

Oriard, Michael V. *Dreaming of Heroes: American Sports Fiction, 1868-1980*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982. Pp. viii, 382. Index, appendix, notes, bibliography.

It would not be inappropriate to begin this review by asking if another book on sport and literature is needed at this time. Earlier work by Umphlett, and the recent books by Higgs and Messinger have more than covered the territory from a number of perspectives. Be that as it may, Michael Oriard, Associate Professor of English at Oregon State University, has allowed the question to be answered in the affirmative. This well-written, clear and concise book brings a fresh viewpoint and a different focus to these materials. The result is one more thoughtful book on sport, on literature and on American culture.

As with any work of this type, definitions and criteria are the key to its necessarily selective character and to its organization. Oriard defines sport for his purposes narrowly, limiting it to "exclusively human games: organized competitions involving tests of physical skill, pitting man against man, without extraordinary means of locomotion." (p. 5) He wants to deal with sports that had their origins in "competition and playfulness" those which are "popularly dismissed as 'mere sport,' that have no purpose beyond the rules of the game." (pp. 5-6) It could be argued that the final qualifier eliminates all sports from consideration. He defines the sports novel as one in which sports dominate, and which "finds its vision of the individual and his condition in the basic meaning of the sport he plays, formerly played, or watches." (p. 6) Because most of these novels deal with baseball, football, basketball and boxing, Oriard concentrates his study on these four sports which he finds particularly useful as expressions of American culture. Oriard believes that sport is a particularly rich source for the study of American culture because it embodies "the best and worst in American culture, because it is at the center of American experience." (p. 21)

Oriard says that the two basic heroic types in America are that of the natural and that of the self-made man. They are found in American folklore and in the juvenile literature of the late nineteenth century. These two heroic types are the myth-bearers in American culture. Each of the four sports which Oriard examines displays these types in its own context. Baseball is pastoral and therefore well-suited to the natural. Football is more attuned to the urban life and an active field for both the cavalier and the corporate man. Boxing and basketball are both essentially urban sports. Boxing presents man the animal, as well as the natural corrupted by the urban environment of the sport. Basketball presents man as artist with the dominant elements of freedom, self-expression and jazz. In addition Oriard sees the sports novel as having passed through several stages: Jack London identified the primary themes; Ring Lardner was the first to use sport as a microcosm of American society; and Bernard Malamud broke out of the limitations imposed by realism.

After an examination of the Athlete-Hero, Oriard identifies and explores four themes which run through sports literature and through American culture:

the Country-City conflict; the tension between Youth and Age; Sexual Roles; and History and Myth. These themes are the basis for the final four chapters of the book. A large number of novels are presented and analyzed, some briefly, some extensively, and all supporting the thematic scheme. It is possible to quarrel with the exclusivity of these themes, but as an organizational construct for the interpretation of the novels and for cultural analysis they are quite valuable.

Although the title of the book suggests over a century of materials, in point of fact the emphasis is decidedly twentieth century and the majority of novels come from the decades of the sixties and seventies. Oriard seems most comfortable with this period and his most interesting and original interpretations and analysis come when dealing with these more recent novels. His insights into Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* and Fred Exley's *A Fun's Notes* are especially rich and powerful. Oriard's elucidation of Coover's questions concerning the meaning and nature of history and religion, as well as the character of myth is clear and concise and demonstrates why Coover is one of the most significant of America's living authors. In dealing with *A Fun's Notes* Oriard clarifies its main theme, the psychic cost of fame and power for those who want it and cannot achieve it in a culture in which both are glorified. Oriard's treatment of boxing, the boxing novel and the boxing hero is thought provoking and one of the stronger points of his analysis. One other valuable feature of the book is the "Appendix: A Checklist of American Sports Fiction," for anyone who wants to pursue the primary materials on their own.

*Dreaming of Heroes* is not without its problems and shortcomings. In what is generally a clear and concise presentation Oriard fails twice to offer critically important definitions. First is the failure to define "hero." The hero is described, archtypes are offered, models are given, and examples are legion. From these an idea of what a hero is, can be deduced, but there is a lack of precision here that although not fatal, is a needless flaw. Most important in this respect is the need for anyone working with twentieth century materials to differentiate the hero from the celebrity. The second definition which is lacking is that of "myth." In his otherwise fascinating concluding chapter "History and Myth in American Sports Fiction," this failure of definition casts a shadow, and especially weakens Oriard's otherwise compelling interpretation of Robert Coover's work.

The other weakness, and perhaps a minor one, is Oriard's view of American colonial history contained in the Introduction. Two related problems are evident here. First, like so many others, Oriard draws too great a distinction between the Seventeenth Century New Englander and Virginian. Second, and more serious, in drawing this distinction Oriard uses W. J. Cash's characterization of early Nineteenth Century Southerners to justify the seventeenth century comparison. In this case the timing is critical as the characteristics Cash describes are in large part the result of eighteenth century religious and intellectual developments.

Finally there will be those who will quarrel with Oriard's descriptions of the nature of any symbolic meaning of the four sports which he examines. Two examples are his uncritical acceptance of Michael Novak's views of sport as religion, and his description of basketball as a game played "as much by instinct and intuition as by pattern and rational control." (p. 117)

But for these minor problems Michael Oriard has made an important and substantial contribution to the growing body of quality work on this important subject. *Dreaming of Heroes* is yet another reminder to historians that the novel is a vital source in the search for meaning in culture.

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