

Joe DiMaggio, A Star With The Power of Silence



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In a new biography of Joe DiMaggio, author Jerome Charyn writes that "there was a kind of heartbreak, as we worried that he might disappear in that enormous expanse of space ... that the leaping gazelle we saw was some aberration, a phantom put there by our own wish to create some creature more perfect than ourselves. No fellow human being could possibly look that good, but DiMaggio did."

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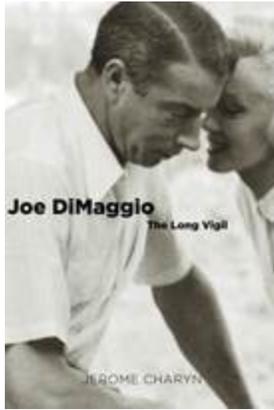
For a couple of generations, Joe DiMaggio symbolized the word class. He was called the Yankee Clipper because he seemed to glide across the baseball field: stately, graceful and powerful. He set an untouchable baseball record of hits in 56 consecutive games, and he married Marilyn Monroe, who quickly jilted him even as he remained devoted to her through sickness, health and death.

But DiMaggio never appeared to be anxious, troubled or unruffled; he didn't bare his soul on talk shows and refused millions to write his autobiography. As Paul Simon, who put his name into a song, once said, "Joe DiMaggio understood the power of silence."

Jerome Charyn tries to find the key to soft-spoken DiMaggio's inner life in a new book, *Joe DiMaggio: The Long Vigil*. In the book, Charyn uses the phrase "idiot savant" to describe DiMaggio on more than one occasion: His magic was born on the baseball field, and abandoned him once he left it.

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Joe DiMaggio: The Long Vigil

By Jerome Charyn
Hardcover, 192 pages
Yale University Press
List Price: \$24

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When he stepped on the field, everybody fell silent; but Charyn refers to DiMaggio's inability to cope outside baseball as "the sadness of his life," as DiMaggio fell into a state of being as "a legend without a purpose."

He'd met Monroe as his star descended and hers was rising, and Charyn argues that DiMaggio rescued her career at a time when she was faltering and lies about her past were being uncovered. At that moment, Charyn says, Monroe's first date with DiMaggio rescued her image, and they soon became the "prince and princess" of America.

Their relationship was tumultuous, to say the least, and with their lives in the spotlight it's difficult to say who loved whom, or who used whom. Charyn believes that their relationship ran into troubles because she suddenly had a sparkling career ahead of her just as his was ending.

"He wanted her to become a housewife, and she was very much involved with films and wanted to keep her career," Charyn says. "And he never could understand that."

DiMaggio's own career, in its time, reached impressive heights — he was the first baseball player to earn over \$100,000. It wasn't the monstrous heights of salary reached by professional athletes nowadays, and so he still had to earn some extra income after retiring. Instead of shilling for a local bank, DiMaggio turned to selling his memorabilia, a choice that some found undignified.



Lenore Riegel

Jerome Charyn has written more than 30 novels and works of nonfiction, including *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson*, and was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award in 2005. He lives in Paris and New York City.

"The sad thing about it," Charyn explains, "is that he could earn more in one day signing baseballs and bats than he did in his entire career as a Yankee."

DiMaggio earned that income during the memorabilia craze of the 1980s, and Charyn points to it as a sign of baseball's transformation from sport to big business.

Sports fans can put unrealistic expectations on their idols — "he was a hero, and we expect our heroes to remain heroic," Charyn says. At one point, DiMaggio had a television show and needed a cue card in front of him even to say, "Hello, this is Joe DiMaggio"; he was a communicator on the field, not in front of a camera. He had no language

outside his form as a ballplayer, Charyn says:

"And that's why he was so spectacular," he continues. "Because you suddenly see a very silent man begin to dance on the field. And there's nothing more beautiful than that."

Excerpt: 'Joe DiMaggio: The Long Vigil'

by JEROME CHARYN



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Prologue: Pinocchio in Pinstripes

He was the nonpareil, missed from the moment he retired in 1951. "Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?" asked Paul Simon in 1967. "A nation turns its lonely eyes to you." Thus there was a lament for DiMaggio long before he died, in 1999. And when he lay ill in a hospital during the last days of his life, the flurry of reports about his condition could have been about a pontiff or a president, not a baseball player who toiled in the outfield at Yankee Stadium for thirteen years. DiMaggio seemed to override baseball and sports itself. He was the lonely practitioner of some lost American art—America's one and only prince, who happened to have been a baseball player.

