

Sports Fiction: Critical and Empirical Perspectives

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In the fall of 2003, ESPN premiered its first entry in the realm of scripted, fictional television programming, *Playmakers*. The program chronicled, often with explicit detail, the trials and tribulations of a fictional pro football team, the Cougars. Dubbed a "macho soap opera" (Flynn, 2004, p. 68), plot lines revolved around everything from murder, to drug abuse, to domestic violence, to homosexuality, to abortion. The aging veteran, the raw rookie, the greedy owner—characters on the program embodied just about every conceivable sports stereotype.

Playmakers was the product of the network's newly formed Original Entertainment division, created as part of ESPN's new strategy to expand beyond its core audience of young male viewers by developing original movies and other types of specialty programming (Umstead, 2003). The strategy worked. *Playmakers* was a hit, consistently drawing viewers from the highly coveted 18- to 34-year-old male demographic (Romano, 2003). The program also succeeded in attracting more female viewers to the network, ten times the number that ESPN was drawing in the same time slot just one year earlier, to be exact (Umstead, 2003). Furthermore, the program also drew support from some unlikely sources such as the gay community for spotlighting the turmoil one closeted homosexual player faced after coming out to his teammates and team owners (Page, 2003; Rowe, 2003). *Sports Illustrated* even branded *Playmakers* its "Show of the Year" (Deitsch, 2003).

Any celebration caused by these accolades was short lived, for as much praise as *Playmakers* received, it drew an equal amount of scorn. NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue repeatedly voiced his objections to the program, calling it a "gross mischaracterization" of the sport ("Tagliabue knocks," 2003, p. 4). Some real-life players were also angered, and the NFL Players Association complained to ESPN, asking the network not to air the program (Fryer, 2003).

Throughout these protests, the network's response remained the same, that the program was for entertainment only, a work of pure fiction. However, many observers questioned this defense, noting that the origins of some characters and storylines on the program could easily be found in contemporary newspaper headlines. In fact, several writers argued that one had to look no further than the NFL's Carolina Panthers to find a number of scandals every bit as salacious as those depicted on *Playmakers* (Czaban, 2003; Pells, 2004). Moreover, at the same time that Commissioner Tagliabue was trying to combat the negative image being generated by the program, former NFL linebacker Lawrence Taylor was hitting the talk show circuit, actively publicizing his autobiography that recounted in graphic detail "a life far more drug-addled and pornographic than any presented on the TV series" (Elliott, 2003, p. Z6).

Although the abundance of criticism may not have cost the program its viewers, it did cost one high-profile sponsor. Gatorade pulled its advertisements from the season finale of the series, citing concerns over the program's content (Lowry, 2003). Despite the ratings gains produced by the show, the cumulative effect of all the negative attention forced ESPN to cancel *Playmakers* after only one season (Betchel, 2003; Sandomir, 2004).

All of this controversy is recounted only to provide context for one small fact, which the creators of *Playmakers* were quite clear about from the program's inception—the show was not really about football. As ESPN Vice President Mark Shapiro said, "Sports is just a backdrop for this series" (Tierney, 2003, p. 2C). One critic noted in her review that *Playmakers* "is a show about football that shows almost no football" (Stanley, 2003, p. E1). This revelation is nothing new. It shows only that the network has learned what novelists, playwrights, and Hollywood film and television producers have known for years, that sports serves as an ideal backdrop for telling other stories. In his thorough examination of baseball films, Good (1997) wrote that "baseball films are only marginally about baseball. They are more about the human condition" (p. 7). Berman (1981) expressed a similar sentiment: "Sports fiction is always about reality; only the metaphor the fictional work utilizes to describe reality varies" (p. 10). Indeed, no other observation about sports in fiction receives as much unanimous support as the notion that sports is a "dynamic metaphor for reality" (p. 4) and that books and films about sports serve as an efficient means for examining other aspects of life. Racism, sexism, social inequality, the splintering of the American family—all of these issues have been addressed in countless fictional narratives that revolve around sports.

THE POPULARITY OF SPORTS FICTION

Fictional narratives involving sports have become a popular staple of the modern entertainment landscape. One admittedly limited bibliography chronicling American sports fiction of the twentieth century lists 631 literary works about sports (Burns, 1987). And despite some claims that sports films are "box-office poison" (Sayre, 1977, p. 182), sports films continue to be a popular draw in theaters. Cable network ESPN Classic features the program *Reel Classics*, where a different sports film is screened every week. Moreover, an Internet search for "sports films" yields an abundance of "top 10" lists, providing more evidence that the genre has an extremely loyal following eager to discuss at great length the various qualities that make certain sports films great. The sports film genre is as prolific as it is popular.

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Zucker and Babich's (1987) index of every sports film ever made enumerated approximately 2,000 sports films made before 1985. The sports film genre dates back to the origins of the medium, and, in fact, films about baseball actually predate the World Series (Good, 1997)! The trend continues with two more entries into the genre in early 2004—*Miracle*, which depicts the victory by the U.S. ice hockey team over the Soviet team in the 1980 Winter Olympic Games, and *Against the Ropes*, a film about a female boxing promoter struggling to succeed in a male-dominated business. Although television programs about fictitious sports teams are less common and frequently short-lived, they nonetheless continue to surface on network schedules every few years, from *The White Shadow* in 1978 to the most recent entry into the genre, the aforementioned *Playmakers* in 2003.

Despite the long history of sports in literature and in the cinema, some scholars argue that relatively little research exists examining sports fiction, and only recently have those within the academic community begun to realize the potential value for new insights and knowledge that sports fiction represents. Dickerson (1991) noted in his analysis of 60 years of baseball films that sports have become more than mere entertainment and that organized athletics have become "politically, economically, socially, and legally intertwined with our nation's infrastructure" (p. 4). Moreover, he uses this argument as evidence to support the need for focusing greater attention on depictions of sports in film. Nonetheless, to date, Dickerson's findings remain true: "The sports film seems to have been overlooked as a major film genre" (p. 5).

Novels and other written works about sports have likewise been "denigrated as a subject for serious literature" (Oriard, 1982, p. 8). Oriard blamed this lack of serious scholarly attention on the genre's roots within early dime novels and juvenile fiction such as Burt L. Standish's countless stories about Frank Merriwell, "America's pre-eminent fictional sports hero" (p. 308). Although he acknowledged the genre's long history within youth fiction, he and other critics (e.g., Berman, 1981) rightly noted that many of America's literary giants such as Ernest Hemmingway and William Faulkner also invoked sports during their careers.

