

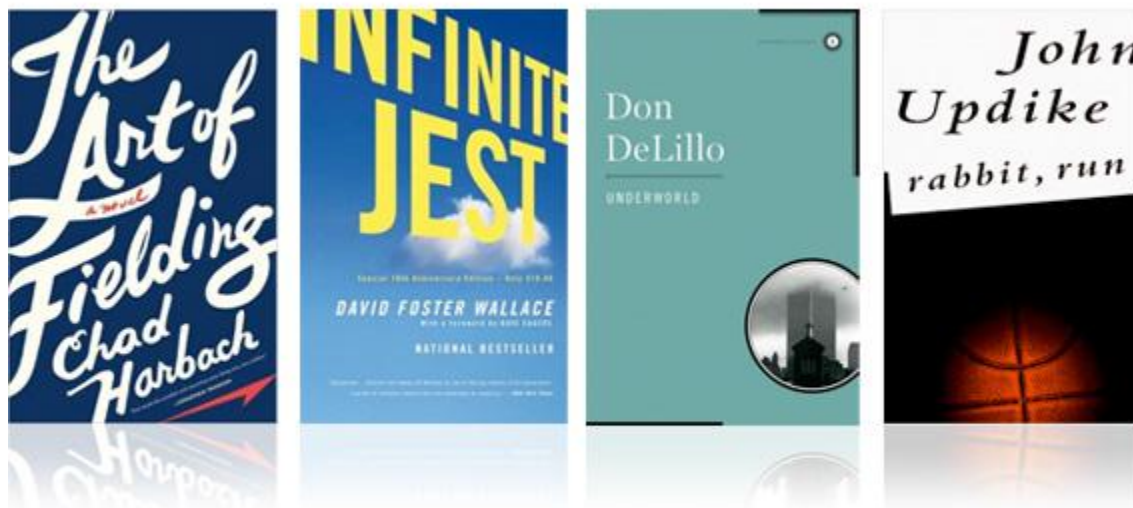
Beyond The Art of Fielding: Why are American novelists so interested in sports?

By Jason Cowley | Posted Sunday, Jan. 22, 2012, at 6:58 AM ET
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Beyond The Art of Fielding

Why American novelists turn to sports.



In the summer of 2006, I spent six weeks in Germany on assignment to write about the World Cup for a British Sunday newspaper. Those were long, settled days of warmth and sunshine and I had very little work to do—perhaps one essay to write each week.

I rented a small flat in central Berlin that overlooked Peter Eisenman's austere Holocaust Memorial and was situated opposite the Adlon Hotel, from a high,

open window of which the disturbed pop icon Michael Jackson once dangled one of his babies in a moment of manic exuberance. Accredited journalists were given a complimentary first-class rail pass for the duration of the tournament and I spent my days travelling on trains and reading or rereading novels and stories with sporting themes, just to get in the mood.

It seems strange now to recall that all of these books were by American men: Philip Roth, John Updike, Don DeLillo, Richard Ford, David Foster Wallace ... I also read Thom Jones's stories about luckless boxers; Tom Coyne's 2001 novel about a golf caddy, *A Gentlemen's Game*; and, as I do every year, *The Great Gatsby*, which uses golf to expose the dishonesty of the narrator Nick Carraway's girlfriend. In most of what I read, sport was portrayed as being central rather than marginal to American life, as well as being a way to test and explore moral character: resilience, courage, toughness, loyalty.

There was an implicit understanding in these books that most of us live, as Ford puts it in his 1986 novel *The Sportswriter*, "applauseless" lives, none more so than Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, the everyman "hero" of Updike's great tetralogy, written between 1960 and 1990, that comprises *Rabbit Run*; *Rabbit Redux*; *Rabbit Is Rich*; and *Rabbit At Rest*.

Rabbit is a sportsman of sorts – he was once a "first-rate" basketball player. But as a mature adult, he is restlessly second-rate. We first encounter him as a young man on the basketball court, where he is nimble and commanding. Then, at the end of *Rabbit at Rest*, we look on as he dies in bloated and complacent late middle-age – on a basketball court, completing the circle of his life. Rabbit's is an emblematically American death. He has joined in with a group of kids who are playing in a park, and he collapses, "bursts from within", as he rises to shoot a basket, the ball hitting the ground just after he does. "Harry," wrote Updike in an introduction to the collected Rabbit novels in 1995, "was for me a way in – a ticket to the America all around me."

