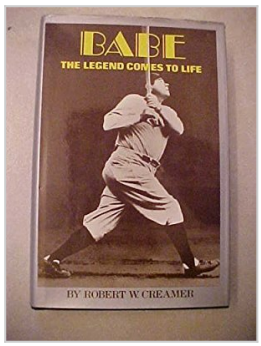


# Babe: The Legend Comes to Life

*By Robert Creamer*



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**"I swing big, with everything I've got. I hit big or I miss big. I like to live as big as I can."-- Babe Ruth**

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In this extraordinary biography, Creamer uncovers the complex and captivating man behind the legend. He presents the truth behind famous Ruth stories such as the "called shot" homers and the home run for a dying child, analyzes the astounding statistics with detailed information on specific games, and describes Ruth's varied, often volatile, relations with those around him, from fellow players to fans, friends, and reporters.

From Babe Ruth's early days in a Baltimore orphanage, to the glory days with the Yankees, to his final years, Creamer has drawn an indelible portrait of a true folk hero.

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## Editorial Review

Review
"The first really adult biography of the Babe, as well as one of the best, and least sentimental, books about a great sports figure ever written." --*Time*

"This book does far more than tell the facts and myths of Babe Ruth's life. It chronicles a time when baseball was played only on grass and a western road trip for East Coast teams meant a train ride to St. Louis." --*AudioFile*

About the Author
ROBERT W. CREAMER is an American sportswriter and editor. He was one of the first hired on the staff of *Sports Illustrated* in 1954 and served the magazine as a senior editor until 1984. Also an accomplished author, he wrote the most definitive biography of Babe Ruth, entitled *Babe*, in 1974.


**Chapter One: Legend and Truth: Babe Ruth Lives**

I apologize for not having talked to everybody. There were so many. Each week I would think, There, now I've finished with that section. Now I know all there is to know about *that.* And a few days later I would learn of someone new or someone I had not thought of or someone I never would have thought of, and he would have one more window on the past for me to raise. A quick insight, an illuminating moment. Pete Appleton, for instance. The only thing I remembered about Pete Appleton was that his real name was Pete Jablonski, and I was wrong about that; it turned out to be Jablonowski. I had to look up his record to learn that he had pitched in the major leagues off and on for fourteen seasons. The clipping that came to my desk had Pete Appleton telling of Ruth phoning down to a hotel lobby from his room, asking the switchboard to page "any Yankee player that's around down there." Appleton, who was new to the ball club, took the call, and Ruth said, "Hey, keed, how about coming up and playing some cards with me?" He was lonesome, Appleton explained. He could not come downstairs to the lobby because he'd be mobbed by people, especially women. This was 1933. (Where was Claire?) There was nothing in Appleton's little story about booze and broads and gluttony and raising hell. just an edgy, lonesome man in a hotel room.

And, said Appleton, "He had the prettiest swing of all." The "prettiest." An odd but strikingly accurate word to describe what Ruth did so much better than anyone else. Have you ever seen that old film clip of Ruth taking batting practice? If you like baseball you remember the pretty things about the game -- the individual moments of craftsmanship and, sometimes, artistry within the mathematical precision of three strikes, three outs, four balls, four bases, nine innings, nine men. Ruth, easing along at three-quarter speed in batting practice, stepping into the pitch, flicking the bat around, meeting the ball cleanly, cocking the bat back for the next pitch, is for me -- and maybe Pete Appleton -- the epitome of baseball, its ideal expression.

This book had its genesis, I suppose, in my memory, because I saw Ruth when I was a boy. I saw him hit home runs in Yankee Stadium, and I remember that they all seemed to be a hundred feet high in the air as they passed first base. I remember watching him swing and miss, his huge torso twisting violently so that he ended up with his face more than 180 degrees around from the plate, staring intently up into the stands, right at me. God, how I remember that feeling: Babe Ruth is looking right at *me.* I remember him in right field one day when a little dying-quail hit began to fall into no man's land, that point of inaccessibility at the extreme range of center fielder, right fielder and second baseman, and I can still see Ruth waddling in from right field

and *in* and *in* as he tried to get to the ball. (I think now that maybe the second baseman and the center fielder held up a little, giving way to the king.) He had his right arm extended, the glove held low, and after his long, inept run the ball glanced off the heel of his glove and fell safely. That was in 1933 too, when he was thirty-nine and his fat was old; I learned later that those who had played with him in his prime hated it when people like me, who saw him only in those last years, recalled him like that. They remembered when he could run (he stole fifty bases his first four seasons with the Yankees) and field and throw and do everything on a ballfield.

