

# Jenifer Levin's *Water Dancer* and the Feminist Sports Novel

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Jenifer Levin's *Water Dancer* (1982) marks a major breakthrough in the genre of sports fiction: the first novel to articulate a compelling alternative to the masculine sporting myth. After a few turn-of-the-century school stories that portrayed girls as fierce athletic competitors, writers either afforded sport only a minor role in their heroines' lives, or ignored it altogether. A handful of women authors who wrote under male pseudonyms interestingly worked against some of the conventions of the boys' sports story, but never to overturn them completely. And the number of juvenile sports novels by women generally is a tiny fraction of those by men.

Beginning in the 1970s the decade of Title IX, a kind of equal-rights feminism appeared in such juvenile novels as those written by R.R. Knudson. Among adult authors, Alix Kates Shulman, Lisa Alther, Mary Gordon, Ellen Gilchrist, and Bobbie Ann Mason have written about masculine sport, more or less incidentally, always to ridicule or denounce it as an emblem of male oppression. Sara Vogen, Nancy Willard, and Rita Mae Brown have written novels more deeply rooted in sport, but have not attempted to articulate a self-consciously "feminine" or feminist perspective on the subject. In this context, Levin's novel about marathon swimming, in addition to its literary excellence, is an important book, because it

considers the traditional sporting ethos of competition-mastery-control, and convincingly proposes an alternative to it. In a novel primarily concerned with sport and gender, in which “masculinity” and “femininity” are equally possible for males and females, Levin’s protagonist, Dorey Thomas, gives up her desire to be a “giant” who masters the waves, becoming instead a “water dancer” who gives herself to them. This surrender has nothing in it of “masochism”: to be water dancer is neither to dominate nor be dominated, but to live in one’s body in the world.

Levin does not present this vision as specifically “feminine,” but in the context of American sports culture and the feminism of women like Mary Daly and Marilyn French, it seems appropriate to call it “feminist”. And it is the first novel of which I am aware to imagine, powerfully, an alternative to the traditional masculine sporting myth.



**Peter Lindsey, here with Alan Metcalfe, delivered the Maxwell Howell Address.**