



The Killings of Stanley Ketchel

By James Carlos Blake
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Introduction

In 1903 seventeen-year-old Stanley Ketchel flees his family's Michigan farm to ride the rails as a hobo. He finds a home among the mine workers in Butte, Montana, one of the last wild towns of the old west. There Ketchel also discovers his true calling: prizefighting, a bloodsport barely hindered by rules. Despite his lack of formal training as a boxer, his unbridled style quickly earns him the nickname "Michigan Assassin." Ketchel soon outclasses every middleweight in the West, winning the middleweight title in 1908.

Only the heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, rivals Ketchel's claim to be the greatest boxer of the era. The first black to hold the world title, Johnson becomes Ketchel's obsession. Driven to prove himself the best, Ketchel challenges Johnson to a title fight, which leads to a unique bond between the two men. But its outcome also sets Ketchel on a willful and tragic course.

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways do Stanley Ketchel's devotion to his mother, Julia, and his undisguised hatred of Thomas Kaicel, the man he believes to be his father, shape the course of his life?
2. How might Stanley's encounters with "life on the rails" and the lawless elements of early-twentieth-century frontier boxing have prepared him for his transformation from farm boy to "the Michigan Assassin"?
3. How would you describe the roles played by each of Stanley Ketchel's advisors -- Maurice Thompson, Joe O'Connor, Pete "the Goat" Stone, Willus Britt, and Wilson Mizner -- over the course of his career, and which do you think served him best in terms of his professional success?
4. What role does Kate Morgan's untimely death play in Stanley Ketchel's attitudes toward women and relationships in his life?
5. What do you think accounts for Ketchel's remarkable ability to recover so speedily from his injuries in the ring, and what does this talent suggest about his unique gifts as a fighter?
6. How did the vivid descriptions of Ketchel's bouts and matches impact your understanding and appreciation of boxing as the so-called "sweet science"?
7. How does Colonel Dickerson's revelation of his identity as Stanley's biological father affect their friendship, and in what ways is their relationship significant in terms of Stanley's career?
8. Why does his 1909 defeat at the hands of the heavyweight champion Jack Johnson haunt Stanley, and what does his unwillingness to fake a draw in their bout reveal about his character?
9. How did the stream-of-consciousness passage of Stanley's thoughts at the end of *The Killings of Stanley Ketchel* affect you as a reader?
10. To what extent did the courtroom testimony about Stanley Ketchel's murder give you insight into the motives of Walter Diple and Goldie Smith?

About the Author

James Carlos Blake is the recipient of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, the Southwest Book Award, the Quarterly West Novella Prize, and the Chautauqua South Book Award. He lives in Arizona. *The Killings of Stanley Ketchel* is his ninth novel and his tenth book of fiction.