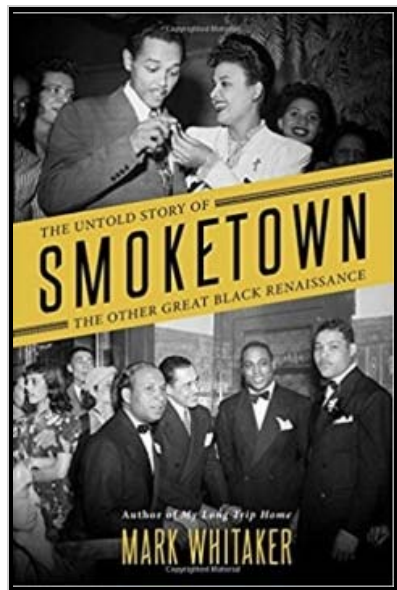


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Smoketown

The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance

by Mark Whitaker

Price: \$30.00(Hardcover)

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From the Publisher: The other great Renaissance of black culture, influence, and glamour burst forth joyfully in what may seem an unlikely place—Pittsburgh, PA—from the 1920s through the 1950s. Today black Pittsburgh is known as the setting for August Wilson’s famed plays about noble but doomed working-class strivers. But this community once had an impact on American history that rivaled the far larger black worlds of Harlem and Chicago. It published the most widely read black newspaper in the country, urging black voters to switch from the Republican to the Democratic Party and then rallying black support for World War II. It fielded two of the greatest baseball teams of the Negro Leagues and introduced Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers. Pittsburgh was the childhood home of jazz pioneers Billy Strayhorn, Billy Eckstine, Earl Hines, Mary Lou Williams, and Erroll Garner; Hall of Fame slugger Josh Gibson—and August Wilson himself. Some of the most glittering figures of the era were changed forever by the time they spent in the city, from Joe Louis and Satchel Paige to Duke Ellington and Lena Horne. Mark Whitaker’s *Smoketown* is a captivating portrait of this unsung community and a vital addition to the story of black America. It depicts how ambitious Southern migrants were drawn to a steel-making city on a strategic river junction; how they were shaped by its schools and a spirit of commerce with roots in the Gilded Age; and how their world was eventually destroyed by industrial decline and urban renewal. Whitaker takes readers on a rousing, revelatory journey—and offers a timely reminder that Black History is not all bleak.

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About The Author

Mark Whitaker

Mark Whitaker is the author of the critically acclaimed memoir, *My Long Trip Home*, and *Smoketown*. The former managing editor of CNN Worldwide, he was previously the Washington bureau chief for NBC News and a reporter and editor at *Newsweek*, where he rose to become the first African-American leader of a national newsweekly.

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What We Say

This very entertaining work of popular history makes a fair case that Pittsburgh equaled New York City's Harlem and Chicago in terms of importance for the black experience and American history. If nothing else, Pittsburgh certainly punched above its weight. That will be no surprise to those who remember it sits at the intersection of three major rivers and its steel mills gave rise to some of the biggest fortunes in America. No wonder Presidents came calling. But the vibrant history of Pittsburgh's black movers and shakers is still impressive. It launched the mostly widely read black-run newspaper in the country, a soapbox used to champion such important movements as black support for WW II (hardly a given, once one realizes the brutal treatment of black veterans who returned home after WW I) and the still-resonating great migration of black voters from the Republican to the Democratic Party. Pittsburgh fielded two of the greatest baseball teams in history, including future Hall of Famers like Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson, pioneered night baseball and much more. It cultivated major jazz figures like pianists Erroll Garner and Mary Lou Williams, composer Billy Strayhorn and singer Billy Eckstine, who was the most popular vocalist in the country until a photo showed a white female fan leaning on his shoulder in adoration. I'm just getting started! Pittsburgh was also key in turning boxer Joe Louis into a national hero (even for white people), pushing for the integration of major league baseball and then giving Jackie Robinson the support he needed to succeed. The city's contributions arguably climax with the rise of America's greatest playwright -- August Wilson. "Smoketown" has a wide-ranging story to tell and, at times, author Mark Whitaker's chapters feel like stand-alone articles. That's a plus in way -- you can read a chapter and then put the book down and come back later without feeling you've lost the thread. It's also a minus, for each story feels a tad isolated from the rest. The result is that "Smoketown" contains a lot of individual tales of triumph rather than one interwoven story. But people influence each other and eventually it coheres with the sad elegy provided by Wilson. His masterwork of a ten play cycle set in Pittsburgh's Hill District can stand alongside the greatest theatrical works in history. And here the funeral for Wilson becomes a funeral for the fading Hill District, black Pittsburgh itself and all it accomplished. Like many funerals, it's sad but ultimately joyous since there's so much good to remember. -- Michael Giltz

What Others Say

"An expansive, prodigiously researched, and masterfully told history." (Kirkus Reviews) "The fascinating and never-before-told story of Pittsburgh's black renaissance—a vibrant and creative community that produced a great black newspaper, a great black baseball team, a great black industrial tycoon, a great black painter, a great black playwright, and some of the greatest black musical talent in America. Thank you, Mark Whitaker." (Gail Lumet Buckley, author of The Hornes and The Black Calhouns) "Mark Whitaker says his remarkable mid-twentieth century Pittsburgh "was a black version of the story of early twentieth-century Vienna." Mr. Whitaker is so riveting a storyteller that the reader even wonders if Belle Epoque Vienna had the equivalent of a Billy Eckstine, Mary Lou Williams, Billy Strayhorn, Joe Louis, or an August Wilson." (David Levering Lewis, Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of W.E.B. Du Bois) "Mark Whitaker has given Pittsburgh's wondrously rich black culture its due at long last. Smoketown is illuminating history and an absolute delight to read." (David Maraniss, author of Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story) "Who knew that Pittsburgh had an African American renaissance as vibrant as Harlem's and arguably more consequential? Mark Whitaker knew, and he rescues from unjust obscurity an American episode that continues to reverberate." (George F. Will, syndicated columnist)

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