

Hell Froze

Red Sox vs. Yankees: The Great Rivalry, by Harvey Frommer and Frederic J. Frommer '90JRN. Sports Publishing. \$24.95.

Babe Ruth: Launching the Legend, by Jim Reisler '86JRN. McGraw-Hill. \$24.95.

By

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[Winter 2004-05](#)

The momentous events of this October — you residents of Malden and Marblehead know what I'm talking about — have flummoxed the Sophoclean pity and terror inscribed for decades along the scar tissue of Boston hearts. The Red Sox' spectacular pummeling of the Yankees means there is finally a scrap of rivalry, which the *New American Heritage Dictionary* calls "a contest." Until now it's been strictly lions and Christians, which is to say a rivalry only as defined by (a) the kind of shameless fat-cattling that is the special province of the Yankees fan or (b) a Bostonian capacity for hope that makes Mary Poppins look like Samuel Beckett. But October's spoonful of sugar makes two recent books by Columbia authors go down, if not in the most delightful way, at least palatably. It can never be déjà vu all over again, again.

Nevertheless: the real subtitle intended for *Red Sox vs. Yankees: The Great Rivalry*, by Harvey Frommer and Frederic J. Frommer '90JRN, is *One Hundred Years of Slaughter*, and I don't mean Enos. That the Bosox come first in the title appears to be only a grudging concession to alphabetical order in this gloating coffee table recycling of photos, memorabilia, and twice-told tales of Yankees massacres. Harvey Frommer is author of *The New York Yankees Encyclopedia*, *A Yankee Century*, *Big Apple Baseball*, and *New York City Baseball*, among other (mostly New York) sports books. Although Yankees past and present are evoked with loving accuracy, in one late-'40s photo *Red Sox vs. Yankees* misnames two Sox players: the caption identifies Stan Spence as Stan Spinee and Sam Mele, who later managed the Twins,

as Sam Nede. As Rob Edelman, author of *Great Baseball Films*, notes later in the book, “movies were made about Yankees rather than players from Boston.” There is the obligatory shot of Lou Gehrig ’25CC, in his poignant farewell at the stadium, his pinstriped knickers flared like jodhpurs, his powerful shoulders sloped in their signature wishbone curve.

The authors do provide Sox lovers and Yankees haters (not necessarily the same species) the customary scraps of gristle to gnaw in a final chapter, called “Talkin’ Rivalry,” in which politicians, current and former players, writers, and just folks weigh in with passion and anecdote on the Yanks-Sox carnage. A quick tally shows 64 voices from the Boston cause to 30 for New York, with seven who played for both sides and a couple of strenuously neutral noncombatants. Still, the name Bucky Dent, the shortstop whose three-run homer in the 1978 playoffs clinched the pennant for the Yankees, thuds down in accounts on both sides with a regularity that, without the anodyne of the 2004 season, might have been considered editorially cruel and unusual.

The book ends with a fluffy but entertaining chart comparing the history and character of the two cities and teams (for example, Boston’s signature food is baked beans; New York’s is pizza). But even here the truth is inescapable, though the Frommers get it wrong. Under the category “Titles since 1918,” they print the score as Yanks 26, Sox 0. No contest — except for the small but delicious consolation in the book’s obsolescence.

Babe Ruth: Launching the Legend, by Jim Reisler ’86JRN focuses on Ruth’s departure from Boston and his first Yankees season in 1920, which Reisler details player by player and almost game by game. *Babe Ruth* leans heavily on well-known anecdotes and sources, such as Robert Creamer’s definitive 1974 biography, but Reisler has to do some careful selecting to retain his PG rating.

For example, he soft-pedals the all-nightly postgame Ruthian feats between the sheets that Creamer pursues in frank detail, and his main argument is that Ruth’s 54 homers in 1920 (four more than any other team that season) and his larger-than-life celebrity rescued the game from the 1919 Black Sox scandal. And, oh yes, the Babe was nice to children.

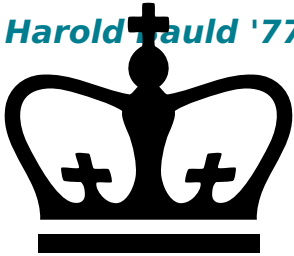
Reisler has predictable condescending Yankees fun at the expense of Harry Frazee, the hapless Sox owner who sold Ruth in 1919 (and a stream of later Sox) to the

Yanks in order to finance an addiction to investing, ironically, in New York theaters. Boston writers, from Frazee's time to our own — for example, Dan Shaughnessy, author of the 1990 *The Curse of the Bambino*, the book that gave the now archaic phrase its brief decade in the sun — tend to favor Frazeean disembowelment.

Though the book is clearly not aimed at stat-heads who belong to the Society for American Baseball Research, Reisler's individual portraits of the players have depth and dimension, especially that of Carl Mays, the pitcher who killed Cleveland shortstop Ray Chapman with a bean ball during the 1920 season. Here's a curiosity of Reisler's book, which is of course confirmed by the Frommers' fun facts: the 1920 Yanks didn't win the pennant, and Ruth's teams won only 7 pennants and 4 world series. It wasn't until DiMaggio (10 pennants and 9 World Series) and Mantle (12 pennants and 7 World Series) that Yankees dominance became the dismal drumbeat whose counterpoint, the outcome of last year's ALCS and World Series, has the most fragile, lovely lilt.

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