
WILLIAMS, PETER. *The Sports Immortals: Deifying the American Athlete*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1994. Pp. 2,170. Summary outlines, epilogue, appendix, works consulted and cited, index. \$17.95 pb., \$35.95 cb.

In *The Sports Immortals: Deifying the American Athlete*, Peter Williams seeks to address the fundamental question: Why do we deify our athletes? Noting that humans in general have long demonstrated a seemingly incurable proclivity to idealize figures of historical and cultural importance, Williams argues that “this deifying machine” is both “universal and inescapable, as much a part of our innate nature as the need to love, eat, and sleep” (p. 2). In order to examine how this human penchant is worked out in the world of sports, and especially in the world of baseball, Williams draws from a wide array of disciplinary backgrounds, including philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. In so doing, Williams offers us a compelling and fascinating glimpse into this creature we might appropriately call *homo mythicus*.

Many others have sought to fathom our personal and cultural fascination, indeed preoccupation, with athletic heroes and idols. There is no one better than Bernard Malamud, whose widely acclaimed novel, *The Natural*, provides an enchanting account of baseball as archetypal fertility myth to call on here. The protagonist of Malamud’s masterpiece, Roy Hobbs, operates at the vortex of our most profound psychological, moral, and communal needs, and, as such, he serves to crystallize our need for gods. In the end, of course, Roy fails to be the hero we want and need him to be, and he appropriately confronts the now infamous line: “Say it ain’t true, Roy.” But, if Malamud offers us a literary *tour de force* on the subject of sport as myth, Williams offers us the scholarly and theoretical underpinnings that seek to explain why we transform athletes into gods and heroes.

Williams’s book is divided into four parts. In part I, Williams outlines his theoretical position, a position derived from a sophisticated synthesis of theories drawn from seminal thinkers like Jung, Huizinga, Freud, and Becker. Finding more commonalities than differences, Williams argues that the ontology of *homo mythicus* devolves from instinctive archetypes that exist as vestiges of our unconscious, prehuman existence: “the need to locate and realize archetypes is an urge we follow blindly, like salmon or lemmings” (p. 7). Whether it be in the form of Huizinga’s impulse to play, Jung’s primordial images, or Rank’s dominant immortality ideology, myth-making, for Williams, is consequently an innate predisposition, an essential and primary component of our human nature. The remainder of Part I attempts to catalogue the primary archetypal figures and patterns as well as locate the myth within particular cultures. According to Williams, the attributes of the universal monomyth include archetypal figures (gods and heroes), narratives (the plots of the myths), agnostics (heroes and gods in conflict), places (mythical settings), and tools (physical, conceptual, and, usually, magical devices). Localized archetypes exist within the context of place, time, and cultural setting.

In part II, Williams applies his theoretical formulation to the world of sport, arguing that sports are particular manifestations of archetypal myths. They routinely and necessarily reflect the monomyth's components; sports, too, have archetypal narratives (the athlete's mythical journey of self-discovery), formulaic characters (apollonians like Gene Tunney and dionysians like Jack Dempsey), tools (bats and gloves), locations (stadiums and halls of fame), and conflicts (the agnostic element). Sport myth is also set in regional (East vs. West in the Olympics), temporal (John L. Sullivan vs. James J. Corbett), and cultural (Billie Jean King vs. Bobby Riggs) locales.

In part III, Williams applies his theories to the sport of baseball; after all, nowhere is our apparent need to mythologize and make into heroes more urgently expressed than in the American sport of baseball. Williams focuses in particular on the archetypal figures of baseball: Babe Ruth as the ultimate dionysiac and Walter Johnson as the perfect apollonian; Billy Martin as the crafty trickster and Fred Merkle as the fool; Joe Jackson as pariah and Lou Gehrig as martyr.

Part IV addresses the "lesser sports—lesser" because baseball remains our most powerful national sporting myth. Williams explores those games which are essentially American, like football and basketball, or played by particular cultural and economic groups, like yachting, polo, golf, and thoroughbred racing, or universal games, like boxing. Williams concludes with an arresting mythological interpretation of the 1892 John L. Sullivan—James J. Corbett fight, the classic manifestation of sports myth.

Williams's treatise is both impressive and engaging. He organizes the rites of sport and some of its most captivating moments and personalities into the epic inherent in sport as the measure of our humanity, a ritual whereby we come to express the psychological nature of life and, to some extent, its moral predicaments—ritual history as revelatory myth. The book will certainly serve as a valuable reference for students of sport as myth. It is less suitable as a text; it is too specialized and limited in scope. Perhaps its greatest value lies in its attempt to locate our cultural obsession with sports at the heart of our ontology and to demonstrate that the way we elevate our athletes to the level of divinity is no different from the way the Greeks created their own pantheon of gods.

In the end, of course, Williams tends toward a psychobiological perspective, one that construes our myth-making proclivity as "natural," a part of our genetic blueprint, a part of what some linguists and anthropologists would call our "deep structure." For those who are social-constructionist in perspective, that is, for those who view social reality as more mutable, I can already hear them crying: "Say is ain't true, Peter."

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