

Young Adult Literature and Culture

Young Adult Literature and Culture

Edited by

Harry Edwin Eiss

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

Young Adult Literature and Culture, Edited by Harry Edwin Eiss

This book first published 2009

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2009 by Harry Edwin Eiss and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-0493-2, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0493-6

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
Harry Edwin Eiss	
Chapter One.....	1
From Politics to Personal Expression: Representations of Sport in Walter Dean Myers' Young Adult Works	
Ray Schuck	
Chapter Two.....	21
The Nature of Female Friendship in the Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants Quartet	
Joyce Litton	
Chapter Three.....	39
The Path to Sedna	
Joel Rudinger	
Chapter Four.....	69
The Isis Trilogy	
Harry Edwin Eiss	
Chapter Five.....	91
Young Adult Achievers: Three Stories of Science Fair Projects	
Margaret Best and Susann deVries	
Chapter Six.....	109
Outer Space, Inner Worlds: Science Fiction and The Adolescent Imagination	
Sally Sugarman	
Chapter Seven.....	119
Let Them Read Books!	
Alethea K. Helbig	

Chapter Eight.....	129
The Evolution of Public Education in China since Confucius	
Jerry Loving	
Contributors.....	175

INTRODUCTION

HARRY EDWIN EISS

Ray Schuck focuses on the sports stories of Walter Dean Myers, “Both as Myers’ works explicitly address race and as they address other issues that are not explicitly linked to race,” and finds that “they prepare readers to take up a mindset that is more conducive to seeing broader issues of cultural politics.” With that in mind, Ray finds “in particular, the more one recognizes that idealistic constructs of “purity, “innocence,” and so on, which have often been applied both to sport and beyond, are cultural mythologies, the more one is prone to see the racial and ethnic systems of domination that inform not only those terms, but so much of everyday life as well. In short, one becomes more disposed to recognizing politics itself as a condition of human society and, in the process, one more readily acknowledges the limitations of many aspects of dominant cultural expressions.” This then leads Ray to claim that “With that mindset in tow, one is much more ready to engage the project of multicultural democracy.” It is an excellent approach to a seldom explored category of young adult literature, and one that is woefully under represented.

Joyce Litton offers a highly represented and commercially successful counterpart, the more female oriented series books for young adults, specifically *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants Quartet*, four coming of age stories that resonate with teenage girls because they deal with “everyday issues that teens face: difficulties with parents and stepparents, relationships with boys, fear of unplanned pregnancy, confronting the death of a close relative or a friend, trying to make friends outside a close knit circle,” all of this couched in the wonderful friendship the four girls share, and the “middle class values” that are embraced. What this means is that “*The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* is a series that young adults enjoy and that mothers approve. Indeed, mothers like to discuss these books with their daughters, and many other women also find them entertaining.”

Joel Rudinger not only provides the cover illustration, but fleshes it out with a wonderfully interesting narrative of his own journey into the Sedna myth, bringing the disciplines of folklore and mythology alive, and leaving

leaving us with the following enchanting image that makes us want to find our own path to this mythic world: “Horace Smoke slipped his granddaughter’s story knife back into the sheath on his belt. His eyes were far away. He stood up, took one step, and disappeared among the people passing on the sidewalk. As I sat on the park bench alone, it occurred to me, in the long quiet of that moment, that Horace Smoke was as magic as his words. He had taken me back to the beginning of time, to when the world was new.”

This mythic world slides into my own discussion, one that focuses on *The Isis Trilogy*, best known of Monica Hughes many works. She writes, “Science fiction and fantasy in particular are valid carriers of myth for the 20th century, and most especially for young people. The success of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* lies not only in the fascinating minutiae of Middle Earth but in the story of the Hobbit Frodo, who is drawn, against his will, into the search for the ring, without which Evil will overcome. In so doing he gains strength and knowledge—as does the reader, because mythic fiction is *empowering*.”

Margaret Best and Susann deVries also give us literature that uses science. They begin, “The science fair project is the central metaphor and the reality in Paul Zindel’s *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* (1970), Christopher Paul Curtis’s *Bucking the Sarge* (2004), and Joyce Maynard’s *The Cloud Chamber* (2005). Though different in many ways, each of these stories depicts a striving teenager who lacks a conventional, stable home and has a problem mother. Their vision and determination to succeed in the science fairs enable the main characters to acquire the necessary management skills to interact and persevere in a complex world. These stories contain many young adult literature themes: disillusionment and alienation, coping with family dynamics, peer relationships, overcoming obstacles, and broadening perspectives.” This is a promising beginning, and Margaret and Susan more than fulfill it with a detailed discussion of the three stories and how “It is through the science projects that the main characters are able to find control and order in a situation that is muddled with adults and expectations, or lack of expectations, of the young adults. The project presents barriers to overcome and goals that are achievable. While concentrating on their projects, the characters build strength and self-awareness to persist in the face of problems and doubt.”