The narrator of Ford's *The Sportswriter* is, like Rabbit, a would-be man of action and sportsman who has lost his way in life but who never stops believing in the redemptive capacity of sport. The novel begins with a resounding

declaration: “My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter.” Written with terse lyricism in a flat, confessional style, it’s essentially about ennui and drift, and the failure of a certain kind of American man to become emotionally literate.

Bascombe’s young son has died, his marriage is over and, though he once wrote an acclaimed book of stories, he no longer has the ambition to write anything more demanding than sports features. But he is good company: cynical, laconic, yet capable of moments of wonder.

I first read *The Sportswriter* not long after it was published – it was a gift from my father – and it seemed entirely new and fresh, so unlike the English novels I’d read. I couldn’t imagine that the English writers I was being encouraged to read at that time – William Golding, Graham Greene, John Fowles – would begin a novel as Ford did or write with the same idiomatic freedom and confidence about the centrality of sport in our lives. I used to think that a choice had to be made between sport and literature; that you couldn’t be both a sportsman and a book man. They represented two separate and distinct cultures, the life of the mind and the life of action, and there was no connecting bridge between them.

I was wrong, of course, but it took me many years and the emergence of the new memoir-writing about sport, inspired by Nick Hornby’s *Fever Pitch* and Pete Davies’s *All Played Out* in the early 1990s, to understand why. I realise now that my misunderstanding was bound up with class anxieties about what was an appropriate subject for serious and considered study and reflection, the failures of English education (mine, at least) and, above all, with the absence of a literary tradition.

Even today, there’s still scarcely any tradition of British fiction about sport, as there is about war, class, politics or crime. Nor is there much fiction that moves in and around the subject of sport as David Foster Wallace does in *Infinite Jest* (1996), which is set partly in a tennis academy. There are good English novels in which sportsmen have a walk-on part or in which sport features tangentially (such as the comedies of PG Wodehouse or LP Hartley’s *The Go-Between* (1953), with its portrayal of a village cricket match) or pejoratively and sarcastically, as in the work of Martin Amis. *London Fields* (1989), perhaps Amis’s best novel, has a low-life character named Keith Talent. He’s a wife-beater, small-time crook and darts player, and the object of much hilarity and scorn (Keith – he has no talent at all, get it?).

Amis, as was Foster Wallace, is a tennis fan, and even plays recreationally. But when he writes about the game in a novel such as *The Information* (1995) or in his journalism, it’s always with an eye on the next gag; it’s always as a vehicle for grotesque humour or satire. It’s as if, in common with so many English novelists of his generation, he’s incapable of taking such a non-intellectual pursuit seriously as a worthy subject of fiction: far better to go head to head with nuclear war, Islamism and the Holocaust. Or could it be that as a subject for fiction sport is simply too tricky to represent – the on-field action sequences, I mean? Also, how to represent the consciousness of those who excel at sports when they themselves are mostly incapable of describing how and why they do what they do so well?

Amis once said perceptively of Updike that “his fascination with the observable world is utterly promiscuous”. The same could be said of most of the major male American novelists of the postwar period, for whom no subject, however superficially trivial or banal, seems to escape their notice. American reality, Roth wrote in a 1960 essay, “stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.”

As well as writing a novel about baseball, *The Great American Novel* (1973), Roth creates, again and again, characters whose youthful sporting brilliance and athleticism is rapturously described, so as to make their subsequent struggles and decline seem all the more poignant. And always the bookish, cerebral Roth delights in humbling his sportsmen, as if to punish them for being so physically strong and naturally gifted. I’m thinking here of Swede Levov in *American Pastoral* (1997), of Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain* (2000) and, most recently, of Bucky Cantor in *Nemesis* (2010).

In June last year, Roth was awarded the Man Booker International Prize. He did not attend the dinner in London, but those of us who were there watched a recording of him reading from *Nemesis*, set during a polio epidemic in Newark during the hot summer of 1944. The central character is a physical education teacher at a boys’ playground.

Because of poor eyesight, Bucky has been exempted from the draft but he is immensely strong and throws a javelin prodigious distances. He's something of a hero to the boys he teaches.

The novel is narrated in a long retrospective by one of Bucky's former pupils and the story he tells has the terrible inexorability of Greek tragedy. Late on, we learn what became of the proud and stubborn Bucky, of how he was an unwitting carrier of the polio virus that was killing and maiming the boys in his care and of how he himself was eventually struck down and crippled by the disease.

Yet the book ends not on a single note of despair but rather in ironic glory as we encounter Bucky once more as a young man. It's a summer afternoon and he's out with the boys in a big dirt field, demonstrating how to throw the javelin. "It's not magic," he tells them. But for the boys, what they witness is a kind of magic – the magic of high sporting dedication and accomplishment, of the mysterious naturalness and grace of it all. To the boys, Bucky seemed "invincible".

