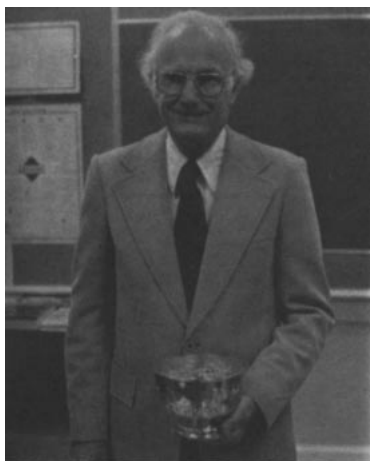


# Sport and Modern American Fiction

by  
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Sports fiction generally is not held in high regard by many critics. Even more choose to ignore that type of writing. However, an examination of three representative novels, Ring Lardner's *You Know Me Al*, Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*, and Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, reveals a level of sophistication and development previously overlooked.

What these three novels indicate is the distance sport as subject matter for serious fiction has come in the twentieth century. By the second decade of this century, Ring Lardner places a fictional character, Jack Keefe, in a real setting, a situation which makes certain demands upon the reader. The reader must know the game of baseball. Even further, it is helpful if a reader has a knowledge of individual players, their traits and their idiosyncracies. There is change from this in Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* (1952). The reader still needs an understanding of the game, but more importantly, Malamud insists upon familiarity with baseball tradition and history. In the novel there are allusions to Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, the Black Sox scandal, Ban Johnson, Branch Rickey, Shoeless Joe Jackson, Eddie Waitkus, and many others. *The Natural* uses these allusions to create a sense of reality in a largely mythical world. Coover's *Universal Baseball Association* . . . is the first sports novel to extend totally beyond the apparent limits of its subject matter. No intimate knowledge of baseball is necessary. Since the Association and all its players are creations of J. Henry Waugh's imagination, Coover has no need to create a sense of exterior history or tradition. Waugh is a man exploring the boundaries of individual existence and self determination. As does all good art, the novel transcends the seeming limits of its subject matter. Sport as subject for fiction should not be looked upon with condescension. Sport as subject matter is no more or no less important than F. Scott Fitzgerald's gauzy Jazz Age or Jane Austen's English drawing room society.



Ellery Clark displays one of his father's Olympic trophies.