SPORTS FICTION: THE NON-GENRE

The assertion that sports fiction is simply drama or comedy that happens to involve sports leads to the question of whether sports fiction actually constitutes a distinct genre of entertainment. Most analyses of films and literature within the genre bypass this vexing question in favor of more clear-cut areas of inquiry. After all, addressing this question forces a number of somewhat arbitrary decisions regarding the definition of genre, as well as what elements are required to merit inclusion within any given genre.

Virtually every scholar who has attempted to define sports fiction has been faced with a myriad of highly problematic questions (e.g., Burns, 1987; Dickerson, 1991; Oriard, 1982; Zucker & Babich, 1987). For example, is the mere presence of sports in a narrative enough to justify inclusion as sports fiction, or must sports be central to the storyline? To that end, how large a role must sports play in a narrative before it is considered a central element? In addition, should all forms of athletic competition be included, or only organized sports? For example, in their rather exhaustive reference guide to the early history of the sports film genre, Zucker and Babich (1987) made some rather arbitrary decisions about what constitutes a sports film, stating that sports must play "an integral part in the film, even if it's not basically

about sports" (p. 3). However, the definition of what constitutes an "integral part" is clearly open to interpretation and is sure to result in numerous discrepancies among scholars and critics. The problem is no less vexing for critics examining written works about sports. Oriard (1982) defined a sports novel "simply as one in which sport plays a dominant role or in which the sport milieu is the dominant setting" (p. 6). In addition, Burns (1987) arbitrarily eliminated countless literary works about sports from his critical bibliography of the genre, including juvenile fiction and stories about motor sports.

In one enlightening critical and cultural analysis of baseball films, Good (1997) pondered whether baseball films constitute a valid and distinct genre of entertainment. Although he did not examine the larger body of work that falls within the broader domain of sports films in general, the discussion begins to answer some of the fundamental questions regarding the nature of genre(s) from a conceptual level. Good noted that "Film scholars have borrowed the concept of genre from their literary colleagues, but have applied it far less systematically and precisely" and later added that "the definition of genre in film studies remains curiously unfixed" (p. 10). He resisted applying the term genre to baseball films, largely because of the blended nature of most baseball films (e.g. baseball biopics, baseball-romance stories, baseball comedies, baseball musicals, etc.). Instead, Good preferred the use of "type" or "category" to describe the films he examined. Unfortunately, the author concluded the discussion by remarking that the debate regarding the nature of film genres is a matter best left to film scholars. Likewise, the present discussion does little to clarify whether sports films exist as a distinct genre.

THEMES AND CLICHÉS IN SPORTS FICTION

Few other scholars have sought to question whether sports films constitute a distinct genre of entertainment. Instead, they have proceeded under the assumption that sports films are indeed a coherent genre of entertainment and have focused on the various conventions or dominant themes that characterize the genre. Zucker and Babich (1987) argued that sports films as a whole display an astonishing lack of thematic diversity and that every sports film ever made utilized one of only three repetitive themes: "the triumph of the underdog, the fall (and sometimes resurrection) of the mighty, and the sporting event as a pretext" (p. 1). To support their argument, the authors cited example after example of films that fall within one or more of these categories. Although a few scholars take issue with this highly reductionistic view of the various themes utilized within sports films (e.g., Erickson, 1992), dissenting voices are rare.

In addition, most critics examining fictional narratives about sports have repeatedly noted their heavy reliance on clichés. Early in his analysis of baseball films, Good (1997) profiled the numerous clichés that populate such films—the mythical status of the ballpark; the fatherly team manager; the presence of dual contrasting female leads, one pure, one tempting. As he argued, in contemporary baseball films characters are "raw rookies and worn-out veterans" (p. 22). Movies about baseball are hardly the only sports fictions guilty of utilizing these stereotypical characters, as those same stereotypes can be found in narratives depicting other sports, including the aforementioned television series *Playmakers*, as well as *Slapshot*, *Any Given Sunday*, and others. In addition, a host of other cinematic clichés can be found in virtually all sports fiction. For example, a review of the recent boxing film *Against*

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the Ropes complimented the film for its successful use of several conventions of the sports film genre, most notably the "slow clap" and the "big fight" at the climax of the film (Ebert, 2004).

THE MEANING OF SPORTS FICTION: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Critics who have turned their attention toward sports fiction have taken a number of different approaches in examining this body of work. A number of scholars have examined literary works about sports to explore the conflict between play (cf. Huizinga, 1955) and sport (e.g., Berman, 1981; Messenger, 1990; Oriard, 1991). For example, Berman (1981) argued that the sports fiction of the 1970s explored the tension between true play, which is possible through sport, and contemporary culture, which is "actively hostile to any manifestation of freedom, any play" (p. 8). In general, analyses of literary works involving sports are vastly more complex (and esoteric) than their cinematic counterparts, possibly due to the level of depth afforded by the printed word not possible in the span of a 120-minute film. Likewise, critics examining sports literature have a much older body of work upon which to draw.

Other scholars have approached the topic from a historical perspective, tracing the ebb and flow of the popularity of sports films through the decades, while also examining the dominant cultural ideology reflected in these stories. For example, based on the argument that "the products of Hollywood do mirror the changes of the culture that gives birth to the films" (Dickerson, 1991, p. 153), Dickerson performed a rigorous sociocultural analysis of baseball films from 1929 to 1989, dividing the 60-year history of baseball films into a number of distinct eras and methodically examining each period chronologically.

However, the majority of analyses of sports in narrative fiction have examined the works along thematic lines, exploring how the many fictional films and novels about sports have addressed a myriad of relevant topics. A global review of these assorted critiques reveals a surprising amount of consistency both in regard to the topics addressed as well as in the various critical interpretations of these themes. As Oriard (1982) stated, literary works of sports fiction display "amazing unanimity in their major interests . . . because they portray issues fictionally that are essential to the nature of sport in America" (p. 21). Nonetheless, because analyses of this nature are subject to an almost infinite number of competing interpretations, only a few of the more dominant and consistent findings are presented here for discussion. In this respect, this chapter is in part a summary of literally thousands of pages of critical analyses and cannot fully explore all the meaning implicit in the many texts referenced. Those seeking to explore these themes more fully are advised to consult the various works cited herein.