Babe Ruth was loved; Ty Cobb was reviled. Joe DiMaggio was revered, looked upon with an almost religious awe. He was the first saint of baseball when baseball itself was a religion, an icon of American life, "the binding national myth," according to David Halberstam in Summer of '49; and even as reverberations began to grow about his tie to gangsters and gamblers, his disregard for his only son, his mauling of Marilyn Monroe (he bruised her face and might have broken her thumb), DiMaggio still managed to survive as our troubadour.

As Marilyn's own aura multiplies year after year, and we see her now as a great comic artist, much more complex than most of the men who hovered around her—Arthur Miller, Elia Kazan, Yves Montand, Frank Sinatra, and both Kennedy boys—Marilyn and Joe have become America's mythic couple, with a troubled friendship and romance that was more constant than any marriage, even their own. Whatever his faults, he was the only man worthy of her, who did not *use* Marilyn or feed off her fame, as Miller and Montand did. When she was trapped inside a madhouse in 1961, it was DiMaggio who got her out, threatening to tear down the place, "piece of wood by piece of wood," if it did not produce her in five minutes. When she lay about like some besotted prisoner in Frank Sinatra's Palm Springs compound, it was DiMaggio who stood outside the gate, keeping his own vigil, just as he kept vigil in the caverns of Yankee Stadium.

He was always keeping vigil, and that's why we remember him. His greatness has less to do with statistics than with his *devotion* to baseball, or to anything he cared about. He had a purity and a natural grace that few others had. He was, as Grantland Rice reminds us in "An Ode to the Jolter," a "drifting phantom" with "movement none could match." Ted Williams, his one great rival, was utterly bored in the outfield. "There were tales of his conduct in the outfield, where he'd sit down between batters or practice swinging an imaginary bat, watching his leg-stride, watching his wrist-break, watching everything except balls hit to him," wrote Richard Ben Cramer.

It was Cramer's biography of the Yankee Clipper, published in 2000, that seemed to deflate DiMaggio, to tarnish him for

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the twenty-first century. Subtitled *The Hero's Life*, it attacks the "hero machine" that helped create DiMaggio and reveals a man who didn't want to go to war, who was utterly friendless except for a coterie of sycophants, who stalked Marilyn after their divorce, who sold his World Series rings to pay for his lodging, and who never spent an instant marveling "at the beauty of anything. Except maybe a broad."

Cramer's book is itself a marvel that digs deep into the DiMaggio myth as it unmans him piece by piece. But its picture of the Jolter is far too reductive and bleak. DiMaggio was much more than the blind apparatus of a machine that spat out heroes and ruined them in the process. He wasn't as calculating as Cramer loves to think. He was like an idiot savant whose magic was born on a baseball field and abandoned him once he left it.

No one, not even Cramer, doubted him in center field. "It was a special place—not just the vastness in the Bronx, but every center field: the largest suzerainty in the game's realm, it had to be patrolled by a prince."

DiMaggio was that prince, alone in his suzerainty, unrivaled, a hunter waiting for his prey. DiMaggio land was not simply center field but right-center and left-center, so that the other two out fielders were appendages who didn't dare enter his territory unless the prince gave them permission to do so. "He was a world by himself," recalls Henry Kissinger, who first saw DiMaggio patrol the outfield from a seat in the bleachers in 1938, when Kissinger was a German Jewish refugee living with his parents in Washington Heights. "There was nobody who could take over a ballpark like he could."

And Kissinger wasn't an exceptional witness: so much of DiMaggio's almost magical fame comes from his own fans, from those he marked for life, whether it be Ernest Hemingway, who wrote about "the great DiMaggio" in *The Old Man and the Sea*, a sports writer such as Jimmy Cannon, a social critic such as David Halberstam, a literary critic such as Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, the biologist and baseball aficionado Stephen Jay Gould, or the rest of us, who were astonished by what we saw, and were able to find a language to tell others about it, to describe DiMaggio's own language, his economy of motion, his lyricism as he roamed center field. There was a kind of heartbreak, as we worried that he might disappear in that enormous expanse of space, that no one man could withstand all the wind, not even the Yankee Clipper, that the leaping gazelle we saw was some aberration, a phantom put there by our own wish to create some creature more perfect than ourselves. No fellow human being could possibly look that good, but DiMaggio did.

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