Correspondence followed with Peter Schwed of Simon and Schuster, in the course of which it was decided that I would attempt a thorough, detailed biography of the Babe. There had been several books written about him, all of them informative to varying degrees, but all necessarily limited in scope, one way or the other. His autobiography, done with Bob Considine and Fred Lieb, was written when Ruth was desperately ill, at a time when it was difficult for him to speak and awkward for his collaborators to press him for nitpicking details and specific information. Two "unauthorized" biographies appeared at about the same time, one in 1947 and the other in 1948. The first, by Tom Meany, was lively and entertaining, but it was more a colorful portrait than a biography. The second, by Martin Weldon, was earnest and detailed but contained assumptions and mistakes that were surprising in a book so thoroughly researched. Ruth's widow wrote a memoir of her husband with Bill Slocum, Jr., in 1959 that shed a good deal of light on aspects of his personal life, but it degenerated into a philippic against organized baseball for its rejection of the Babe after his playing days were over. Lee Allen, the baseball historian, wrote a book for boys in 1966 that was a meticulous account of Ruth's playing days but which glossed over the unsavory episodes. Daniel M. Daniel wrote an early cc authorized" biography in 1930 that contained firsthand material. Louis J. Leisman published a 36-page pamphlet in 1956 called *I Was with Babe Ruth at St. Mary's* that was of considerable help in understanding what Ruth's boyhood was like. In 1959 Roger Kahn did a piece for *Esquire* that punctured some of the fatuous myths about Ruth and reaffirmed with fresh testimony the extraordinary impact and continuing hold he had on the people of his generation. By far the most revealing and rewarding work on Ruth was a novellalength soft-cover memoir written in 1948 by Waite Hoyt, who had been the Babe's teammate for more than a decade during the heroic years.

What I have tried to do in this book is go beyond the gentle inaccuracies and omissions of the earlier accounts and produce a total biography, one that, hopefully, would present all the facts and myths, the statistical details and personal exuberance, the obvious and subtle things that combined to make the man born George Ruth a unique figure in the social history of the United States. For more than any other man, Babe Ruth transcended sport, moved far beyond the artificial limits of baselines and outfield fences and sports pages. As I write this, he is dead and buried for more than twenty-five years, and it is nearly forty years since he played his last major league game. Yet almost every day, certainly several times a week, you read and hear about him. As Henry Aaron moved toward Ruth's career record of 714 home runs, he said, "I can't recall a day this year or last when I did not hear the name of Babe Ruth." Sometimes the references come in comic profusion. When Willie Sutton was released from prison, amid the odd adulation we Americans like to give to excrescences on the fabric of society, *Time* reminded us that he was known as "the Babe Ruth of bank robbers." A caption in *The New York Times* under a photograph of Enrico Caruso, illustrating a story on Franco Corelli, the singer, dubbed Caruso "the Babe Ruth of operatic tenors." A press release from Long Beach, California, said that Chuck Stearns was "the Babe Ruth of water skiing." John Lahr, in his thanks to those who helped him as he wrote the biography of his father, Bert Lahr, called Suzi Arensberg of Alfred A. Knopf "the Babe Ruth of copy editors." Someone at Simon and Schuster may disagree, but there it is.

It goes on and on. Philippe Halsman photographed his hundredth cover for *Life* and declared, "This is the high point of my career. It has taken me 27 years to achieve this record and I like to think of it as the equal of, maybe the superior of, Babe Ruth's." The New York Mets brought up a promising young slugger named

Mike Jorgensen, who said, with a cheerful nod toward the concept of transmigration of souls, that he couldn't miss as a major leaguer because he was born August 16, 1948, the day Babe Ruth died.

