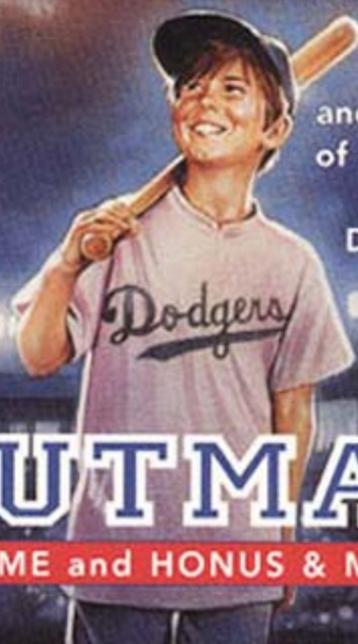


■ A BASEBALL CARD ADVENTURE ■

# JACKIE

*& Me*



I held the card  
against  
my chest  
and thought  
of 1947, the  
Brooklyn  
Dodgers...

## DAN GUTMAN

Author of *BABE & ME* and *HONUS & ME*

# JACKIE & Me



*A Baseball Card Adventure*

DAN GUTMAN

 HarperCollins e-books

■

*For Stephanie Siegel*

■

*“A life is not important  
except in the impact it has on other lives.”*

—JACKIE ROBINSON'S EPITAPH



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## INTRODUCTION

THERE'S SOMETHING YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ME. I'VE got a special power.

It's sort of like a sixth sense. Nobody knows about it except my mom and dad. I discovered it when I was very little. My dad had given me a bunch of baseball cards. As I was handling the cards, I felt a funny tingling sensation in my fingertips. Buzzy. It sort of felt like the feeling you get when you touch a TV screen with the power on.

I didn't think too much about the tingling sensation when I was a little kid. I just figured all kids had the same feeling when they held a baseball card in their hands.

But then I discovered what that tingling sensation meant. One day, I went to sleep with a very old baseball card in my hand. When I woke up, I was in the year 1909.

I know it sounds crazy. You may not believe me.

That's okay. You don't have to believe me. I know what happened. I could use baseball cards to travel through time. For me, a baseball card was like a time machine. The tingling sensation was the signal that I was about to go on a trip, back to the year of the baseball card in my hand.

The first time this happened, it was a pretty exciting—and frightening—experience. When I got back from my “trip,” I didn't think I would ever take another one.

But when you've got a special power—this gift—it seems a shame not to use it. So I did. This is the story of what happened.

Joe Stoshack

# 1



## THE BRAWL

“YOU CAN’T HIT, STOSHACK!” BOBBY FULLER YELLED AT ME from the pitcher’s mound. “You couldn’t hit water if you fell off a boat!”

I stepped into the batter’s box. Bobby Fuller busted my chops all last season. Now it was our first practice game and he was starting in again. I dug my left toe into the dirt and got set for his first pitch.

“You’re ugly, too, Stoshack.”

Fuller knows he can rattle me. That’s why he does it. My team, the Yellow Jackets, had a one-run lead in the fifth inning. The runners at second and third took their leads. Two outs. A hit would put the game out of reach. Fuller needed to strike me out. I was doing my best not to let him get to me.

“Did I mention stupid?” Fuller asked. I pumped my bat back and forth. “You’re stupid, too, Stoshack.”

A few of Fuller’s teammates snickered. I felt the blood rushing to my face. *Try to act like it doesn’t*

*bother you*, I said to myself. *Try to act like it doesn't bother you.*

"You gonna take that, Stoshack?" the catcher whispered to me, quietly enough so that even the umpire wouldn't hear. "What kind of a wimp are you?"

It would be so *easy*. I could just turn around, take my bat, and brain the catcher with it. Do some real damage. His mask would provide only so much protection. That would shut him up. And it would feel so good.

"Stick it in his ear, Bobby!" the shortstop hollered.

The coaches are always telling us about the importance of sportsmanship. The Louisville Little League has strict rules about how we're supposed to act, and what we're allowed to say to the other team during our games. I guess Bobby Fuller and his teammates never got the message. Their coach didn't seem to care.

