

Special Issue

SPORTS-RELATED YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND POLITICS

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WHY READ SPORTS-RELATED YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE?

We grew up as sports fans. Some of Mark's earliest memories are going to Georgia Tech football games with his parents to cheer on his father's alma mater. His father finally gave up his season tickets once Mark's brother and he joined soccer club teams so his family spent Saturdays on youth soccer fields rather than sitting in college football stands. Luke grew up in a household where the daily sports page was a coveted text and, as a Detroit Lions fan, he learned lessons about persevering in the face of defeat on what seemed like a weekly basis. We also early on recognized the role sports play in our society, and not just as entertainment but as a landscape upon which social-cultural-political issues from our society are reflected. As we finalize this special issue of *Study & Scrutiny* in late 2020, athletes and leagues are making decisions about how they present themselves and their sport with regards to the fall presidential election, police violence toward Black lives, and related social justice movements.

WNBA and NBA players, while playing a delayed season in a bubble due to the COVID-19 pandemic, are using their platform to speak out against police violence and racial injustice. The

players have donned justice-related slogans on their jerseys where their names are usually placed (e.g., “Black Lives Matter,” “I Can’t Breathe,” “Say Their Names”). They also use pre- and post-game press conferences to talk about various social justice issues, but particularly asking for justice in the death of Breonna Taylor. English Premier League players are wearing “No Room for Racism” patches on their jerseys and begin every match with a moment of silence to kneel to support Black Lives Matter. NFL players stopped their preseason training in response to the police shooting of Jacob Blake. We could list more efforts by athletes and sports leagues to address sociopolitical issues. Like so many contemporary athletes, numerous authors of young adult literature (YAL) have long addressed the relationship between sports culture and social, cultural, and political issues.

Sports have been a central element of plotlines in novels that are considered to be foundational in developing the category of young adult literature as we know it today. For example, Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contender* (1967/2018) tells the story of Alfred Brooks, who learns from his boxing training how to better understand his life as an African American growing up in New York City, as well as the dispositions he needs to embrace as a productive adult. Walter Dean Myers and Chris Crutcher, both award-winning and highly popular authors, continued the sports focus within YAL through the 1980s and 1990s with their numerous novels that employ sports to engage readers. More contemporary YA authors—including Matt de la Peña, Jason Reynolds, and Sara Farizan—have also examined the lives of youth and their relationship with sports culture. Moreover, these authors, among many others, present stories that illustrate the relationship between sports culture and broader societal questions related to identity, prejudice, and privilege.

The articles included in this themed issue on “Sports-Related Young Adult Literature: Society, Culture, and Politics” focus on sports-related YAL with stories about racial identity, sexual violence, racism, and sexism, and we will conclude our editorial by introducing the scholars and their work. First, though, we present an argument to support teachers and students reading sports-related YAL in an effort to discuss sociopolitical issues prevalent in our schools and communities.

SPORTS CULTURE AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Students’ interest and involvement in sports culture is widespread at the secondary level. During the 2018-19 school year, nearly eight million students participated in organized high school athletics across the United States (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2019). It is important to consider, too, that the NFSHSA’s calculations do not account for students who long to

participate in school-sponsored athletics but are unable due to poor grades, scheduling conflicts, or other unique circumstances, nor does it account for those who opt to play recreationally rather than competitively. Further, that number also does not include youths who, despite having no desire to play sports competitively or recreationally, passionately follow sports and immerse themselves in sports fandom. The number of teens involved in sports culture grows greater still when considering those who only participate in unconventional yet increasingly popular ways, such as playing fantasy sports (e.g., fantasy baseball, fantasy football) or eSports (e.g., large-scale Madden tournaments). So, as robust as participation in organized high school athletics is across the nation, students' immersion in sports culture is even greater than those numbers alone suggest.

A case for incorporating into the classroom sports-related content that is based on students' interests in, passion for, and knowledge of sports culture would not be complete without acknowledging that, while many students nationwide are interested in and knowledgeable about sports, not all students are. The truth of that statement makes Smagorinsky's (2016) point quite pertinent: "Sports may not appeal to each and every teen, but then neither does any other topic" (p. xiii). Still, if sports culture alone does not speak to students' knowledge and interests, incorporating sports-related texts that provide avenues for exploring sociopolitical issues of consequence in students' lives presents additional opportunities for the important work of building relevance as researchers (e.g., Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Guthrie, Wigfield, & Klauda, 2012) have described.