Thus, Ruth lives, all around us, which is a matter of satisfaction to some, irritation to others, disinterest to a few. When Marianne Moore, the baseball fan, was asked about Ruth she said, "I never particularly liked him. He was tough." Roger Maris, when in 1961 he pursued and broke Ruth's sacrosanct record of 60 home runs in one season, was subjected to a continuing stream of abuse from spectators, sportswriters, letter writers, people in the street, people who for some reason deeply resented what Maris was doing and who felt impelled to act as surrogates for Ruth in trying to defend his record. Maris broke it anyhow, with a laudable display of sustained skill and athletic courage, yet a decade later only a handful of people knew where Roger was or what he was doing, while tenors and bank robbers and photographers and God knows who all else were still being measured against an indefinable standard of superiority called Babe Ruth. What will you bet that people, and not just those who attacked Maris, will write in after reading this and point out with some acerbity that Maris did *not* break Ruth's record, that Ruth hit his 60 in the old 154-game season and that Roger had only 59 after 154 games and needed the extra times at bat of the expanded 162-game season to get to 60, let alone 61? The phrase "with an asterisk," meaning a qualified success, came into common American usage after that 1961 season because of diehard insistence that Maris did not really break the Babe's record.

Maris himself never said a word against Ruth, so far as I know, but, Lord, he must have tired of hearing Babe Ruth's name. So have others. Or, at any rate, they have tired of hearing of Ruth as hero. Leonard Shecter, in his book *The Jocks*, a somewhat sophomoric attempt to tell the ungilded truth about sport, tried to undo the popular image of Ruth as a jolly, lovable, funmaking giant. Shecter wrote, "In fact, he was a gross man of gargantuan, undisciplined appetities for food, whiskey and women....Ruth was never the playful, outgoing man he was supposed to be....It does not take much research to find out what the Babe was really like. It doesn't matter. The fake Babe Ruth is more palatable than the real one." And I hurry to blunt Shecter's comments because Ruth is alive for me too, and I know he is more complex than that, and I want my idea of the total truth about him to be known.

How many people dead a quarter of a century can arouse so much continuing interest, so much passion? Granted, we make special folk heroes of those highly proficient in sport. But very few people care, one way or the other, that Ty Cobb was a psychotic or that Honus Wagner as an old man coaching with Pittsburgh used to swipe baseballs and trade them for beers. Yet many insist that Cobb was a better ballplayer than Ruth, and Wagner may have been better than both of them. Does it matter about Cobb or Wagner? No. Yet Ruth matters. At seventy, Waite Hoyt, a member of baseball's Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, an urbane, intelligent, caustic, unsentimental veteran of a notably unserene life, talked of Ruth with intensity and fire. "I am almost convinced," Hoyt wrote to me, "that you will never learn the truth on Ruth. I roomed with Joe Dugan. He was a good friend of Babe's. But he will see Ruth in a different light than I did. Dugan's own opinion will be one in which Dugan revels in Ruth's crudities, and so on. While I can easily recognize all of this and admit it freely, yet there was buried in Ruth humanitarianism beyond belief, an intelligence he was never given credit for, a childish desire to be over-virile, living up to credits given his home-run power -- and yet a need for intimate affection and respect, and a feverish desire to play baseball, perform, act and live a life he didn't and couldn't take time to understand."

Along with an abiding interest in Ruth the hero, Ruth the outsize man, I found in the people who knew him, most of whom are elderly now, a warm affection. You would ask about Ruth, and the first thing they would do, remembering, looking off into the past, would be to smile. I have a good friend named Jim Russell who is a lifelong baseball fan; one day after I had begun to write this book I had lunch with him. We got to talking about Ruth and about the various things I had learned. Finally he asked, "Have you found out 'i what he was like? I mean, what kind of guy was he really?" It took me a moment to realize what he was getting at. I said, "Do you mean, underneath it all, was he a shit?" He said, "Yes. Was he?"

