

Jeffrey Hill
De Montfort University

Richard Ford's The Sportswriter: Literature and History

Sport historians have long been aware of the influence exercised by fictional writing on our understanding of sport. Attention has tended to be directed towards what might be termed "popular" writing – autobiographies, magazine pieces, and of course cinematic creations. "Serious" writing has perhaps received less notice. This paper will focus on one such piece of serious literature: Richard Ford's The Sportswriter (1986), a novel which raises intriguing questions about how historians might use literary "evidence," and what it means for a novel to be "about sport."

Ford's narrative deals with the slow unfolding of small events over an Easter weekend in New Jersey sometime in the 1980s. The hero, Frank Bascombe, reflects on a fabric of personal issues to do with the direction of his own life after the death of his young son, a subsequent divorce, and a new relationship with a charming but shallow younger woman. The Sportswriter is a novel about new beginnings and the acceptance of the passing of things, and its themes might equally work well in a setting unconnected with sport. The fascination of the story lies in Ford's ability to weave together the countless small, almost unconsidered, thoughts and dramas that make up what he describes, in a fine phrase, as "the normal applauseless life of us all." It is not a novel explicitly "about sport." However, it is also not without significance that Ford makes his central character a sportswriter, someone responsible for communicating ideas of life and society through sport, and who occupies a central place in the American male psyche. It is also not without significance that Bascombe's ex-wife is a sportsperson, a golfer, who manages her life after divorce in a resourceful and determined way that contrasts with Bascombe's amiable and rather aimless meanderings.
