

Messenger, Christian K. *Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction: Hawthorne to Faulkner*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981. Pp. xv, 369. Index, notes. \$24.00.

American authors as diverse as Jack London, Irwin Shaw, Damon Runyon, Donald Barthelme, John R. Tunis, Larry McMurtry, Marianne Moore, Robert Coover, James Dickey, John Updike, Ernest L. Thayer, and William Carlos Williams have used sport as the focus of short stories, poems and novels. Yet if the study of sport history is a relatively recent development, even younger is the formal examination of the relationships between literature and sport. Fortunately, the book length studies produced in this decade have been intelligent and timely. Professor Messenger's work, together with Robert J. Higgs's *Laurel & Thorn* (1981) and Michael Oriard's *Dreaming of Heroes* (1982),

does precisely what a critical book is supposed to do. It offers a series of thoughtful observations, many of which a reader will agree with and a few that will cause dissent.

The book's introduction is a short, perhaps too short, discussion of play, game and sport. Most of the names are there, Huizinga, Caillois, Benveniste, Ehrmann, Sutton-Smith and so on, but one might wish for a bit more time with the complexities of play, game and sport. It is an adequate starting point, though. Messenger has staked out a large territory and it is necessary that he move ahead to explore and to chart. First comes a section on Classic American Literature which includes sections on Hawthorne, Washington Irving, Fenimore Cooper and Thoreau. Wisely, Professor Messenger rushes by the mediocrity of *The Blithedale Romance* and the dreary *Marble Faun* to *The Scarlet Letter's* Hester and Pearl, two of American literature's more interesting players. Messenger points out weaknesses in Irving, gives Cooper his overdue due—"For Cooper the real meaning of sport was neither play nor fancy nor even competition but rather ideals represented and attitudes struck and acted upon in daily life. These were serious matters which demanded attention..." (p. 53)—and is brief with Thoreau who never was.

Part Two: The Popular Sports Hero heads the book into more interesting and lively areas. Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, frontier sport, early sports journalism and the Dime novel all are highlighted, but the most important portion is the closing chapter devoted to a writer whose role in the literature of sport has not yet been fully appreciated. Ring Lardner is given twenty pages and he deserves it. He foreshadowed and influenced many writers from the 1950's onward (Bernard Malamud, Mark Harris, *et al.*) even though Lardner wrote little about sport after 1920. Not only did Ernest Hemingway admit to being an admirer and imitator of Lardner, but Lardner's journalism and fiction opened previously untouched aspects of sport. Messenger does have some rough spots here, for "My Roomy," a short story about insanity is never adequately explained and he concludes that Lardner "could not see beyond the collective paradigm of play experience and this doomed him to be a writer of the second rank," (p. 128), a statement that if not wrong is certainly open to argument.

The heart of the work, however, is Part Three: The School Sports Hero and Part Four: The Modern Ritual Sports Hero. We are introduced to pulp fiction, Thomas Hughes, Gilbert Patten, Ralph Henry Barbour. Owen Johnson and Jesse Lynch Williams. Then the big stuff—F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. Messenger's discussion of Fitzgerald's fascination with sport and the athlete is lucid and intelligent. The commentary on Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise* and Tom Buchanan, the brutal and amoral former Yale All-American in *The Great Gatsby*, is on the mark. The author's excellent observation that Fitzgerald suffered some of the same faults Fitzgerald saw in his friend Ring Lardner atones for some of the earlier passages on Lardner.

Although the organization of the rest of the book is a little hard to follow,

Professor Messenger is on target often. He points to Hemingway's misguided sense of sport in *Death in the Afternoon* and opens not only this work to new perspectives, but others in the Hemingway canon as well. One would expect much more time to be spent on *The Sun Also Rises*, with its boxing, bullfighting and fishing and *The Old Man and the Sea*, but it is gratifying that Messenger expends energy and insight on *The Hamlet*, William Faulkner's 1940 novel that is still underrated. The book is comic and serious, attractive and grotesque. The only shortcoming I can find is not really a fault at all. Because Messenger's discussions of Hemingway and especially Faulkner are the strong points of the book, one could only wish to have more of their writings examined. Space limitations make this clearly impractical.

Professor Messenger's *Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction* does exactly what a critical book must do to be worthwhile. It engages the reader, makes intelligent observations, sheds new light on material and is sometimes provocative. If a reader wishes to continue the dialogue with the writer after the final sentence is read, a book has been successful. I would love to talk with Christian Messenger.

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Editor's Note: With this issue, the *JSH* and NASSH have the opportunity to thank Larry Fielding for his dedicated service as book review editor and to announce the appointment of Steve Hardy to take over Larry's duties. During his tenure, Larry made great advancements in establishing this important section of the *Journal* and in developing a workable system for giving suitable notice to works by NASSH members and other sport historians. NASSH members are indeed fortunate to have Larry's continued contributions as he serves as convention manager for the annual meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, May 19-21, 1984. (See Announcements)