Gender and Sexuality

Perhaps no other element of sports fiction has received as much attention as how these films and television programs address elements of gender, sexuality, and dominant ideology. The traditionally highly gendered nature of athletic competition makes fictional representations of sports inherently reflective of gender issues in

society at large. Thus, "to some degree every sports film is about gender" (Baker, 2003, p. 3).

Organized sports have typically been dominated by men, especially prior to Title IX. Therefore, it should be no surprise that sports fiction, like most other forms of fictional entertainment, are dominated by male characters. Perhaps the dominant ideology regarding masculinity in fictional narratives is the dramatic depiction of an individual struggling against great odds to achieve success. "This heroic individual overcomes obstacles and achieves success through determination, self-reliance, and hard work" (Baker, 2003, p. 49). Oriard (1982) termed this ideological male the "athlete-hero" and traced the origin of this figure back to the roots of sports fiction in juvenile literature of the early twentieth century. The author argued that the prototype of this character in sports fiction can be found in the immensely popular works of Horatio Alger and the action-oriented dime novels popular at the turn of the twentieth century, noting that "a single strain runs consistently through all three literary types—the concept of the self-made man" (p. 47). Although these youth-oriented novels taught youngsters lessons about morality and fair play and espoused the benefits of athletic competition, they also implicitly taught readers this dominant ideology.

Although examples can be found throughout the history of sports fiction, one recent example is the character of Billy Chapel in the film *For Love of the Game*. The story takes place over the course of one game, where the aging pitcher throws a no-hitter in his final appearance on the mound. As one sportscaster says in the film, "He's pitching against time, he's pitching against the future, against age, against ending." Through flashbacks, the viewer is witness to the challenges that Chapel has faced on and off the mound in coming to this pivotal moment in his career, particularly to Chapel's rehabilitation after a potentially career-ending injury. In the end, he overcomes these obstacles to finish his long career on a high note.

Such depictions of athletes struggling to overcome great obstacles are most often found in sports biopics, "sports soap operas" (Berman, 1981, p. 3) that depict the lives of famous athletes in rather dramatic fashion. Although sports biopics are grounded in reality, these "fictionalized biographies" (Sayre, 1977, p. 183) often exaggerate the events of the athletes' lives for dramatic license and elevate the subjects of the films to mythical status. Good (1997) argued that sports biopics are a blend of both history and fiction, and he noted how some films make use of numerous cinematic devices to add historical credibility to biopics and mask their fictionalized nature. For example, the author cited the use of newsreel footage to add a documentary-like feel to such films, as well as the casting of real-life sports heroes in early sports biographies such as *The Pride of the Yankees*. Because sports biopics are so closely aligned with fictional narratives, these films and the ideology they reflect merit inclusion as sports fiction.

Good (1997) argued, "No other film genre so celebrates the traditional American belief that any person can achieve success through dint of his own efforts. The belief seems especially pronounced in baseball biopics, whose heroes played what is, after all, 'the national game'" (p. 55). Perhaps the most prolific era of sports biopics was from the early 1940s to the mid 1950s (Dickerson, 1991; Good, 1997). Numerous films of this variety were produced during this period, including baseball biopics *The Pride of the Yankees*, *The Babe Ruth Story*, *The Stratton Story*, *The Jackie Robinson Story*, as well as films about heroes from other sports such as *Jim Thorpe—All American* and *Knute Rockne—All American*. In virtually all of these films, the main character battles some tremendous obstacle(s) on his path to athletic stardom. For

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Lou Gehrig, it was debilitating illness. Monty Stratton returned to the game after losing a limb. And Jackie Robinson and Jim Thorpe battled prejudice and racism to break the color barrier in their respective sports.

Numerous authors have argued that the abundance of such films during this period was in response to America's ideological needs of the post-World War II era. Dickerson (1991) wrote that *Pride of the Yankees* "embodies the moral standards, ethics, and popular values that Hollywood creators and the Roosevelt administration sought to exemplify and reinforce for the American audiences during this period of world strife" (p. 43). Sports biopics experienced a renaissance during the 1980s and 1990s with films such as *The Natural*, *Eight Men Out*, *The Babe*, and *Rudy*. Dickerson called this period a "return to mythbuilding" (p. 119). Much like the postwar era that produced the first round of sports biopics, these films were produced in response to cultural changes in society (Dickerson, 1991; Good, 1997). For example, Dickerson (1991) argued that films like *The Natural*, which closely resembles sports biopics from earlier decades, served to fulfill America's yearning for traditional values following the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s.

Explorations of male sexuality are relatively rare in sports fiction, and overt depictions of homosexuality are rare. Baker (2003) conducted one of the more thorough analyses of the depiction of male sexuality in sports fiction, tracing the changing image of ideal masculinity in sports films. The author asserted that sports films help define ideal masculinity throughout the decades and noted, "Sports films provide an interesting site for [the analysis of masculinity] because they often foreground dominant masculinity, yet they also show how it has been refigured over time" (p. 49). For example, Baker chronicled how some of the earliest sports films helped define new notions regarding ideal male masculinity in the 1920s through the 1950s. The author then traced the changes in depictions of masculinity throughout the history of sports fiction to present day films such as *The Replacements* and *Any Given Sunday*. Regarding these more recent films, Baker wrote that "the presentation of ideal masculinity in such postmodern sports films has had to include variations on dominant masculinity that present greater inclusiveness and new forms of appeal" (p. 53). Indeed, such variations can also be found on the previously discussed television football drama, *Playmakers*, where one of the many subplots on the program focused on a closeted homosexual player struggling to conceal his sexuality from his teammates and coaches, the team owner, and the media. In addition, *The Greg Louganis Story*, a made-for-TV film about the Olympic swimmer, is another example of how new modern notions of masculinity have been reconciled with classic Hollywood ideology.

