

Kids and Sports Books

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More than 35,000 titles are in print and available to young readers. According to Barbara Harrah's bibliography, *Sports Books for Children*, over three thousand five hundred books use sport as subject matter. Even excluding instructional manuals there remains a large body of material from which kids can select their readings. Some of the immediate sources and influences for novels and short stories aimed at this young audience are, of course, Burt L. Standish's Frank Merriwell series and John R. Tunis's novels. Some contemporary sports books, however, seem to look back an even greater distance into literary history. The heritage begins at least as early as the late 14th century when a type of drama called the morality play developed. The morality play was generally the dramatization of a spiritual crisis in the life of a representative human figure in which his spiritual struggle is portrayed as a conflict between personified abstractions representing good and evil. The central figure was often named Mankind, Everyman, or some like title, and he was surrounded by abstract representatives of his state of mind or body: Despair, Courage, Strength, and so on. The most common plot is that of a soul-struggle in which the hero is tempted by vice but is finally restored to grace. Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender*, set in Harlem, uses seventeen year-old dropout Alfred Brooks and the sport of boxing to play out the young man's struggle with False Hope, Envy, and Dishonesty leading him to his ultimate discovery of Virtue. The ghetto changes to the middle-class, middle-American Eden River and the sport shifts from boxing to cross-country, but the thrust of Leon McClinton's novel *Cross-Country Runner* is very similar.

Another category of books becomes apparent. Their pattern is not so rigid as the parallels in a morality play, but works by Donald Honig, Alfred Slote, and Matt Christopher epitomize fiction in which a lesson about life is learned by the protagonist in the novel. Honig's *Winter Always Comes* and *Way to Go, Teddy* both use baseball much the way Mark Harris's *Bang the Drum Slowly* does as a vehicle for the examination and resolution of human problems. Other books serving as good examples here are Matt Christopher's *Look Who's Playing First Base* and Curtis Bishop's *Field Goal*.

A third group of books is firmly planted in the Horatio Alger-Great American Dream tradition, a formula which despite surface alterations has remained virtually unchanged over the years. *Chicano Cruz*: by William Cox substitutes a Chicano hero for the traditional WASP and has a militant black ballplayer as a character but otherwise seems no different than novels written decades earlier.

In a field most of us assume to be simple and uncomplicated, there appears to be both diversity and complexity. While no one would assert that writers of kids' sports books set out to emulate morality plays, the links with that tradition are not unreasonable. In other works where the single lesson is to be learned, most books are neither cloying nor condescending to a young audience. Only the Horatio Alger-Frank Merriwell tomes - past and present - seem overly rigid and less interesting.