Al Rosen), Moe Berg (first cousin of a friend who lived two houses away from me), Sid Gordon (who—what I could never understand—lived a few blocks away yet played for our National League enemy, The New York Giants).

In basketball: Dolph Schayes, Max Zaslofsky, Sid Tannenbaum (three All Americans who played across the bridge at NYU), Nat Holman and Lou Bender (Bender went to Erasmus ) who starred for the greatest team of its era, The Original Celtics.

In football: Sid Luckman (who went to Erasmus, went on to be All-American at the college I went to, Columbia, after which he starred for the Chicago Bears and is usually credited with “inventing” the forward pass), Benny Friedman, Sid Gillman, Marshall Goldberg, Al Sherman (a left-handed quarterback who enrolled at Brooklyn College at 15, and though he was only five foot six and 145 pounds, went on to play in the NFL, and to coach the New York Giants).

In tennis: Herb Flam, Allen Fox, Grant Golden, Mike Franks, Sid Schwartz (an Erasmus grad who visited my gym class), and Dick Savitt (National Indoor and Wimbledon champion, who, at 89, still plays once or twice a week on the same New York City public courts I have the pleasure of playing on).

There were others: Sidney Franklin, in bullfighting, who went to Eastern District High School, in Brooklyn, with my father; Marty Glickman, who played professional football and basketball, and was



removed at the last minute from the United States relay team at the 1936 Berlin olympics because he was Jewish; Henry Wittenberg, winner of two olympic medals in wrestling; Viktor Barna and Richard Miles, international and U. S. champions for many years in table tennis; Vic Hershkowitz, who won 15 consecutive handball championships . . .

And then there were the Jewish boxers who dominated boxing in the first half of the twentieth century. The list included champions at virtually every weight level: Abe Attell, Barney Ross, Benny Leonard, “Kid” Kaplan, Al McCoy (real name: Al Rudolph), “Slapsie Maxie” Rosenbloom, “Battling” Levinsky, Ted “Kid” Lewis, and, of course, the man who loomed so large in my imagination as a boy that I wrote a novel about him: Max Baer.

Baer wore a Star of David on his boxing trunks, and the first time he did so was in 1933 when, at Yankee Stadium he defeated “Hitler’s boxer” Max Schmeling. Baer went on to become heavyweight champion of the world, and to an extraordinary life that exists within the fictional world I’ve created in *Max Baer and the Star of David*.

### **Max Baer: Real...and Imagined**

I grew up during the years of the great Brooklyn Dodger teams of the forties and fifties, and I rooted especially for the handful of their Jewish players: Cal Abrams, Al “Goodie” Rosen, Sandy Koufax, and third base coach, Jake Pitler. I also rooted for Jewish athletes who were prominent in other sports: football, basketball, wrestling, tennis, table tennis, and boxing.

In boxing, my great hero was Max Baer, who, though he wore a Star of David on his boxing trunks, was only one quarter Jewish. His grandfather, of French-Jewish ancestry, was a butcher, and named his sons for the tribes of Israel. Max’s father, Jacob, was a butcher too, and his early education took place in Jewish schools.

Baer became a professional boxer in 1929. One year later, in a bout that scarred his heart forever, he knocked out a fighter named Frankie Campbell.

Campbell, whose brother, Dolph Camilli, later became a star first-baseman for the Brooklyn Dodgers, never woke up, and died that night. Max was severely distraught, and in later years would, without publicity, put three of Campbell’s children through college.

In 1933, Baer, a contender for the heavyweight championship, fought against “Hitler’s boxer,” Max Schmeling, before more than 60,000 people, and it was for this fight—because of his anger at the news coming out of the Third Reich, and his pride in being part-Jewish—that he first put a Star of David on his boxing trunks, an emblem he would wear in every fight after that.

Schmeling was heavily favored, but Baer defeated him easily, and the referee stopped the fight in the 10th round, and awarded Baer the victory by technical knockout. But Baer, ever a showman, had his great moment just before the fight’s end. When he had Schmeling on the ropes, he called out, for all the newspaper reporters to hear: “This one’s for Hitler!” Then, in the lingo of the ring, he rang Max Schmeling’s bell.

One year later, Baer defeated Primo Carnera for the heavyweight championship of the world. Again the showman, at the weighing-in ceremony, Baer began plucking hairs from Carnera’s chest. “He loves me . . . he loves me not,” Baer said. During the fight, when Carnera dragged Baer to the canvas with him, Baer called out, for all to hear: “Last one up’s a sissy.”

Baer lost the championship a year later to James Braddock, but continued to fight until 1941, when he enlisted in the Army. His lifetime record was 72 wins (more than 50 by knockout), and 12 defeats.

