

Umphlett, Wiley Lee. *The Sporting Myth and the American Experience: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. Cranbury, N.J.: Bucknell University Press, 1975. Pp. 205. References, selected bibliography, index. \$10.00.

Wiley Lee Umphlett is the Director of Continuing Education at the University of West Florida and this volume is a major revision of his Ph.D. dissertation at Florida State University. Dr. Umphlett also has an article in the *Laurel Review* dealing with John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, which was a forerunner of this volume and the dissertation.

The thesis of *The Sporting Myth and the American Experience* is that American writers use sport heroes to examine the American experience because they mirror American cultural traits including mobility. These heroes are placed in the pattern of "encounter" in which the hero is "confronted with a decision between a self-effacing code or private interests." (p. 28). Over time the nature of the encounter in sporting literature has changed. The flight of the romantic character was to nature, e.g.

Cooper's Natty Bumppo. The neo-romantic character, e.g. Updike's Rabbit Angstrom, is frustrated in his flight because he is alienated from nature and confronts endless flight or running. In both cases the flight is away from the strictures of civilization in search of a condition in which the hero can find freedom for self-expression in individual achievement. In addition to these two types of encounter, Umphlett describes the encounter with society in which the hero operating in modern organized sport experiences the frustration of the innocent who seeks self-expression in a society or system which he does not understand.

In this examination of the three kinds of encounter a wide range of sporting literature is drawn on featuring a variety of authors and sports (over forty). Despite the range this is not a laundry list nor an attempt to produce a comprehensive catalogue of sporting literature. The major themes of encounter remain the central focus of the book, while the writers and literature are treated within the American literary tradition, where the "essential encounter" is central. In the sporting literature the game or the contest serves as a symbol of encounter.

In presenting the athlete as innocent with the attendant desire to remain forever young, sporting literature explores the search for immortality and the fear of death. Umphlett notes that the failure of love is another common theme. This finds expression in the sport hero's inability to comprehend the world of women, which he finds alien and confining. This trait is nearly universal within the sporting literature from Natty Bumppo to such contemporaries as Roy Hobbs in Malamud's *The Natural*. Umphlett points out that this illustrates Leslie Fielder's observation that the hero in American fiction fears sexual encounter with women because it can result in societal ties and responsibilities.

One example of Umphlett's approach can be seen in his treatment of Ring Lardner's *You Know Me Al*, the biting characterization of Jack Keefe whose letters to his friend Al reveal Jack as a "busher" who is too simple to comprehend his situation and is therefore frustrated in his encounter with society. Umphlett notes that in creating Jack Keefe, Lardner was ridiculing one of the sacred cows of American folkworship, the baseball player, previously an example of the best of American character. By demythologizing the Frank Merriwell type Lardner anticipated the loss of innocence that characterized pre-World War I culture.

One of Jack's major problems comes from his rural background which makes it difficult for him to function in urban culture. His ineptness in coping with new surroundings is Jack Keefe's encounter. He fails in three areas of expression: money matters, inner security, and relation-

ships with women. Jack longs for the ideal world in which keeping the rules had guaranteed success, the code of the sporting hero. Jack cannot see an ordered world because he persists in using his own rules developed in the rural world. He is an innocent in an alien world who will never be able to develop a self-definition in this encounter. In a broader context Lardner is commenting on the general problem of adjustment from the agrarian to the urban society, a problem not only for Jack Keefe but for American culture.

In this impressive work Umphlett provides a solid analysis of sporting literature at a level of professional literary criticism and a stimulating presentation of sport as a mirror of culture. There are minor problems. The concept of the sporting myth needs to be clearly defined. The precise meaning of "encounter" and the difference between encounter with society and the neo-romantic encounter needs clarification. These minor faults do not detract from the overall high quality of Umphlett's demonstration that sport in literature deals with fundamental human experiences and reflects major trends in American culture. *The Sporting Myth and the American Experience* also serves as an excellent guide to the best American sporting literature and provides a springboard for thought and speculation on the role of sport in American life as well as the nature of American culture.

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