Women in Sports Fiction

Women, when depicted in sports fiction at all, have traditionally been relegated to a limited number of roles, most of which are secondary to their male counterparts. By and large, this tradition continues today in films such as *Hoosiers*, where women are relegated to the traditional roles of "mother, spectator, cheerleader, booster" (Tudor, 1997, p. 94). Like many other themes present in contemporary sports fiction, Oriard (1982) noted that this tradition springs from juvenile literature that depicted women only as mothers or as one-dimensional, overwhelmingly supportive girlfriends. Good (1997) echoed the assertion that women occupy a limited number of roles in sports films, noting that in baseball films women serve either as supportive nurturers or as temptresses. As evidence the author cited examples

from the earliest baseball films of the Depression era, through biographical films like *The Pride of the Yankees* and *The Stratton Story* in the 1940s, to more contemporary baseball films such as *The Natural*, *Bull Durham*, and *Field of Dreams*.

Despite changes in culture and society, these stereotypes continue to permeate contemporary sports fiction. However, as one author noted, "When women characters occupy a more central position in the narrative, increasingly complex articulations of gender occur" (Tudor, 1997, p. 102). Nowhere is this more evident than in *Bull Durham*, where Annie Savoy takes the dominant role in her relationship with rookie pitcher Ebby Calvin "Nuke" LaLoosh, teaching her younger partner about the ways of baseball, life, and love. Likewise, *The Natural* also contains a somewhat unusual portrayal of a woman with the depiction of a single mother living alone in the big city. Nonetheless, "beneath the feminist trappings . . . they fill essentially the same role as the women in the earlier films. They exist to help men" (Good, 1997, p. 153).

Depictions of women as athletes are rare, and, even then, critics argue that women are still ultimately portrayed as subservient to men (Sayre, 1977). *Pat and Mike* was perhaps one of the earliest feature films to revolve around a female athlete, and, although the film does depict a female as a successful athlete, Baker (2003) noted that such success in athletic competition is only possible for a woman "provided she has the guidance of a good man" (p. 79). Baker employed the somewhat contradictory phrase "female masculinity" to describe the nature of women athletes in sports films. The author argued that although women are portrayed as adopting masculine traits on the field, they are forced to retain their feminine qualities off the field. "Women can compete in athletics, but only to the degree that it doesn't impede, and better yet supports, conservative ideas of femininity and thus the greater importance of male control" (p. 80).

The role of women in sports fiction has not changed significantly over the years, despite advances in women's rights and governmental actions, such as Title IX (Pearson, 2000; Tudor, 1997). One of the few, if not the only, empirical examinations of the role of women in sports films utilized content analysis to assess the role of women in sports films from 1930 to 1998. Although the results showed that in terms of sheer numbers women were depicted as heroes in sports films more after the implementation of Title IX, "many of the films, like their predecessors, trivialized women's athletic prowess as a result of their comedic nature and emphasis on heterosexual attractiveness" (Pearson, 2000, p. A-102).

Nonetheless, some critics have cited films like *The Bad News Bears* as evidence for the changing role of women in society (Dickerson, 1991). Although women still occupy a limited number of roles in that film, the characters they play represent a distinct break from previous sports films. The character who most notably embodies this difference is Amanda, the young girl recruited as pitcher for the team. Her character is a "reflection of the contemporary liberated female, able to compete with her male counterparts on any level" (p. 112). Likewise, some cite films such as *A League of Their Own* as further proof for the gains made by women on the field of competition. However, Good (1997) argued that *A League of Their Own* only superficially challenges traditional depictions of women in sports fiction. Although women take center stage as the athletes in that film, their strength and independence is undermined as they ultimately serve only to support their manager and inspire him to "stop drinking and start caring" (p. 159). Furthermore, the team's star player ultimately abandons her sports career to return home and support her husband (Baker, 2003). A similar theme can be found in the more recent film *Bend It*

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Like Beckham, which focuses on the success of a woman in coaching a men's team.

In actuality, the film *Like Beckham* was affected sports fiction. As *Slap Shot*, *Major League*, and *Major League II* depict them as greedy capitalists, for example, the team owner (Good, 1997, p. 153) is motivated by personal gain. *Like Beckham* as a meddling mother figure of the team. Furthermore, that characterization of women as successful athletes in *Hoosiers* and *The*

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Like Beckham, where two of the star players fall for their coach. However, because of his success in coaching the women's team, he is later called upon to "advance" to coaching a men's team. Interestingly, both *A League of Their Own* and *Bend It Like Beckham* were directed by women.

In actuality, the women's rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s may have affected sports films in a negative way. Numerous films from recent decades such as *Slap Shot*, *Major League*, and *Any Given Sunday* have vilified females by depicting them as greedy owners who are at odds with the male protagonists of the films. For example, the team owner in *Major League* is portrayed as a "wicked stepmother" (Good, 1997, p. 118) who sets out to doom the team so that she can relocate it for personal gain. Likewise, the female team owner in *Any Given Sunday* is portrayed as a meddling nuisance, threatening to undermine the coach's authority as leader of the team. Furthermore, some argue that a backlash against the social change that characterized the 1960s and 1970s fueled a return to the more traditional role of women as supporters and nurturers in the sports films of the 1980s, such as *Hoosiers* and *The Natural* (Dickerson, 1991; Tudor, 1997).

Race and Minorities

Much like women, minorities have frequently been mistreated in fictional narratives about sports. Most critics who have written on the depiction of ethnic minorities in sports films have largely observed that many films serve to propagate negative stereotypes. For example, in his examination of minorities in baseball films, Good noted that such films "often mistreat the player by giving him certain childish or uncivilized traits" (1997, p. 140). The author offered *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars & Motor Kings* as evidence to support this thesis, arguing that the film reinforced negative stereotypes by depicting the characters as clownish rather than emphasizing their skill and athletic prowess. The author also cited more recent films such as *Major League*, where a Cuban-born Black player "shaves his head clean with a hunting knife and communicates mostly by grunting and glaring" (p. 151) as further evidence that Hollywood continues to portray ethnic minorities in a negative light. "Whatever noble ideals the films mean to express, what emerges is the dominant culture's contempt for minority cultures" (p. 152).