We contend that, when reading sports-related YAL, the lessons learned are often products of characters' entanglement in conflicts that are rooted in sociopolitical issues. In the real world, people must navigate the politics of daily life, what Janks (2010) labeled "little *p* politics" (p. 188). In fictional stories about sports culture, the athlete-protagonists also manage these everyday politics, which involve "the politics of identity and place...small triumphs and defeats...winners and losers, haves and have-nots, school bullies and their victims...how we treat other people day by day" (Janks, p. 188). These layered stories have flourished in the years since Lipsyte published *The Contender*.

In the 1980s, sports-related YAL included stories by award-winning authors such as Walter Dean Myers and Chris Crutcher. The sociopolitical issues in which these stories' characters are entangled get pushed to the fore. For instance, *Hoops* (Myers, 1981/2008) is focused on a street-smart teenage basketball player's push to overcome the poverty of his hard-scrabble existence in Harlem and to build a trusting relationship with his new coach, who is trying to outrun his own history of corruption in a point-shaving scandal. *The Outside Shot* (Myers, 1984) follows that same

teen-athlete as he navigates life as a young Black man on a basketball scholarship at a predominantly white college in the Midwest, where he also learns to respect a woman as his equal. Additionally, the 1980s saw Crutcher publish books such as *Running Loose* (1983) and *Stotan!* (1986), a pair of coming-of-age stories about teen-athletes wrestling with sociopolitical issues such as racism and domestic violence as they endure unhealthy relationships with the adults in their lives. These titles by Myers and Crutcher, as well as books such as *The Moves Make the Man* (Brooks, 1984) and *My Brother Stealing Second* (Naughton, 1989), are works of sports-related YAL in which characters' lives are complicated by sociopolitical issues.

In the 1990s, sports-related YAL depicting intersections of sport and society continued to emerge. For example, Marie Lee (1992) wrote *Finding My Voice*, a story about a second-generation Korean gymnast dealing with a bigoted rival and racism in her school. David Klass (1994) wrote *California Blue*, a novel about a distance runner who, while struggling with a father holding firm to stereotypes about what a jock should be, finds himself in the middle of a clash where ecological considerations advanced by conservationists butt against economic concerns of community members. Further, Jan Cheripko (1996) wrote *Imitate the Tiger*, a fictional account of a high school football player who embraces the aggressive, hard-partying lifestyle stereotypically associated with a gridiron star's life away from the field and, ultimately, battles alcoholism. The aforementioned titles, alongside award-winners such as *Slam!* (Myers, 1996), *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (Crutcher, 1993), *Ironman* (Crutcher, 1995), and others, pushed the subcategory of sports-related YAL toward the new millennium.

The publication of compelling sports-related YAL has continued in the 2000s. Matt de la Peña contributed with his novels *Ball Don't Lie* (2005) and *Mexican Whiteboy* (2008). The former shares the story of Sticky, who loves basketball to the point that he spends more time in the school and local rec center gyms than anywhere else. Sticky's story also examines his mostly negative experiences in the foster system and his constant struggle with an obsessive compulsive disorder. In the latter, Danny grapples with his racial identity as the son of a Mexican father and White mother, which manifests through discussion with his baseball teammates. Several acclaimed stories about female athletes and sociopolitical issues, including *The Running Dream* (Van Draanen, 2012) and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (Danforth, 2012), which address dis/ability and LGBTQ issues, respectively, have also emerged. In *The Running Dream*, Jessica, a track star, adapts to losing her

leg in a vehicle accident but still wants to run. Cameron, an avid swimmer, reflects on her sexual orientation, new romantic relationships, and homophobic prejudice.

To envision what is possible in the classroom in terms of building relevance to sociopolitical issues emerging in contemporary sports-related texts, consider *The New David Espinoza* (Aceves, 2020). In the story, protagonist David Espinoza dedicates himself to transforming his body through a summer of intense weightlifting after a video of him being physically bullied goes viral. David finds inspiration for his transformation in popular culture, from movie stars who are imposing physically to musical artists who are posturing aggressively. Students personally interested in weightlifting or bodybuilding might readily connect with the novel and have intrinsic motivation to read the book. Such students may see immediate relevance and have the potential to draw from prior knowledge and experiences related to weightlifting as they read the novel.