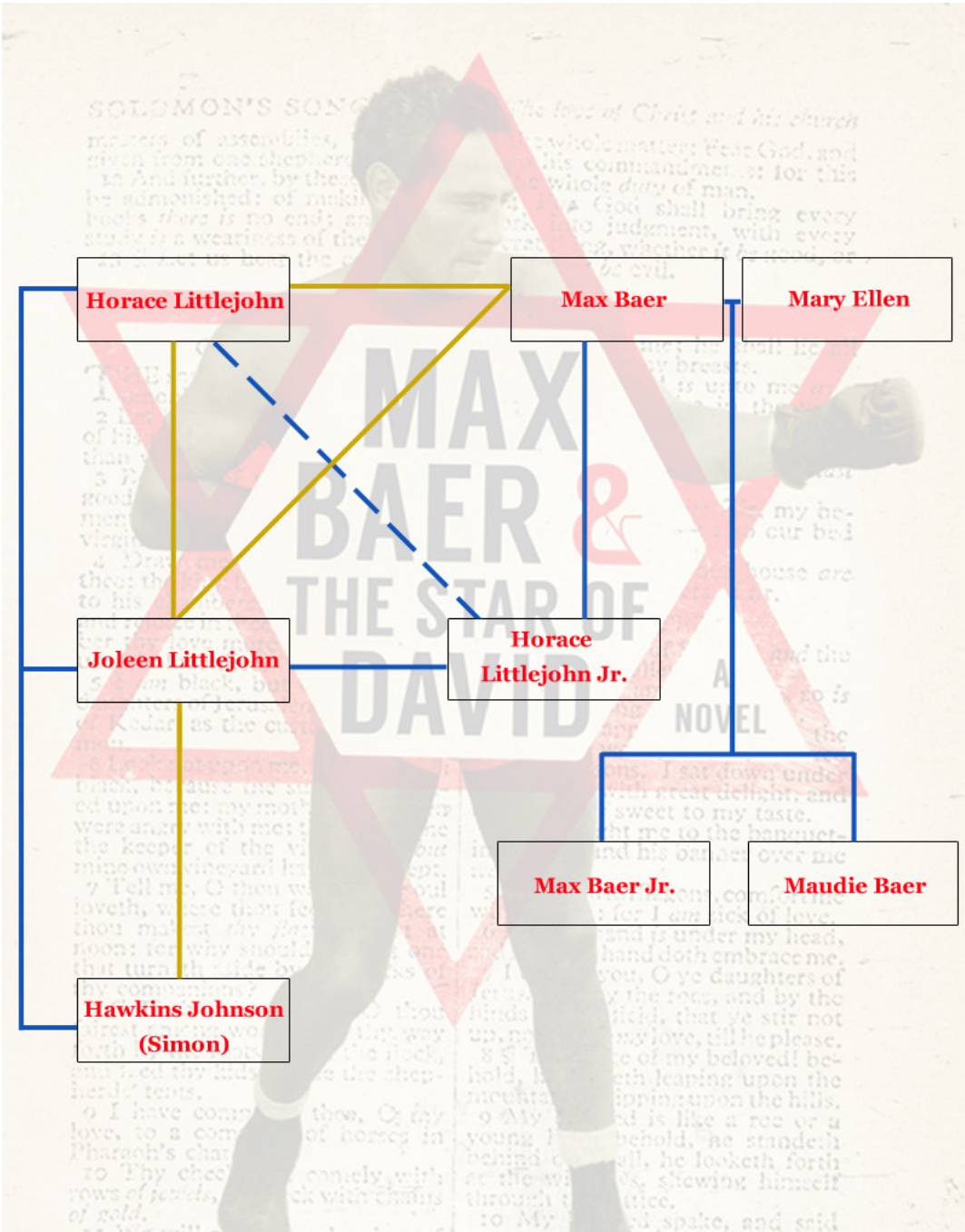
Baer was also a movie star, and appeared, opposite Myrna Loy, in his first movie, *The Prizefighter and the Lady*, in 1933, and in nearly two dozen movies after that; the last one, *The Harder They Fall* was with Humphrey Bogart in 1956. He also played the vaudeville circuit, often with another Jewish fighter, one-time light heavyweight champion, “Slapsie Maxie” Rosenbloom.

Small wonder I was enchanted by this man, and by his wild, wonderful, and improbable life. And so I invited him to be a character in my novel, *Max Baer and the Star of David*. Although in the novel, all the data is accurate, the character of Baer is invented. I have also given Max two close friends: Horace and Joleen Littlejohn, a black couple—Horace as Max’s Man Friday and sparring partner; Joleen as Max’s housekeeper and tutor to his children—as well as a son, Horace Littlejohn Jr.

While non-fiction generally deals with the world of the probable, fiction deals with the world of the possible. Thus, a biography of Max Baer might aim to show us what his life was probably like, whereas my novel shows us what it might possibly have been but never was. The latitude and longitude of my novel true, but the life I’ve given to him is invented.

My hope is that the invented Max Baer of my novel will, for readers, be at least as real as if the real Max Baer had never existed.

# Littlejohn and Baer Family Trees



# Related Reads

## **Articles on Max Baer and Boxing**

[International Boxing Hall of Fame](#)

[Tablet Magazine: Max Baer Takes Down Max Schmeling](#)

[The New York Times: Boxing Is a Brutal, Fading Sport. Could Football Be Next?](#)

[Slate: Fight Snub](#)

## **Books**

*Barney Ross: The Life of a Jewish Fighter* by Douglas Century (Schocken Books/ Nextbook Press, 2006)

*The Boxer's Story: Fighting for My Life in the Nazi Camps* by Nathan Shapow with Bob Harris (The Robson Press, 2013)

*The Polish Boxer* by Eduardo Halfon; Translation by Thomas Bunstead, Lisa Dillman, Daniel Hahn, Anne McLean, Ollie Brock (Bellevue Literary Press, 2012)

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Jewish Book Council, with roots dating back to 1925, is the only nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of Jewish-interest literature. For nearly 70 years, we have supported and celebrated Jewish authors and books, and used literature to bring people together for meaningful discussions around Jewish life, identity, and culture.

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