Baker (2003) noted that most early depictions of Black athletes in films relegated them to supporting roles or depicted them as challenges for White athletes to face and overcome. Although some would argue that the increase in films where Blacks play a more central role represents a positive step in the depiction of minorities on the big screen, most critics argue that even in films where the central protagonist is Black the narrative operates to reinforce White superiority. For example, *The Joe Louis Story* was narrated by a White male voice (Baker, 2003). In addition, Good's (1997) critical analysis of *The Jackie Robinson Story* emphasized the paternal, authoritative role of team owner Branch Rickey in guiding Robinson through the treacherous waters of the integration of organized athletics. In that relationship, "Rickey just naturally assumes the role of master, Robinson that of servant" (p. 143). Baker's (2003) thoughtful analysis of Black athletes in mainstream Hollywood cinema pondered the meaning behind more recent basketball films such as *White Men Can't Jump*, *The Air up There*, and *Above the Rim*. The author argued that all three films emphasize the importance of interracial relationships and represent a "raceless utopia wished for by a white audience" (p. 35). Numerous other examples, give additional credence to this argument such as *Cool Runnings*, *The*

Legend of Bagger Vance, or the *Rocky* films. These films portray more positive relationships between Black and White characters and could be viewed as a positive step in the depiction of minorities in sports fiction. However, Baker (2003) concluded his analysis by stating that these films "avoid careful engagement with the moral and social complexities that confront working-class African-American men" (p. 40).

Youth and Aging

Other critics have noted that one theme that permeates sports films is the coming of age or transition from one stage of life to another of one or more of the characters in the films. Sports fiction may be particularly adept at exploring this tension because "the polarity of youth and age is sharply focused in the sports world" (Oriard, 1982, p. 126). Oriard also argued that this recurrent theme is the product of a culture fascinated with youth, and the author cited the larger-than-life figure of "Babe" Ruth as evidence (p. 128). An additional reason that sports fiction may serve as an ideal vehicle for exploring the transition from one stage of life to another is the natural conflict between work and play embodied in professional sports, where grown men make their living playing children's games (Tudor, 1997).

Although numerous scholars have discussed this recurrent theme within sports films, Good (1997) provided the most thorough analysis, in which he argued that the transition from childhood into adulthood is best embodied in films that focus on the relationship between pitchers and catchers. Good began the discussion by noting the virtually universal phenomenon of adolescent initiation into adult society. These rites of passage require "the intervention of the older men, who remove the boys from their previous environment and prepare them for the full range of adult experiences and duties" (p. 94). Because contemporary culture has abandoned many of the rituals that are a part of this transition into adulthood, American males are "left mostly to their own devices to learn manly behavior" (p. 95). Therefore, to find examples of what it means to be a man, many adolescents look to athletes and sports stars as role models. Good claimed that sports represent the closest thing to an initiation ritual in contemporary society, and "probably nowhere is this more obvious than in the relationship between pitchers and catchers" (p. 95).

Good (1997) developed the analogy between initiation ritual and athletic competition by describing the typical roles taken by pitchers and catchers in sports narratives. He noted that the catcher is usually an older, more experienced athlete, nearing the end of his athletic career. "But as old as he is, he won't psychologically be a grown-up until he relinquishes the merry masculine priorities of drinking beer, chasing women, and playing ball" (p. 97). The catcher serves as a mentor for his younger counterpart, the pitcher. The pitcher in sports films is often wild and inexperienced, both on and off the diamond. As evidence, Good cited the nickname "Wild Thing" for the character of Rick Vaughn in *Major League*. A more colorful description of a pitcher's wild, uncontrolled nature was offered in *Bull Durham*, where Millie describes rookie pitcher Ebby Calvin "Nuke" LaLoosh: "Well, he fucks like he pitches—sorta all over the place."

In this onscreen relationship between pitchers and catchers, the catcher's job is to teach his young teammate about the game of baseball, mirroring the initiation of adolescents into adulthood. Good (1997) argued that pitchers assert their manliness through their physical abilities on the field, whereas catchers are wiser and more developed psychologically. However, neither character is able to advance

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to the next stage of human development until they are tested in the "big game." Once the pitcher prevails over his opponent in this game, he is given full status as an accepted, even celebrated member of the team. Likewise, the catcher is able to give up the game and move to a more adult role, for example as husband, parent, or even coach. Oriard (1982) echoed this analogy, noting that this passing of authority from veteran to rookie serves to "re-enact ancient ritual deaths" (p. 126).

Although Good argued that this transition from one stage of life to another is most evident in the pitcher/catcher relationship, it can also be found in other fictitious relationships. In his analysis of the youth versus aging theme, Oriard (1982) stated that the roots of this familiar narrative can be found in Jack London's "A Piece of Steak," a short story about a once-successful aging boxer pitted against a younger foe. Ultimately, the elder fighter loses and the younger boxer emerges victorious, thus completing the transition for the characters. The author later cited *The Hundred-Yard War*, by Gary Cartwright, as a variation on this theme. That novel explores the trials that a rookie must endure to gain acceptance from his teammates. Tudor (1997) argued in his analysis of the cinematic adaptation of *The Natural* that Roy Hobbs is "lost in a perpetual adolescence" (p. 99), despite his age. In the story, Hobbs is guided into adulthood by the team's manager, aptly named "Pop." The transition into adulthood occurs at the climax of the film in the big game, where "it is time for Roy to become the father and leave his infancy and childhood behind" (p. 101). Hobbs succeeds in doing so, hitting the game-winning home run and rounding the bases in slow-motion. Fittingly, the film concluded by offering evidence demonstrating Hobbs' progression into adulthood—the final scene depicts him back home in his rural origins, throwing the baseball with his son.

The recent film *For Love of the Game* serves as another example of this transition into adulthood depicted in sports fiction. In addition to struggling against age and injury to win his final game, veteran pitcher Billy Chapel is struggling with the transition into the role of husband and father. Chapel is romantically involved with a single mother, and the film chronicles how the character slowly adapts to the role of husband and father until he suffers the injury to his pitching hand. The injury is not only a setback to his athletic career, but it also represents a setback on his journey into adulthood. Only after Chapel wins his final game is he able to leave baseball behind and devote himself to marriage and family.

Religion

Virtually every critic who has examined sports fiction has noted that works within this genre are heavily laden with religious references and symbolism. No doubt, this is the byproduct of the intricate relationship between sports and religion. Numerous authors have explored the parallels between modern religion and sports—stadia as places of worship, the highly ritualistic nature of both sports spectatorship and religious observances, and how athletes are often elevated to god-like status (e.g., Higgs, 1995; Magdalinski & Chandler, 2002; Price, 2000). These parallels are not limited solely to contemporary Judeo-Christian religious practices. Oriard (1982) noted that in college football, many bowl games "honor various crops (roses, cotton, oranges, sugar, peaches, tangerines)" (p. 227), harkening back to more ancient religious rituals and ceremonies. It is only fitting that in a society where sport and religion share so much common ground that fictional works about sports reflect this curious relationship.