Other students, though, might benefit from a teacher's intentional efforts to build relevance, to help students connect with relevant topics. One way to do that is through the sociopolitical issue of body image and the role popular culture plays in shaping how bodies of various shapes and sizes are perceived. For example, teachers can invite students (a) to critically examine the physical dimensions and musculature of action figures to determine how they have evolved from the 1960s to the present day, including ones students might have personally played with in years prior, and (b) to discuss the implications of that evolution in relation to body image and conceptualizations of masculinity, including who benefits and who suffers. While advancing critical literacy, such hands-on activities stand to support relevance building (Guthrie, McRae, & Klauda, 2007; Guthrie et al., 2012), generating connections to students' lived experiences and the text at hand. Alternatively, teachers could focus on bullying—the impetus for David's transformation—as a sociopolitical issue and invite students to write about their own personal encounters with peer violence and other bullying behaviors. In doing so, students stand to see the prevalence of the issue at the local level while also establishing relevance with Aceves's novel.

We recognize that not all students hold interests in sports culture, but we also believe that relevance can be built through the critical study of sports and sociopolitical issues. The approach may especially appeal to students who are sports culture's harshest critics—students who are exhausted by the “rah-rah” view of sports or have otherwise grown tired of sports seemingly being elevated above all other aspects of high school life. Just as Wilhelm (2016) designed an inquiry unit exploring the costs and benefits of America's emphasis on sports to engage students of all kinds, we

believe sports-related YAL can help to disrupt the commonplace, to challenge the status quo of sports culture and our greater society for the betterment of all, from those who love sports to those who loathe them and everyone in between.

IN THIS ISSUE

Themed “Sports-Related Young Adult Literature: Society, Culture, and Politics,” this issue of *Study and Scrutiny: Research on Young Adult Literature* invites readers to explore the confluence of sports culture and sociopolitical issues as depicted in contemporary sports-related YAL. The issue begins with “Playing Past Racial Silence: Cultivating Conversations on Racial Identity through Sports-Related Young Adult Literature” by Michael Domínguez and Alice Domínguez. Drawing upon student voices, the authors problematize classroom discourse and works of literature that equate racial identity with the experience of being marginalized, arguing that such narrow framing makes race an inaccessible topic to some students. Further, Domínguez and Domínguez contend that select works of sports-related YAL (e.g., *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* [Alexie, 2007]; *Mexican WhiteBoy* [de la Peña, 2008]; and *Dragon Hoops* [Luen-Yang, 2020]) can provide valuable entry points for students to explore the complexities of racial identity by introducing to the discussion much-needed nuance and accessibility.

In “Athlete as Agitator, Assaulter, and Armor: Sports, Identity, and Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature,” Shelby Boehm, Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko, Kathleen Olmstead, and Henry “Cody” Miller contend that select titles of sports-related YAL offer opportunities for readers to critically examine relationships between athlete identities and sexual violence. The authors analyze athlete identities and figured worlds in six works of sports-related YAL depicting sexual assaults committed by male athletes against female classmates, and they consider how such issues can be taken up in various settings, including secondary English language arts classrooms and teacher education courses.

In the issue’s third feature article, “Lizzie, Mamie, & Mo’ne: Exploring Issues of Sexism and Racism in Baseball,” Alan Brown and Dani Parker-Moore explore how the novel *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* (Schmidt, 2004) stands to help readers build understandings of racism and sexism in baseball. Framed by a look at baseball’s long history of racism and sexism, the article challenges readers to consider the barriers that still prevent women from playing the sport today. The article also includes instructional methods teachers can employ to support students reading

Schmidt's novel and to advance the critical study of sociopolitical issues that haunt America's favorite pastime.

In addition to the featured articles, this issue includes an interview with a scholar and reviews of books that are connected to the theme. Terri Suico conducted an interview with Chris Crowe, author of *More Than a Game: Sports Literature for Young Adults* (Scarecrow Press, 2004), a foundational book about sports-related YAL that documents the history of sports literature for adults and adolescents alike while also highlighting sports-related nonfiction and poetry as well. Readers interested in learning more about Crowe's work will surely appreciate the scholarly review of *More Than a Game* that Suico wrote for this issue. Likewise, readers eager to learn more about contemporary works of sports-related YAL will look forward to Lisa A. Hazlett's review of *Gut Check* (Kester, 2019), Ann Marie Smith's review of *Heroine* (McGinnis, 2019), and Anita Dubroc's review of *Here to Stay* (Farizan, 2018).

This special issue illustrates not only the influence that sports culture has on our greater society but also the impact that reading sports-related YAL in conjunction with discussing sociopolitical issues can have on middle and high school youth.

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