



5 MINUTES WITH **JANE LEAVY**

After a decorated career at *The Washington Post*, Jane Leavy has taken longform to a whole new place. With two bestselling biographies of baseball heroes — *Sandy Koufax: A Lefty's Legacy* and *The Last Boy: Mickey Mantle and the End of America's Childhood*, the author has gone deep on some of the greatest players of all time. She's back this month with *The Big Fella: Babe Ruth and the World He Created*, a look at the sadness in Ruth's life and the greatness he nevertheless achieved while becoming arguably the most famous man in the world — thanks, in part, to the efforts of Christy Walsh, the original sports agent. "I think of my three books as a trilogy," Leavy told *Yankees Magazine* deputy editor Jon Schwartz before she threw out the ceremonial first pitch at Yankee Stadium on Sept. 21. "Sandy was a guy who eschewed fame. Mickey was a guy who was destroyed by it. And Babe's the guy who invented it."

YANKEES MAGAZINE: *This book follows your biographies on Sandy Koufax and Mickey Mantle. What is it about these titans, about whom so much is already known, that compels you to look for more?*

JANE LEAVY: I must have been a rat terrier once. I have an aversion to doing things the way they are normally done, which makes me a little bit like The Babe, I suppose. Maybe the only way. Linear stories don't much interest me. Doing the typical biographical arc? Eh. That's for somebody else. There's always a sense that there's more that we haven't gotten to, and that sense has become really palpable. I think that history — and I don't think just this specific history — is going to be rewritten now. Things that we all thought were settled questions and settled personalities, biographies we thought we knew were definitive, are going to be rejected and redone because the availability of new materials — like the ones that helped me understand what really happened in Babe Ruth's childhood — are going to retell these stories in entirely different ways.

YM: *You write about how you struggled to find the reality in the story, and I think that anybody who has spent time with Babe Ruth's legacy knows exactly what you mean. How out of balance is the popular perception of The Babe with the reality?*

JL: One of his granddaughters said that he was a "window wisher." He was the kind of guy who would go past somebody else's house and look in at that family sitting there at the dinner table, and wish that that could be him.



YM: *Early in the book, you have almost a full page of nicknames, all of them recognizable. Do you think the fans here tonight in their No. 3 jerseys have any understanding of how overwhelming his celebrity was in its time?*

JL: He embarked, with Christy Walsh, in an effort — maybe not consciously — to redefine what it meant to be famous in America, and certainly what it meant to be famous as an athlete. And they created the template for what you see all over here. They started it!

YM: *You mention all the sportswriters who essentially dined out nightly on Ruth's fame. What do you think is lost due to the distance now between writers and players?*

JL: There's a profound irony that those guys had access to him, long before the word access was ever applied to a journalistic convocation. They just were with him. They knew him. They really, really knew him. And they wrote almost none of it. And that relationship has completely flip-flopped. That was the convention — you don't write it. It's all off-limits. Today, you've got reporters who are expected — it's part of the job requirement — to ferret out any little personal detail of life off the field. And they have *no* access. So, it's absolutely inverted. And they can't know their subjects in the way that the old-time guys did. ❧

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.