Although some critics argue that this is a more recent phenomenon (e.g., Dickerson, 1991), sports fiction has long endowed athletes with supernatural (or Christ-like) powers. For example, in *The Babe Ruth Story*, "Ruth actually heals the sick on several occasions by his words and deeds" (Tudor, 1997, p. 52). Good (1997) also cited the original *Angels in the Outfield* as another early sports film that employed a supernatural theme. Likewise, novels about baseball, as well as their cinematic adaptations produced during the renaissance of the genre in the late 1980s, such as *The Natural* and *Field of Dreams*, were ripe with symbolism or statements about religion.

In writing about the character of Roy Hobbs in the novel and film versions of *The Natural*, both Tudor (1997) and Oriard (1982) drew a number of parallels between Hobbs and tales from Greek and Norse mythologies. Similarly, Good (1997) argued that the film "weaves together Biblical allusions, Greek myths, Arthurian legends and baseball folklore" (p. 27). For example, Good noted the supernatural aura that surrounds Hobbs' homemade bat "Wonderboy," forged from a tree struck by lightning. Furthermore, the author argued that the wound in Hobbs' side was Christ-like. Bergesen (2000) likewise noted the abundance of religious symbolism present in the film adaptation of *Field of Dreams*. The author draws parallels between the baseball diamond that the protagonist builds in the middle of an Iowa cornfield to the Garden of Eden. Likewise, Bergesen also compared Ray Kinsella's mandate to build the baseball diamond to Noah's instruction to build an arc. The analogy fits remarkably well, as both individuals become the object of ridicule for undertaking such seemingly bizarre tasks.

The analogy made in *Bull Durham* is qualitatively different from those made in the prior two films. Unlike other sports films where athletes are given religious qualities or elements are reminiscent of Biblical events, *Bull Durham* advances the notion of sport as religion. This is most clearly articulated in a monologue by Annie Savoy: "I believe in the Church of Baseball. I've tried all the major religions, and most of the minor ones. I've worshipped Buddha, Allah, Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, trees, mushrooms, and Isadora Duncan. I know things. For instance, there are 108 beads in a Catholic rosary and there are 108 stitches in a baseball. When I heard that, I gave Jesus a chance."

Additional examples of religious or supernatural elements in sports fiction are seemingly endless. Dickerson (1991) noted that the character of Pedro Cerrano in *Major League* worships a voodoo god who he believes controls his fate on the baseball diamond. The author stressed the contrast played out in the film between that character and a teammate who is a born-again Christian. Others have noted that sports films "have invested the ballpark with a supernatural aura" (Good, 1997, p. 46). *For Love of the Game* offers another example of religious references in sports films, in which the main character is (not-so) coincidentally named Billy Chapel. One play-by-play announcer in the film makes the reference more explicit when he says, "The cathedral that is Yankee Stadium belongs to a Chapel." Religious imagery can also be found in films depicting other sports, such as *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. In *Field of Dreams*, a baseball diamond is heaven; however, in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, a golf course is where the film's narrator will spend his afterlife. In addition, the ghost of a dead basketball player helps his former teammates win in the basketball comedy *The Sixth Man*.

Analysis of the implicit meaning underlying sports fiction could continue ad infinitum. Various authors have written extensively on the depiction of a wide range of topics in sports fiction, including the nature of class in narratives about boxing

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(e.g., Baker, 2003; Berman, 1981; Oriard, 1982), changes in culture and society (e.g., Dickerson, 1991), and so forth. However, the preceding summary chronicles some of the dominant themes in sports fiction that have received attention and provides a sufficient encapsulation of the vast critical literature examining depictions of sports in narrative fiction.

THE ENJOYMENT OF SPORTS FICTION: EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVES

Critical analyses of sports fiction do little to explain the popularity of such films or why audiences enjoy them. Relatively few critics pause to consider such questions, although occasionally authors have tendered somewhat tentative explanations. Good (1997) considered the question of why viewers enjoy films about baseball but did little to answer the question. The author noted only that it is not solely because viewers are fans of the game, for the simple reason that films about baseball and baseball games are qualitatively different entities. Although not explicitly offered as a theory of enjoyment, Dickerson (1991) argued that the values depicted in fictional narratives about baseball resonate with audiences. Berman (1981) more thoroughly explicated this argument, stating that sport "speaks very directly to the experience of contemporary America" (p. 12), adding, "We simply do not identify with scientists or painters in the way we identify with athletes" (p. 13). Sayre (1977) also noted the importance of identification and character development in the enjoyment of sports fiction: "If our emotions are to be involved in winning or losing, we need to give a hoot about the individual who's sweating glycerin and gnawing his lip and panting like the athlete he isn't" (pp. 183-184).

Unfortunately, none of these critical explanations for the appeal of sports films possess the rigor necessary to withstand a more thorough empirical or theoretical examination. However, social scientists operating primarily under the general domain of media psychology have generated a considerable body of research that seeks to answer questions regarding how and why viewers enjoy a wide variety of media entertainment. These extant theories exploring other genres of entertainment may be useful in understanding why viewers passionately root for characters like Rocky Balboa or Roy Hobbs.

Parallels Between Sport and Fictional Entertainment

As long as people have gathered together to be entertained, either by athletes doing battle on the field of competition or by actors performing on a stage, philosophers, psychologists, and scholars have tried to understand the appeal of entertainment (Zillmann, 2000). Only relatively recently has the nature of the entertainment phenomenon become the subject of serious empirical study. A review of recent literature within the burgeoning domain of media psychology finds numerous theories to explain the appeal of both fictional entertainment such as dramas and comedies (e.g., Vorderer & Knobloch, 2000; Zillmann, 2000) and the appeal of sports spectatorship (e.g., Bryant & Raney, 2000; Bryant, Zillmann, & Raney, 1998; Giles, 2003). Interestingly, most attempts to explain the appeal of these seemingly distinct areas of media entertainment rely on the same theories. A brief review of these theories finds a tremendous amount of conceptual common ground for the enjoyment of

both sports spectatorship and fictional entertainment, both of which are embodied within sports fiction.