It was this radiant passage, when he had the pick of all of his work, that Roth chose to read for guests at the dinner. As he described Bucky's exploits with the javelin, sitting at his desk at home in north-west Connecticut, Roth lifted and then stretched back his throwing arm, fully inhabiting the moment now, as if he was engaged in the act of becoming Bucky, or had become him. It was a lovely thing to behold.

Perhaps the most acclaimed American novel of recent months is Chad Harbach's debut, *The Art of Fielding*, just published in Britain. Written from many different points of view, it is broadly the story of a young college baseball prodigy who suffers a catastrophic loss of nerve – the "yips", in the vernacular – after a fielding accident. Harbach is a cultural critic and one of the founding editors of the smart, Brooklyn-based literary magazine *N+1*. He worked on the novel for more than a decade and says he was influenced by Don DeLillo, especially by his early work about American football, *End Zone* (1972), and by Foster Wallace, whom he describes as "one of the few novelists who have really thought about the relationship of sport to larger society".

It's this willingness to think about sport and its role in, and relationship to, larger society that separates American writers from their British counterparts. There has been no equivalent in British fiction of the long, opening set piece of DeLillo's epic 1997 novel *Underworld*, in which he thrillingly recreates a famous 1951 baseball match between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers and sets it in the turbulent context of the early stirrings of the cold war and of American paranoia about the communist threat. The best sporting set piece in a British novel I can think of, by contrast, is the golf match between James Bond and Goldfinger at Royal St George's, Kent – it's entertaining and well written but scarcely serves as a statement about English society, in the grand DeLillo and American style.

The publication of *Fever Pitch* in 1992, which borrowed from the American writer Frederick Exley's "fictional memoir" *A Fan's Notes* (1968), inspired a whole series of British sports memoirs from the early 1990s onwards. These were less about the sport itself than about the psychological condition of fandom. For a new generation of writers, after Hornby, sport became the means through which to write about the particularities of their own lives, their loves and losses, aspirations and failures.

American novelists such as Harbach, and those who came before him such as Roth, Foster Wallace and DeLillo, are doing something much more imaginatively difficult when they dare to write fiction about sport, because they aren't merely rubbing up against, or seeking to recast, the actuality of events already known and familiar. Or to tell us what they were thinking about or how they were affected by them. Rather, they are creating entire fictional sporting worlds – something from nothing, as it were – populated by characters who can seem as real to us as Wayne Rooney or Lionel Messi. In fact, they seem more real – more complex, more human even, because the novel, at its best, is the one art form that offers privileged access to consciousness and interiority, to the inner torments, excitements, contradictions and indeed boredom of the human story.

"You loved it," Harbach writes of baseball in *The Art of Fielding*, "because you considered it an art: an apparently pointless affair, undertaken by people with a special aptitude, which sidestepped attempts to paraphrase its value yet somehow seemed to communicate something true or even crucial about the Human Condition." And that something crucial is that: "We're alive and have access to beauty, can even erratically create it, but will someday be dead and will not."

So for Harbach, the secret of the appeal of sport to the American novelist is this: that, like art, it is a potential gateway to beauty, and can make us feel fully alive. Foster Wallace said something similar in a 2006 essay on the Swiss tennis genius Roger Federer: “Beauty is not the goal of competitive sports, but high-level sports are a prime venue for the expression of human beauty.”

Can we ever expect an equivalent of *The Art of Fielding* on this side of the Atlantic? The portents at last seem promising. In March, John Lanchester publishes *Capital*, a sprawling, panoramic state-of-the-nation novel in the realist tradition of Mrs Gaskell’s *North and South* or HG Wells’s *Tonay-Bungay*. Its setting is one London street and, through the lives of those who live on it, seeks to dramatise the larger story of the English nation at a time of soaring inequalities and profound economic crisis. Lanchester is a clever fellow who knows a lot of stuff – including a lot about football and one of the main characters is a young African Premier League player.

Lanchester understands how football, in the age of the globalised Premier League with its clubs owned by Gulf oil theocracies and international plutocrats, has become the dominant cultural form of our times and that no novel that seriously wants to take the temperature of modern England, to hold up a mirror up to how we live today, can ignore sport.

What I like is that Lanchester is not content with merely describing the African’s life away from the pitch but follows him on to it, describing his debut in an extended scene that savours what Blake called “the holiness of minute particulars”. It’s worthy of Updike at his most promiscuous and, I hope, signals a new, more ambitious direction in English fiction.

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