

The Sporting Life



Charles B. Harris

Broadly defined, sports have figured in American literature since at least Christmas Day 1621, when Plymouth Governor William Bradford banned all “sporting implements” because citizens of Puritan New England were playing in the streets rather than worshipping (Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647*). This *ABR* focus concentrates more narrowly on *organized* sports, whose significance as an institution in American life emerged just after the Civil War. But with rare exceptions—Jack London’s boxing novel *The Game* (1905) and Ring Lardner’s epistolary baseball novel *You Know Me Al* (1916) come to mind—books about football, baseball, basketball, and other organized sports were generally limited for a century to dime novels, boys’ weeklies, and adolescent fiction.

The 1952 publication of Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural* began to change all that. As Michael Oriard observes in *Dreaming of Heroes* (Nelson-Hall, 1982), his excellent study of American sports fiction, Malamud’s first novel presented baseball as “a vital source of myth in a nearly mythless country,” its critical success signaling to other serious writers that sports and art are not necessarily inimical. But if Malamud provided a catalyst for change, *The Natural* hardly constitutes a watershed, as the prejudice against sports literature faded slowly. As late as 1978, Paul Auster, an aspiring but as yet unpublished novelist, was too embarrassed to affix his own name to his first novel, *Squeeze Play*, a combination baseball/ detective fiction, using the pseudonym “Paul Benjamin” instead. (Auster includes *Squeeze Play* as an appendix in his 1997 autobiography *Hand to Mouth*.) Similarly, Don DeLillo used the *nom de plume* “Cleo Birdwell” to conceal his authorship of *Amazons* (1980), a fictional memoir of the first woman to play in the National Hockey League, despite the fact that he was six books into his career at the time and that his second novel, *End Zone* (1972), had explored

the relationship between language and football.

As the list of first-rate sports novels included in this focus suggests, the snobbish denigration of sports as an appropriate subject for serious literature has now all but disappeared. Indeed, serious sports fiction has become a kind of literary subgenre, taking its place alongside other emerging subgenres such as the “meta-physical detective story” (e.g., Auster’s *New York Trilogy*), “literary” science fiction (e.g., Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*), and “avant-pop” (e.g., Mark Leyner’s *I Smell Esther Williams*) that also collapse the traditional boundaries between “high” and “mass” culture. In addition to Auster, DeLillo, and Malamud, important contemporary novelists who have successfully tried their hand at sports novels include Robert Coover, Phillip Roth, John Updike, Frederick Exley, Jerome Charyn, Paul Metcalf, Harry Crews, Rita Mae Brown, and David Foster Wallace (see the list in this focus for titles).

Writers of other literary genres have not neglected sports as theme and metaphor, either. Perhaps the most spectacular among a growing list of sports poems is Kenneth Koch’s baseball epic *Ko, or a Season on Earth* (1959). Other poems on that list include Marianne Moore’s “Baseball and Writing,” James Wright’s “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio,” Robert Bly’s “The Hockey Poem,” Rolfe Humphries’s “Polo Grounds,” William Carlos Williams’s “At the Ball Game,” Robert Fitzgerald’s “Cobb Would Have Caught It,” James Dickey’s “In the Pocket,” Gary Gildner’s “First Practice,” Lucille Clifton’s “Jackie Robinson,” David Ignatow’s “The Boxing Match,” Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s “Baseball Canto,” Michael Harper’s “Makin’ Jump Shots,” Charles Bukowski’s “The Loser,” and Joel Oppenheimer’s “For Hoyt Wilhelm,” among many others that could be named. Recent drama in which sports play a central role includes Howard Sackler’s *The Great White*

Hope (1968), Eric Simonson's stage adaptation of the Mark Harris novel *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1992), and Jason Miller's Pulitzer-Prize-winning *That Championship Season* (1972).

But if literature *about* sports is a relatively recent development, organized sports have played a prominent ancillary role in American literature for a long time. Steven Crane not only played football at Syracuse University but, while living with his brother's family in Patterson, NJ, organized, coached, and quarterbacked the town's first football team. When reviewers praised Crane's authentic portrayal of war in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), the novelist explained: "I have never been in a battle, of course, and I believe that I got my sense of the rage of conflict on the football field. The psychology is the same. The opposing team is an enemy tribe." Frank Norris, who broke his arm playing high school football and later wrote a sports column for the *San Francisco Wave*, supplemented such famous Naturalistic tomes as *McTeague* (1899) and *Vandover and the Brute* (1914) with short fictions about football ("Travis Hallett's Half Back"), boxing ("Shorty Stack, Pugilist"), and baseball ("This Animal of a Buddy Jones").