After providing an overview science fiction, Sally Sugarman offers a study on the entire genre. “For this study two hundred and thirty-nine high school students from two schools in Vermont and Massachusetts were surveyed in the fall and winter of 2006 and 2007. One hundred fifteen of

the respondents were male, one hundred and twenty female with four responses not indicating gender. Students in five high school classrooms were interviewed. Adult science fiction readers, teachers, librarians and booksellers were also interviewed.”

Alethea K. Helbig provides an overview of her important activities promoting literature for the young. She was a seminal scholar and educator when colleges and universities were just beginning to take the study of children’s literature seriously, when English departments were initiating serious undergraduate and graduate classes in what previously had been seen as inferior literature, “kiddy lit.” Here we have an entertaining and historically valuable autobiographical account of some of those activities.

Jerry Loving expands the horizons of the entire collection of essays, providing a first hand account of how the young are educated in China, including a detailed history. It begins: “I have been traveling to mainland China at least 4 to 6 times a year as a teacher or education evaluator since 2002. As the visits and years passed, I watched the education system of China slowly improve to the level my schools were like when I went to school in the 50’s and 60’s. Since 2002, I have learned thru my day-to-day experiences with schools all over China how difficult it was for the public school system to improve due to the lack of funding or the lack of qualified teachers. However, in the major cities of China, such as Shanghai, Chongqing, and Beijing, the public schools, teachers, buildings, and curriculum were as current as our school systems are now. For example, there were new school buildings, qualified teachers and administrators, and plenty of students who were eager to learn.” This indeed is history in the making from a man who sees it from the inside. Extremely interesting reading.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM POLITICS TO PERSONAL EXPRESSION: REPRESENTATIONS OF SPORT IN WALTER DEAN MYERS' YOUNG ADULT WORKS

RAYMOND I. SCHUCK

“Look, Lonnie, the game is more than what goes on out on a basketball court. That’s just the way we play it, running around in sneakers and bouncing a ball. Everybody plays the game with what they got. Trust me, man.”¹

—Cal Jones to Lonnie Jackson in Walter Dean Myers’ *Hoops*

Sports play significant roles in the lives of adolescents. As participants, as spectators, and as fans, adolescents engage in practices involving sports in numerous ways for various reasons, including identity negotiation, physical health, socialization, and emotional and psychological fulfillment.² Given this significance of sports, it seems inevitable that young adult literature would address this audience’s experiences with sport. Much young adult literature has taken up such a task, with authors producing works focusing on sports within a variety of genres and forms.³ However, even though plenty of authors have depicted sport in young adult literature, the degree to which young adult literature has incorporated sports experiences has not always translated into a high degree of recognition. As Chris Crowe has suggested, the Sports Literature Association has “virtually ignored” young adult literature, while sports journalists have shown little consideration for young adult literature in lists of significant sports books. Meanwhile, in more generalized literary circles, sports books have received more recognition, though that has translated into just one Newbery Honor and no Newbery Medal wins for sports-themed young adult books.⁴ Yet, work has begun to recognize the intersection of sports and young adult literature, particularly by mapping out the historical development of sports-themed young adult literature and

by detailing various forms in which sports has been treated within young adult literature. Notably, Chris Crowe's 2004 book *More Than a Game: Sports Literature for Young Adults* details the historical and thematic development of young adult sports literature.⁵ While Crowe offers a broad overview of the forms that young adult sports literature has taken, a sense of the broad themes that sports literature for young adults has employed, and the general historical contexts that have influenced this set of literature, the field is ripe for more specific analysis of the ways in which sport is treated in such literature.

In this essay I seek to advance the project of examining the treatment of sport in young adult literature by analyzing the kinds of messages about the meanings of sport that are offered in young adult literature. To do so, I will look at how sport has been represented within works by Walter Dean Myers to gain a sense of the messages that those representations convey. I argue that in representations of sport within his sports-themed young adult books, Myers offers readers the message that sports should be understood more broadly than how well one plays the game. In particular, Myers' works suggest that individuals who become involved with sports must recognize and negotiate the politics of sporting practice, but, at the same time, sports serve as sources of fulfillment that assist in that process of negotiation. Additionally, this suggestion aligns Myers' treatment of sport with the broader multicultural project to which his work has been connected more generally.

The Work of Walter Dean Myers

Walter Dean Myers is perhaps the most notable writer to have prominently represented sports in young adult literature. Myers has received critical attention and national recognition for his work, dating back to 1969, when he won the Council on Interracial Books for Children contest for a manuscript that would eventually become his first book, *Where Does the Day Go?*⁶ In the time since then, Myers has authored over seventy books, including works of both children's literature and young adult literature, and he has won numerous awards, including two Newbery Honors, five Coretta Scott King Awards, the Margaret A. Edwards Award, the Virginia Hamilton Award, and the first Michael Printz Award for Young Adult literature.⁷ Throughout his career, Myers has consistently engaged the subject of sports in his work. Myers has written a number of young adult books that take sport as a central theme, including fictional works, such as *Hoops*, *The Outside Shot*, and *Slam!*; nonfiction work, with *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali*; and a work that uses

a fictional protagonist and storyline to tell a narrative about non-fictional events, with *The Journal of Biddy Owens: The Negro Leagues, Birmingham, Alabama, 1948*. Additionally, Myers has incorporated sport in minor ways into many other works, including *Just Sam*, *Cool Clyde*, and *Stuff; 145th Street: Short Stories*; and *The Dream Bearer*, to name a few. Given the recognition that Myers has received for his young adult works and the number of works focusing on sport that he has written, Myers serves as a particularly useful example for analyzing how meanings of sport are represented in young adult literature.