"You know you can't hit me, Stoshack," Fuller said as he looked in for the sign. "Because you're a big, slow, ugly, dumb *Polack!*"

*That's it.*

Call me ugly. Call me stupid. Say I can't hit. But don't make fun of my nationality or you're gonna pay.

I didn't wait for the pitch. I brought the bat back and flung it at Fuller as hard as I could. It went spinning out of my hands and flew toward the pitcher's mound, about thigh high. Fuller freaked. He jumped to avoid the bat shooting toward him. It zipped about an inch below his heels and skittered all the way to second base.

“This ain’t hockey, Stoshack,” the umpire warned me. “You’re out of the game!”

I didn’t care. When I saw Fuller skip out of the way of my bat, I lost control. I made a fist and charged the mound. I was ready to rip his head off. Fuller flung away his glove and put his fists up.

“You wanna fight, Stoshack?” he laughed. “I’ll kick your butt!”

I could see Fuller’s teammates converging on the mound to defend him, but it didn’t matter. There could have been a hundred guys out there. I still would have tried to bust Fuller’s skull in.

Before I reached the mound, the catcher jumped on my back from behind and knocked me down. By that time, my teammates had rushed off the bench and stormed the field.

I couldn’t tell exactly what happened next. I was at the bottom of a pile of bodies. There was a lot of yelling. I felt some punches being thrown at my head. Somebody stepped on my hand. Mostly, it was just the weight of a bunch of kids on top of me.

It took about ten minutes for the coaches to calm everybody down and peel all the kids off the pile. I was the last one to get up. I was okay, but my hand was throbbing. Coach Hutchinson wrapped his burly arm around my shoulder and steered me roughly back to the bench.

“The season hasn’t even started yet!” he complained. “What are you trying to do, get yourself suspended?”

I glanced at Fuller. Nobody laid a glove on him. He

smirked and turned away. I tore away from Coach Hutchinson and went after Fuller again.

“I’m gonna kill you, Fuller!” I yelled.

This time the umpire tackled me, sending me face-first into the dirt around home plate. He lay on top of me, not letting me move.

“You got a problem, young man,” the ump said in my ear. “You’re not gonna play in this league again until you solve it.”

Coach Hutchinson was furious with me. So was my mom. The Yellow Jackets forfeited the game. My left pinky was sprained. I was suspended from the Little League indefinitely.

## 2



### THE TINGLING SENSATION

AFTER IT WAS ALL OVER, I REALIZED HOW STUPID I HAD BEEN to start the fight with Fuller. He did it all on purpose, I realized. He was probably afraid I was going to get a hit and drive in both runs. He knew that if I started a fight with him, the game would be forfeited and his team would win.

He was right about one thing. I *am* dumb. Sometimes I just can't control my anger.

"I lost it, Mom," I said as my mother held an ice-pack against my hand. "I'm sorry."

My mom is a nurse at University of Louisville Hospital. She made a splint for my finger and gave me a speech about controlling my temper.

I didn't want to face the kids at school the next day after making such a fool of myself. I brought up the idea of staying home, but Mom shot it down.

"Nice try, Joey," she said. "But you're going to have to do a lot better than a sprained pinky."

\* \* \*

Louisville is in Kentucky, about seventy-five miles west of Lexington, on the Ohio River. The Louisville Slugger bat was invented here. Kentucky Fried Chicken started in nearby Corbin.

Kentucky fought on the side of the South during the Civil War. There was slavery here. It was a terrible thing, of course. I guess the white people back then didn't realize how wrong it was, or decided to *ignore* how wrong it was. It's hard to understand today how they could think and act that way back then, but I guess it was just a different time and people had different attitudes.

These days, my class at school is a mixture of white kids and black kids and we get along pretty well. I'm white and most of the kids I know are white, but it's not out of prejudice or anything. I don't think it is, anyway. The black kids make friends mostly with other black kids and they hang together. That's just the way it is.

I'm bringing all this up because February is Black History Month, and most of my teachers were making it part of our studies. Mrs. Levitt, my history teacher, shushed us when we sat down for class on Monday morning.