I told him about Ernie Shore and Bob Shawkey, neither of whom had any reason to be particularly fond of Ruth. Shore pitched in the minor leagues with him at Baltimore and was a better pitcher then than the Babe; yet Ruth was adulated far more than Shore. When the two of them were sold together to the Boston Red Sox, newspaper comment of the day said that the transaction could not help but be a good one for the Red Sox because of Ruth. But with Boston it was Shore who moved right in as a starting pitcher, while Ruth faltered and was sent back to the minor leagues again for a time. A year later, after the Red Sox had won the pennant, Shore pitched the opening game of the World Series against Grover Cleveland Alexander and started and won a second game; Ruth did not play at all, except to pinch-hit once. In 1917 Shore pitched a perfect game, one of the rarest feats in baseball. The Babe started that game and was thrown out of it by the plate umpire before getting anyone out. Shore, sent hurriedly to the mound in Ruth's place, did not allow anyone to reach first base in the nine full innings that followed and was credited with a perfect game. Baseball fans are more aware of that game because of Ruth than because of Shore. Even then, on his biggest day in baseball, Shore's solid accomplishment was overshadowed by the Babe's personality. Shore was a college man who later became a sheriff in his native North Carolina; Ruth was a reform school product. They roomed together in Boston, and the story is told that the Babe used Shore's toothbrush to brush his own teeth, and that Shore went to the manager of the ball club and insisted on being given a new roommate. Shore went into the armed forces in 1918 during World War 1, but Ruth, who was married by then, did not; Shore was not the same pitcher after the war, and by 1921 his big league career was all over, just as Ruth was moving into the big, big money.

If ever a man had reason to be disenchanted by the Hero Ruth, it would appear to be Ernie Shore. Yet he too chuckled when he was asked about the Babe. He said the unhappy roommate story was not true. It Wasn't a toothbrush at all, it was a shaving brush. The Babe didn't wash it out after he had used it, that was all. "Hell, I roomed with him in 1920 when we were both with the Yankees," Shore said. "I was the only one he would listen to." Asked what Ruth was like in those early days in Baltimore and Boston and New York, Shore replied with fervor, if not originality, "He was the best-hearted fellow who ever lived. He'd give you the shirt off his back."

Bob Shawkey was an outstanding pitcher in the American League for the first dozen years of Ruth's career. He had pitched against him in the beginning and later was his teammate on the superlative Yankee teams of the 1920s. In 1930 he was named manager of the Yankees and thus became Ruth's boss (for one season; he was deposed in favor of Joe McCarthy in 1930. Ruth had a burning ambition to be made the Yankee manager, and there were reports that he resented Shawkey getting the job. Shawkey told me some lively stories about Ruth, about fights he had had on the bench and in the clubhouse with teammates, about the time Miller Huggins, then the Yankee manager, fined Ruth $5000 for general misconduct, about an uproarious pennant celebration on a train coming back from Boston when Ruth and Bob Meusel, another Yankee outfielder, banged on the door of Huggins' compartment and said they were going to throw him off the train. Shawkey impressed me as a gentle, decent man, sure of himself without making a big fuss over it, the kind of man who as a ballplayer might have resented a show boat and troublemaker and flamboyant type like Ruth. Again I felt that I might have come across a vein of anti-Ruth feeling, and I asked, "Why did some people dislike the Babe?" Shawkey looked surprised and said, "People sometimes got mad at him, but I never heard of anybody who didn't *like* Babe Ruth."

I told this to Jim Russell at lunch and said that I had found the same sense of affection in all the oldtimers I talked to. Many of them had been specific -- sometimes startlingly specific -- in discussing the details of the things Ruth had done: the fights, the drinking, the eating, the girl chasing, the arrogance, his "indigestion" in 1925, his hypochondria late in his career, his bitterness and almost maudlin self-pity when he could not get the jobs he wanted in baseball after he was through as a player, the disastrous mistakes he made; but through it all there was a flow, a warmth, a delight as they talked about Ruth. He had been fun to be around. They *liked* him. Russell said he was glad to hear that. I was too.