Catharsis

Perhaps one of the oldest and most popular theories explaining why individuals seek out various forms of entertainment is the catharsis doctrine. It has been examined as an explanation for the appeal of violent sports (e.g., Goldstein, 1998; Bryant & Raney, 2000; Bryant, et al., 1998; Guttman, 1998), as well as for dramas (e.g., Vorderer & Knobloch, 2000). Put simply, the catharsis argument rests on the notion that individuals are able to release pent-up frustrations, hostilities, and desires vicariously through viewing others. The catharsis doctrine was first presented in Aristotle's *Poetics* (350 B.C./1951) as a way of explaining the appeal of tragedy, whereby "exposure to it may in fact evoke undesirable experiences. But these experiences, nevertheless, help to diminish such negative emotions in the real life of the observers" (Vorderer & Knobloch, 2000, p. 66).

Obviously, no large leap in logic is required to extend this argument to the enjoyment of sports fiction. According to the catharsis doctrine, viewers watching violent sports films such as *Gladiator* or *Rocky* should hypothetically purge any pent-up bloodlust, and thus, exposure to fictional sports violence should result in decreased hostility on the part of the viewer. However, precious little empirical evidence exists to support this theory. Zillmann (1991, 1998) argued that catharsis is fraught with numerous conceptual difficulties, and, in fact, an abundance of evidence exists to contradict the doctrine (e.g., Baron & Richardson, 1994; Geen & Quanty, 1977). Moreover, the overwhelming majority of empirical research has demonstrated that exposure to violent entertainment is positively correlated with increased aggression, contrary to the prediction one would expect based on the catharsis doctrine (Paik & Comstock, 1994). Despite this contradictory evidence, the catharsis argument continues to have a wide following. However, its utility to explain the continued appeal of sports fiction has yet to be explored.

Disposition Theory

Scholars have long sought to understand how and why entertainment content can so effectively elicit impassioned responses from viewers. Why do we experience such great euphoria when Roy Hobbs hits the game-winning home run in his final at bat in *The Natural*, or why do we wish to see the ragamuffin team of little leaguers known as *The Bad News Bears* win, despite a demonstrated lack of athletic prowess? Those who support the catharsis doctrine would argue that viewers are vicariously participating in this fictitious event, and as a result they share in the characters' jubilation (or sadness) at the climax of the film. However, an alternative and more parsimonious explanation to catharsis is offered by disposition theory (Zillmann, 1994, 1996). According to disposition theory, viewers form opinions about characters depicted in fictional narratives as they process media messages. The viewer hopes for positive outcomes for characters with whom a favorable disposition has been formed (i.e., the good guy), and negative outcomes for those with whom an unfavorable disposition has been formed (i.e., the bad guy). Thus, as the story unfolds the viewer experiences either positive or negative emotions, depending on the fate of the characters and the outcome of the narrative. This theory has been employed to explain the appeal of both comedies (e.g., Zillmann, 2000) and dramas

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(e.g., Vorderer & Knobloch, 2000). Likewise, scholars have also employed disposition theory to explain why sports fans experience the highest euphoria when their team wins as well as the depths of despair when their team loses (e.g., Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989).

The previously discussed comments regarding the need for caring about characters suggests the potential for the application of disposition theory in the investigation of the appeal of sports fiction. By utilizing an example from the world of sports fiction, Bryant and Zillmann (1983) briefly alluded to this potential. They argued that presumably, sports fans would not wish to see a liked protagonist injured in athletic competition. "It is likely that only under unusual conditions in which the spectators fear or hate the victim or potential victim—such as depicted in the 'red-neck' stock car race spectators' hatred for the 'nigger' Wendell Scott, portrayed by Richard Pryor in the movie *Greased Lightning*—will people really enjoy seeing the destruction of the sports contestant" (p. 200). Although this argument has not been formally tested, it suggests numerous opportunities for the exploration of the role of affective disposition in the enjoyment of sports fiction.

Because audiences are witness to the events that unfold throughout the narrative structure of sports fiction, they are able to form dispositions with the characters depicted in the story. To again call upon the recent film *For Love of the Game*, viewers follow the career of pitcher Billy Chapel leading up to his final appearance on the mound. They are witness to the many events that have transpired in his life and career, and because of this, they root all the more strongly for him and experience great euphoria as he finishes his career with a perfect game. Although this argument displays a tremendous amount of face validity, it remains for scholars to thoroughly explore the power of affective disposition in the enjoyment of sports fiction.

Suspense and Arousal

One of the most nebulous concepts in the understanding of media entertainment is that of suspense. Numerous scholars representing a variety of research traditions and methodologies have attempted to understand and conceptualize suspense and its role in the enjoyment of media (e.g., Vorderer, Wulff, & Friedrichsen, 1996). Despite the lack of unity in how suspense is conceptualized, virtually all those who have examined the phenomenon agree that suspense plays a central role in the enjoyment of media content.

Carroll (1996) and Zillmann (1996) offered two similar but competing conceptualizations of suspense. Carroll (1996) stressed the role of uncertainty in the generation of suspense. The author argued that the viewer forms ideas about a preferred outcome to a fictional narrative, and suspense is experienced as the viewer hopes for that desired outcome and fears an undesirable outcome. However, Zillmann (1996) took a slightly contrary viewpoint, stressing that suspense is felt by viewers certain of an undesirable outcome. Thus, the greater the perceived certainty of this undesirable outcome, the greater the degree of suspense felt by the viewer. Scholars who have explored the enjoyment of sports spectatorship have also stressed the role of suspense in viewing athletic competition, as spectators anxiously hope to see their favorite team emerge victorious in any given game (e.g., Bryant, et al., 1998; Bryant & Raney, 2000).

Without question, suspense plays a critical role in the enjoyment of sports fiction. However, the concept remains somewhat problematic when applied to sports

fiction. As previously stated, the genre relies heavily on a somewhat limited number of narrative conventions, and, perhaps more than any other genre, sports films are notorious for recycling the same stories over and over again in different guises (Zucker & Babich, 1987). What then is the role of suspense in the enjoyment of these somewhat predictable films? After all, is there any doubt that the underdog basketball squad from Hickory High will beat the odds and win the state championship in *Hoosiers*? Precious few examples, such as the original *Rocky* and *The Bad News Bears*, exist to contradict these cinematic conventions (although it is interesting to note that the sequels to both these movies do return to the convention of the sports film genre where the protagonist does win in the end). To date, few scholars have tackled the problem of suspense when the viewer is relatively certain about the outcome of an event depicted on screen (e.g., Brewer, 1996). Thus, the only conclusion that can be offered at present is that more research is needed to explicate the role of suspense in the enjoyment of sports fiction.