"Who wants to win a prize?" she asked.

"Oooh! Oooh!" we all moaned, waving our hands around to attract her attention.

"You're going to have to give an oral report," she added.

Everybody groaned and put their hands down.

"I want each of you to choose a famous African-

American,” she said as she walked around the room, passing out a sheet of paper with names on it. “I want you to research that person’s life and do a report on him or her. You’ll have plenty of time. The reports won’t be due until May. And there will be a prize for the best report.”

“What’s the prize?” somebody asked.

“Four tickets to Kentucky Kingdom,” said Mrs. Levitt.

“Oooh!” everybody moaned. Kentucky Kingdom is this really cool amusement park with seventy-five rides. One of them is a sixteen-story free-fall. Kentucky Kingdom costs something like twenty-five dollars to get in, and I’ve never been there.

“Does it matter if the person is dead or alive?” somebody asked. A few of the kids in the back of the room laughed.

“No,” Mrs. Levitt replied. “But I don’t want you to write about a player on your favorite sports team.”

She glanced at me. She knows I’m a sports nut, and I’m always trying to get away with sneaking sports into my schoolwork instead of the stuff we need to learn. Like, in math, I convinced Mrs. Levitt to use batting averages to help us learn multiplication and division. In music, I always ask if we can sing sports songs. In art, I’m always drawing pictures of athletes.

“I want you to write about men and women who made a real contribution to American society.”

“How about *dead* athletes?” I asked, and a few kids giggled.

“Well . . .” Mrs. Levitt said, thinking it over. “As

long as you select an athlete who contributed something to the world.”

“What if they’re retired but not quite dead yet?” I asked.

“Joe,” she said sternly, “you know the assignment.”

I scanned the list that she had handed out—*Frederick Douglass . . . Marian Anderson . . . Langston Hughes . . .*

Howie Wohl, the kid behind me, slipped me a note.

DID LANGSTON HUGHES PLAY FOR THE LAKERS?

I scribbled HE WAS A POET, EINSTEIN! and passed the note back to him. Then I continued going down the list—*Benjamin Banneker . . . W.E.B. Du Bois . . . Paul Robeson . . . Sojourner Truth . . . Booker T. Washington . . . Jackie Robinson . . .*

Jackie Robinson! The baseball player! *I could go back in time and meet Jackie Robinson*, I thought.

I didn’t know much about Robinson. I remember reading on the back of some baseball card that African-American players were banned from the major leagues for about sixty years. Robinson was the first player to break the “color barrier.” He played for the Brooklyn Dodgers before they moved to California and became the Los Angeles Dodgers—my favorite team. That was all I knew about him.

But if I were to go back in time and actually *meet* the guy, I could find out all I needed to know. I would see, with my own eyes, what it was like for him to break the color barrier. I was a cinch to get the best mark on the report and win the trip to Kentucky Kingdom.

I was psyched. After school I rushed home and grabbed *The Baseball Encyclopedia* to see what year Jackie Robinson broke into the big leagues.

Nineteen forty-seven. Now all I needed to do was get a 1947 Jackie Robinson baseball card.

# 3



## A GREAT DEAL

ABOUT A MILE FROM MY HOUSE, IN A STRIP MALL OFF Shelbyville Road on the east side of Louisville, is a baseball card store called Flip's Fan Club. The owner, Flip Valentini, sells new cards, old cards, comic books, and all kinds of collectibles from Mickey Mouse to Marilyn Monroe. He also buys all kinds of stuff, and has some valuable things in his collection.

Flip is a cool guy because he's really old—sixty or seventy or something—but he still reads comic books and cares about stuff that usually only kids care about. He told me he got the nickname Flip because when he was a kid, he and his friends played a game where they would flip baseball cards against a wall. The kid whose card landed closest to the wall got to keep all the cards that were flipped.

It's hard to believe that kids actually used to do that. I mean, today those cards would be worth a



**About a mile from my house, in a strip mall on the east side of Louisville, is a baseball card store called Flip's Fan Club.**