

SPORT LITERATURE

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The Paradox of John Robert Tunis

John Robert Tunis was a well-known and respected sports writer in the 1920s, but by 1935 he had turned to writing young adult novels using sport heroes as his protagonists. Tunis was always a supporter of the sporting life, but never a fan of big time, professionalized sport. Protagonists in his young adult fiction faced complex social issues, which went well beyond the playing field. Sporting arenas served as stages for his morality plays, where young male sporting heroes struggled to find truth and to do the right thing in the face of cultural taboos. Through his writings, Tunis could question class, race, and religious discrimination in the United States. In many ways, he was ahead of his contemporaries on these issues.

Although at the vanguard on these social concerns, John Robert Tunis' writings on women in sport were much less forward thinking and much less generous. He is best known to women sports historians and feminists as writing the infamous description of women completing the 800 meters in the 1928 Olympic Games. His report back to the New York Times was filled with colorful imagery of women crawling across the finish line in great physical agony. He is credited or blamed, depending on your viewpoint, for women being banned from 800 meter competition until the 1960 Olympic Games. It was another 24 years before women were permitted to compete at the marathon distance in the Games.

This paper examines the only novels written by John Tunis with women as central characters. Both of these novels, one released as adult fiction and one released in the youth fiction market, used women tennis players as protagonists. His first and only adult novel was American Girl (1930). In American Girl, he explored the corrupting influences of championship play in tennis. This novel was converted to an RKO picture entitled Hard, Fast, and Beautiful. This book will be analyzed using a feminist paradigm.