The role of arousal in enhancing the level of suspense experienced during the consumption of sports fiction cannot be understated. Guttman (1998) argued that one of the central appeals of violent sports is its potential for arousing viewers and that witnessing athletic competition is an effective way for spectators to alleviate boredom. Sports films in particular may be uniquely effective in altering a viewer's mood state through the combination of elements from both drama and sports, as well as because of the higher degree of graphicness possible with audiovisual media (e.g., Zillmann, 1991). As previously stated, the stories portrayed in sports films are not altogether different from those of traditional dramas or comedies. Thus, the mechanisms for generating suspense present in these genres of entertainment are likewise present in sports fiction. However, perhaps the sole distinguishing characteristic of these films is their reliance on athletic competition to advance and often provide a climax to the narrative. Thus, the arousal generated by the inclusion of athletic competition serves to increase the suspense experienced by the viewer as the story reaches its climax. After all, each film in the *Rocky* series culminates with a final showdown between our hero and his latest nemesis. Blow by blow, the viewer eagerly watches the films' main characters slug it out until the protagonist wins the fight and the credits roll. Unfortunately, no empirical evidence exists to test the generation of arousal or suspense during the consumption of sports fiction. This unique combination of narrative conventions and athletic competition embodied in sports films provides a wealth of opportunities for social scientists seeking to develop theories of enjoyment for sports fiction.

Sports-Specific Theories

In addition to the previously discussed theoretical explanations for the appeal of both fiction and sports spectatorship, a number of unique theoretical explanations have been offered to further explain why individuals find sports viewing so enjoyable. Guttman (1998) suggested that spectators' fascination with some types of athletic competition satisfies a sadomasochistic desire within the viewer. For example, fans of NASCAR and other forms of auto racing will freely admit to tuning in to watch every week in the hopes of witnessing a wreck occur. Likewise, crowds annually pack the streets of Pamplona, Spain, to witness the running of the bulls, where numerous participants yearly receive major and sometimes life-threatening injuries. Arguments regarding the sadomasochistic appeal of sports date back as far as Roman times, where thousands of spectators gathered to witness sporting

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events that routinely ended in severe injury and death (Zillmann, 2000). Sports films have the ability to graphically depict all manner of harm and injury through the use of close-ups and other formal features of the medium (e.g., Potter & Smith, 2000). As such, they may be adept at satisfying some masochistic urges within viewers. Although this argument may hold some validity, formal explorations for why viewers enjoy witnessing the specter of death and serious injury are still vastly underdeveloped. Moreover, despite visual media's capacity for graphically depicting injury and harm, viewers remain aware on some level that the events they are witnesses are fictitious, further complicating the application of this theory to sports fiction.

Bryant and Raney (2000) suggested that another factor that enhances viewer enjoyment of sports is the degree to which the play being viewed is perceived as particularly novel, risky, or effective. The authors cited empirical evidence that supports the claim that spectators appreciate these factors when viewing televised sports (Zillmann, et al., 1989). In his critical analysis of portrayals of race in sports films, Baker (2003) noted the improvisational style of play frequently identified with African-American characters. This characteristic is embodied in films like *White Men Can't Jump*, which starkly contrasts the improvisational style of African-American players with a more textbook approach taken by White characters in the film. Numerous other critics have noted the parallel between basketball and creative play (e.g., Berman, 1981; Oriard, 1982). The degree to which audiences are able to perceive and appreciate novel play in sports fiction is analogous to the degree to which similar play enhances enjoyment in real-life athletic competition. As such, this represents another area ripe for exploration utilizing empirical research methods.

One final theory posited to explain the enjoyment of sports spectatorship is that "humans are constantly motivated to enhance their own power and self-esteem by asserting dominance over others" (Bryant, et al., 1998, p. 259). This need is most clearly fulfilled through actual head-to-head athletic competition. However, through alignment or identification with a team or athletic hero, a sports spectator is also able to fulfill this need whenever his or her favorite team or athlete wins a competition. Although rooted in the examination of the enjoyment of sports spectatorship, the argument could also be invoked to understand the appeal (for viewers in the United States at least) of such films as *Miracle* or *Rocky IV*, both films where the American protagonists emerge victorious over foes from the Soviet Union. Again, empirical research testing such a theory is to date nonexistent.

CONCLUSION

This review has explored the nature of sports films from a number of rival perspectives. Critical/cultural scholars who have explored the depths of latent meaning behind sports fiction assert that these narratives are on the whole powerful statements about gender and sexuality, the role of men and women in society, race, changes in culture and society, and countless other topics. On the other hand, social scientists have investigated the appeal of entertainment by exploring the psychological processes that viewers engage in while consuming such fare. What, if any, common ground can be found among all these different approaches to understand and explain the continued popularity of this genre of entertainment? An answer to this vexing question is problematic. On a broad conceptual level, both approaches to sports fiction examine how the viewer makes meaning of any given

text. Scholars writing from a critical perspective examine the meaning generated by sports fictions with the implied assumption that viewers will recognize this meaning on some level of consciousness. Thus, the crux of their work is the analysis of the messages that viewers will absorb in the process. Whereas critical scholars focus largely on the meaning contained within the various films and television programs that constitute the genre of sports fiction, scholars within the domain of media psychology study the reception processes in which viewers engage in the consumption of these media messages. Thus, to borrow a phrase from Messenger (1990), scholars within both areas of inquiry are exploring the area "between the author's text and the reader's experience" (p. 424). As a brief summary of these two research traditions, it is hoped that this chapter will encourage scholars representing both methodological research traditions to seek common ground between their differing approaches and validate the knowledge generated by those within rival research traditions.

Regardless of what connections will be made between these distinct areas of research, what is clear is that audiences will continue to watch fictionalized depictions of athletic competition on screens both big and small, and authors will continue to mine the depths of contemporary culture through the metaphor of sports. Again, this is not because sports fiction represents some wholly unique genre of entertainment. Instead, these creative works operate like virtually all other genres by making us laugh, cry, and sit on the edge of our seats hoping to see our heroes beat the buzzer and sink the winning basket, hit the home run, or make the winning touchdown and bring a happy ending to these fictional stories.

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