I don't suppose it is necessary to declare that this is not intended to be a book for boys. But neither is it a sensational exposé. Ruth's sins, while many and glaring, were not terribly purple. He went to bed with a great many women, but he did not make public capital of it, nor was he ever involved in an ugly bedroom scandal. There were two or three putative paternity suits in the early years, but they came to nothing. He could drink extravagant amounts of liquor, and he got drunk a lot and raised hell, especially in the earlier years. He awed people with the amount of food he could eat. (Shore, asked if Ruth had a big appetite back in 1914, said, "Oh, my God. Oh, lord-a-mighty.") He disliked rules, objected to authority and most of his adult life did what he damned well wanted to. Yet, when he had to, he could discipline himself, and he had a continuing sense of responsibility to certain people and certain things, among them his own position as Hero.

His headlined troubles usually had to do with his flouting of ordinary standards of behavior, principally baseball's rules of discipline, and not with sex or drunkenness or gluttony as such. A considerable part of his headline-making propensity was the result of his extraordinary visibility. He could not hide. Ruth incognito was a contradiction in terms. Even in that era before television and mass-circulation picture magazines (the Sunday rotogravure was the big thing then), *everyone* knew and recognized Ruth's huge, round, flat-nosed, wide-mouthed face, his hulking body, his beaming grin, his unhappy pout. Wherever he went, the Babe was on public display, and few, if any, of his peccadillos went unnoticed.

Almost everyone from that era has a Babe Ruth story. Story multiplied by story becomes legend. Like all legends, Ruth's had a strong vein of truth in it -- and an equally strong vein of baloney. Researching this book was an exploration into, a curious world of misleading fact, perceptive misstatement, contradictory truth, substantiating myth. It was like going to live for the first time in a huge city, one that changes with the weather and the seasons as you get to know it. There were many dead-end streets and confusing neighborhoods, and at the end I could not possibly say that I knew all there was to know about Babe Ruth, any more than one man can say he *knows* New York or London, but I did learn some things about this odd, appealing, truly unique man.

Max Eastman wrote, "The mind should approach a body of knowledge as the eyes approach an object, seeing it in gross outline first, and then by gradual steps, without losing the outline, discovering the details." Has there ever been a grosser outline than that of Babe Ruth? Ask anyone. Babe Ruth? Baseball player. Home run hitter. Big fat guy, moon face, huge torso, skinny legs. Hit 60 home runs one year. Hit more home runs than anybody else. Tremendous home run hitter. Ate a lot of hot dogs. Loved kids.

Babe Ruth? Born in Baltimore. Grew up in an orphanage, signed out of the orphanage to play for the old minor league Baltimore Orioles. Went up to the Boston Red Sox, was a fine pitcher first and then became an outfielder, a home run star. Red Sox sold him to the New York Yankees. With Ruth, the Yankees became the greatest baseball team ever. Won pennants, World Series, everything. Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, the home run twins. Scared other teams. Scared the Pittsburgh Pirates in batting practice before the 1927 World Series, and the Pirates died in four straight. Ruth was the showman, always did things in the World Series. In 1932 against the Chicago Cubs he pointed to a spot in the center field bleachers and on the next pitch he hit a home run to the exact spot. You could look it up.

*Babe Ruth?* Glutton, drunkard, hellraiser, but beloved by all -- except the Japanese during World War II. The Japs shouted, "To hell with Babe Ruth!" the ultimate insult, to GIs on Guadalcanal. Or Cape Gloucester. Or New Guinea. Or Peleliu. Someplace. They yelled it all right.

Hollywood made a movie about him, starring William Bendix, who should have had more sense. Terrible movie. Ran out all the myths and extended them to their illogical conclusions and then invented a dozen new ones. For thousands of people, maybe millions, William Bendix in a baseball suit is what Babe Ruth looked like. Which is a terrible shame, because lots of men look like William Bendix, but nobody else ever looked

like Babe Ruth. Or behaved like him. Or did all the things he did in his repressed, explosive, truncated life.



## Users Review

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