At 5'7" and 140 pounds, F. Scott Fitzgerald was too small to become the sports hero he fantasized about, but that hero worship found its way into his novels. Fitzgerald probably based Amory Blaine, protagonist of *This Side of Paradise* (1920), his first novel, on Hobart Amory Hare Baker, an All-American halfback at Princeton during Fitzgerald's freshman year. Five years later, Fitzgerald registered his growing disillusionment with the All-American hero through his characterization of *The Great Gatsby's* morally compromised Tom Buchanan, a former Yale All-American. Hemingway and Faulkner also played high school football, Papa as a substitute center who covered sports for the school paper, Faulkner as a wiry 5'5" starting quarterback whose career was cut short when he broke his nose tackling a teammate who was running the wrong way with an intercepted

pass. Hemingway wrote two fine boxing stories ("The Battler" and "Fifty Grand") and, with Santiago's veneration of Joe DiMaggio, provides a memorable exemplification of "grace under pressure" in *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Faulkner describes a trip to a baseball game in *Sanctuary* (1931), and two of his characters, Labove of *The Hamlet* (1940) and Charles Mallison of *Intruder in the Dust* (1931), are former football heroes.

Other characters from "classic" American literature who are athletes or former athletes include Sinclair Lewis's eponymous ex-football hero Elmer Gantry, Thomas Wolfe's baseball playing Nebraska Crane from *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) and *The Web and the Rock* (1939), boxer Robert E. Lee Prewitt of James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* (1953), high school sports star Biff Loman of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1939), fallen gridiron great Brick Pollitt of Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1944), and the boxer protagonist of Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* (1937). Sherwood Anderson and James T. Farrell wrote about their youthful diamond exploits in their memoirs—Farrell most memorably in *My Baseball Diary* (1957). More recently, Norman Mailer and Joyce Carol Oates have written non-fictional accounts of boxing. And the list goes on...

The increasing importance of sports in literature should not be surprising considering the centrality of organized sports to contemporary American experience. Sports revenue significantly influences our economy, sports as spectacle provides us with incalculable hours of entertainment and recreation, the language of sports infiltrates our idioms and vocabulary (see "Flash" McCaffery's excursus on baseball names in this focus). Because professional and even collegiate sports have become so closely associated with Big Business and the exploitation of the individual, it should also not surprise us that most contemporary sports literature, especially fiction, emphasizes the negative impact of sports on American culture. In this regard, Oriand's cartography of sports themes is particularly useful:

[B]aseball in literature produces most often either a nostalgic remembrance of the past or a representation of the American innocent confronting complex reality; football becomes a ready metaphor for violence in all its forms or for the stifling of individuality by corporate America; boxing becomes the naturalists' representation of urban dehumanization; and basketball exemplifies the life of the individual ill-suited to regimentation and control.

Finally, given the fecundity of sports literature over the past several decades, it should not be surprising that the topic has attracted the attention of scholars and anthologizers. Paul D. Staudohar, whose *Football's Best Short Stories* is reviewed in this focus, has edited similar anthologies for baseball (1995), golf (1997), and boxing (1999), all published by Chicago Review Press. Other notable anthologies include *Best American Sports Writing for 1999* (Houghton Mifflin), edited by novelist Richard Ford; *The Sporting Life: Poems About Sports and Games* (Milkweed, 1998), edited by Emilie Buchwald and Ruth Roster; *American Sports Poems* (Orchard, 1995), edited by R.R. Knudson and May Swenson; and *Crossing Boundaries: An International Anthology of Women's Experiences in Sports* (Human Kinetics, 1999), edited by Susan Bandy and Anne Darden. The best scholarly account of the importance of sports in American culture remains Christian K. Messenger's *Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction: Hawthorne to Faulkner* (Columbia UP, 1981).

Charles B. Harris is co-publisher of American Book Review.