

Book Review of Chris Crowe's *More Than a Game: Sports Literature for Young Adults*

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If asked to visualize a typical high school in the United States, sports would very likely figure into the mental image. With the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) reporting in 2018-2019 that the overall number of participants in high school sports was nearing eight million, athletics is a deep-seated part of many adolescents' experience. This interest in and involvement with sports have gone beyond the field of play and permeated popular culture. From the long-running television series *One Tree Hill* to the romantic comedy *Bend It Like Beckham* to the prolific *Bring It On* franchise, movies and television shows depicting how many teenagers' experiences intertwine with the sports they play have long been a media staple. While sports can also be found in books written for an adolescent audience, young adult sports literature has not always received the same attention as their multimedia counterparts. Even during this time of great growth in young adult literature, young adult sports literature has not gained the traction that other YAL genres such as dystopian fiction or paranormal romance have. Nevertheless, this genre and the many subgenres it encompasses represent an important component of young adult literature due to its multifaceted nature and to its ability to portray and speak to the everyday lives of many teens.

Fortunately, Chris Crowe's *More Than a Game: Sports Literature for Young Adults* gives young adult sports literature the attention it deserves. Published in 2004, just three years after Michael Cart (2001) declared "a new golden age of young adult literature" (p. 96), Crowe's work appears as part of the Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature series and offers further insight into this pervasive if sometimes overlooked field of YAL. Coming near the start of the YAL renaissance, Crowe documents the value, history, and subgenres of young adult sports literature. Even as *More Than a Game* seeks to call awareness to and celebrate sports literature for adolescents, it also offers thoughtful evaluation of it. Rather than resorting to a hagiography of the genre's history, Crowe turns an analytical eye to the literature and provides insight into the strengths and limitations

different books and subgenres present. As a foundational text, *More Than a Game* acts not just as a historical examination of young adult sports literature but also as a useful resource for thinking about the types of books that comprise this broad genre.

In its 170 pages, *More Than a Game* packs a lot of content into a relatively compact space. The main part of the book consists of six chapters, in which Crowe examines the origins of sports literature for adults and adolescents as well as different types of young adult sports fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. He also dedicates two chapters to more specific topics, namely sports literature for young women as well as the portrayal of coaches in young adult sports fiction. Each of these chapters offers an illuminating if sometimes too-brief look at sports literature for young adults. The first chapter, “Is There a Place for Sports Literature?,” asks and answers the question posed by its title. In it, Crowe starts by providing a broad examination of sports literature works and scholarship in general before moving to considering young adult sports books and what they have to offer. Chapter two focuses on the history of young adult sports literature from its late nineteenth century emergence from boys’ school stories. While the plots were often formulaic, featuring white male athletes who embodied the all-American ideal of being “wholesome, modest, honest, and handsome, and who excelled in several sports” (Crowe, 2004, p. 15), the stories evolved during the 1900s, with “narratives that would develop characters more fully and allow them to wrestle with challenges on and off the field” (p. 17). This development eventually resulted in a *sportlerroman*, a term coined by Crowe to describe a coming-of-age story where “the protagonist is an athlete struggling to maturity... Sports feature prominently in his or her story, but the central conflicts of the *sportlerroman* lie beyond athletics” (p. 21).

Chapters three and four address young adult sports fiction and young adult nonfiction and poetry respectively, with both chapters breaking up these broad groups into more specific classifications. When considering young adult sports fiction, Crowe discerns four general categories (short stories, game novels, more-than-a-game novels, and *sportlerroman*) and then proceeds to describe and analyze these categories while also offering exemplar titles. In chapter four, he looks at YA sports poetry as well as informational sports books for young adults, where he identifies 10 sub-categories ranging from the celebrity autobiography and biography, which is written and published to take advantage of a star athlete’s fame, to books on sports trivia.

After these rather broad topics, Crowe turns his attention to young adult sports literature for young women, tracing its history as well as the themes and trends that have emerged over the decades. This chapter is a welcome inclusion. Since YA sports literature tends to be dominated by male protagonists, many of the previous chapters, including the one on the history of young adult sports literature, tend to focus on books featuring boys. While the preceding sections mention books with girls, this chapter allows for more attention to these types of books and their history. This is especially helpful, since the history and typical themes and characters in YA sports literature for young women feature some key differences from young adult sports literature in general.

The final chapter addresses the role and portrayal of coaches in young adult sports fiction. Here, Crowe notes that coach characters tend to “fall into one of two categories: the villainous, demented sadist or the nurturing mentor” (p. 79) and explores these portrayals in different books. Additionally, Crowe considers why these depictions are so prevalent and what they say and reflect about society’s view of coaches, sports, and athletic victory. The connections Crowe makes between sociological observations and YA sports books’ representations of coaches are thoughtful and thought-provoking, particularly when considering the negative or dementor coach character. Unlike the benevolent coach who populated sports books in the early twentieth century, these dementors value winning, which “modern American society values... over character building every time” (Crowe, 2004, p. 80). In an especially prescient observation given the Penn State abuse scandal that broke eight years after *More Than a Game’s* publication, Crowe notes that the characters in *Chester, I Love You* do not argue with the sadistic coach, just as “no one argues with... a Joe Paterno. Our society reveres coaches, especially successful ones, often granting them *carte blanche* in the locker rooms and on the playing fields” (p. 84).

Taking up 68 pages, or approximately one-third of the book’s total length, the appendices are substantial and substantive, particularly Appendix B, fittingly titled “Thousands of Young Adult Sports Books Classified by Gender, Sport, and Other Categories.” Although this list understandably includes books published before 2004, it does offer a fascinating and far-reaching catalogue of young adult sports literature that would be helpful for scholars and enthusiasts of the genre.

Since it was published more than 15 years ago and right as the impressive growth of young adult literature was occurring, *More Than a Game* has some shortcomings that are mostly attributable to its age. For instance, Crowe states early on that “no sports book has ever won the coveted Newbery Medal” (Crowe, 2004, p. 3), which was true in 2004 but is not the case as of the

writing of this review (Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover* won the Newbery in 2015). Additionally, with the ongoing call to have young adults read "without walls," as Gene Luen Yang's National Ambassador of Young People's Literature put it, the title of chapter five, "Sports Literature for Young Women" might seem dated or even confining to some readers (though, to be fair, this section is more about YA sports literature about young women). Nevertheless, the information and definitions on the different categories of YA sports literature are particularly helpful when considering past, present, and future work. Additionally, the last two chapters (YA sports literature featuring young women and the portrayals of coaches in YA sports books) are unexpected but valuable and thought-provoking inclusions that further enhance the value of *More Than a Game*.

Despite its limitations, *More Than a Game* remains an important examination on young adult sports literature. While the most obvious users of this text would be scholars who are working in young adult sports literature, it also has a place on the bookshelves of YAL teachers, since some of the information, such as the categories, could prove useful in a YAL class as students learn that young adult literature encompasses various genres and subgenres.

While sports literature for adolescents might still not have received the attention or multimedia adaptations that *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* franchises have, it remains an indelible part of the young adult literature landscape. Scholarship on the topic, which was relatively scarce in 2004, has started to gain more prominence, with themed journal issues such as the 2014 issue of NCTE's *English Journal*, guest edited by Alan Brown and Chris Crowe, and books such as *Developing Contemporary Literacies through Sports*, edited by Brown and Luke Rodesiler, dedicated to the study and teaching of sports literature. This is due in large part to *More Than a Game*, which provides not just the foundation but also the legitimacy needed for the work that has followed it.

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