

Sport Literature, Literary Criticism, and Historical Inquiry

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The twentieth century novelist has discovered America's love of sport. Juvenile literature abounds in sport topics; popular fiction features athletes past and present, and some novels focused wholly on sport have now achieved the distinction of contemporary classics. Sport provides the novelist with a metaphor powerful enough both to explore the ambiguities of present life and to reveal the enduring structure of the American experience. In so doing, the novelist can also illuminate for us the appeal of sport itself. No sport is so broadly appealing or so typically American as baseball. Baseball seems to embrace the American spirit, captures the shared dreams of a culture and has even produced a novel that for three decades has been accepted as a contemporary classic. Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*, is explored in some detail as an example of how the study of fiction can benefit the sport historian. At first glance *The Natural* offers tantalizing but unlikely material for the sport historian. *The Natural* tantalizes because its incidents are drawn from specific legends and facts of baseball. Yet while many "real events" are alluded to none are explored in depth; while the Golden Age of baseball is a source of fictional detail the material remains unsorted in time and place, an alphabet soup of different decades, characters, teams and circumstances. What possible benefit can imaginary literature have, then, for the sport historian? While a novel should not be held to historical accountability it still stands in recognizable relation to life. We cannot fully understand and appreciate the ambience of a time period and the coherent shape of its events with historical facts alone; for such a

sensibility we need the kind of information the novelist may provide. Malamud for example, is the first writer about baseball to have explored in depth the historical and cultural allusions imbedded in the pastoral rituals of the game; a basic myth that is not only American but is embodied and refashioned incessantly throughout the history of Western culture. Baseball as elaborated by Malamud captures a truth, a shape to experience, that is perhaps more central to our heritage than sport historians have ever expected. *The Natural* also considers the relationship between sport and the social and moral context in which it exists. Roy Hobbs, the novel's protagonist fails as a result of his inability to live up to the myths of natural harmony, integrity, and innocence that baseball embodied. In the final section of this paper we explore the response from the reader and how that response may be reflective of American attitudes toward baseball. Malamud in creating an encounter between the worlds of social reality and baseball myth provides a commentary on the pervading attitudes of America towards heroes and toward their customary modern vehicle, athletics.



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