In the following analysis, I focus specifically on Myers' young adult book-length works that focus explicitly on sports. While there is something to be said about the use of sport in his other works, I focus on those that are explicitly about sport because they are most engaged in the project of directly representing sport and, thus, they provide the most deliberate messages about sport. In analyzing these works, I argue that Myers asks his readers to see sports more broadly than how well one plays the game. This occurs on two levels. First, Myers asks readers to accept the politics of sports, in the form of forces outside the play of the game that influence the game, as something against which one must negotiate with sport participation. While there are "morals to the stories," as characters and situations are depicted in ways that ask viewers to make judgments, Myers' works avoid overt moralizing about the purity of sports in favor of accepting that negotiating the politics of sport is a necessary part of participating in the sports world. Additionally, on a second level, Myers offers various ways of thinking about sport that can help one in those negotiations by providing various measures of fulfillment, which serve as important counterbalances to the politics of sport that Myers represents in that they help make dealing with the politics of sport palatable, mitigating the cynicism and disinterest that the politics could foster. In the end, Myers' vision of sport is a compellingly realistic one that recognizes the very real frustrations of the politics of the game, but also provides means for finding pleasure in the game as well. A specific reading of *Hoops*, *The Outside Shot*, *Slam!*, *The Journal of Biddy Owens: The Negro Leagues, Birmingham, Alabama, 1948*, and *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali* illustrates this vision.

The Politics of Sport

The theme that sports are subject to forces beyond the game is evident in the novel *Hoops*, in which the reader follows the character Lonnie Jackson, a Harlem teenager who develops both as a person and as a

basketball player while playing in a citywide tournament under the tutelage of Cal Jones, a former NBA basketball player who washed out after he was involved in a point shaving scandal. A similar point shaving operation affects play of the game in *Hoops*, as a group of gamblers seeks to fix the tournament in which Lonnie is playing. The gamblers coerce Cal into leaving Lonnie out of the game so that Lonnie's team will not win by enough points to cover the spread, allowing bets on the other team to pay out. During the game, after the gamblers have returned to the crowd from placing their bets, Lonnie inserts Cal back into the game to thwart the gambling operation. Afterward, Cal is stabbed and killed for his actions by a member of the gambling operation named Tyrone. In the meantime, readers have witnessed how the play of the game can be affected by gambling.

Hoops also depicts other factors that affect the game. In particular, games are shown to be affected by the need to appease sponsors and to highlight specific players who are being recruited for other opportunities. The appeasement of sponsors occurs when tournament organizer O'Donnel asks Cal to step away from the team so that Cal's past involvement with point shaving does not affect public relations for the tournament. Lonnie does not understand the reasoning for Cal's removal, but Cal explains, "O'Donnel is what basketball is all about. ... O'Donnel and cats like him. Because what it's all about is people paying to come into the gym and people paying to put their ads on television. He ain't saying I can't coach good; he's saying I might hurt that money the sponsors are putting up"⁸ Additionally in the book, Cal explains to Lonnie how the games in the tournament are more about highlighting players than about the final results of the matches. As Lonnie narrates, "The tournament, Cal explained, wasn't so much to see who won or lost but was a showcase for scouts all over the country. They were supposed to be coming to New York to look at ballplayers who hadn't been playing high school ball and who might have been overlooked because they weren't on a good team."⁹ Those scouts might offer opportunities in the form of college scholarships to players who look good in the games. So, the games often become coached and played in ways that highlight these players' abilities rather than being coached and played with the emphasis on victory over one's opponent.

Hoops sequel novel, *The Outside Shot*, offers similar themes about the forces that influence the play of the game. In this novel, Myers continues Lonnie's story, this time following him during his first season as a college basketball player on scholarship at Montclare College in Indiana. Like *Hoops*, *The Outside Shot* features gambling as a major aspect of the story.

In this case, after Lonnie is approached by gamblers, he enlists the aid of a group of African American NBA basketball players known as The Brotherhood that seeks to protect opportunities for professional African American basketball players. The Brotherhood and Lonnie recognize that another member of Lonnie's college team is working with the gamblers to shave points off the margin of victory in Montclare's games. In the end, Lonnie is able to thwart the point shaving from occurring, but, before that, like in *Hoops*, readers see how gambling influences the play of the sport.

Readers also see the theme of highlighting the play of particular individuals during a game, which is shown when, at one point, Lonnie states, "I knew what the scenario was. We would all go out and bust our tails in the second half, Larson would put on a big show, and the All-American would win the game."¹⁰ Here, though the goal of the game remained the typical one in the form of victory, the narrative explicitly indicates that victory would be sought alongside the separate goal of highlighting the play of an individual for professional scouts who might be watching. The influence of this kind of alternate goal becomes clearer when contrasted with an earlier point, where the reader is offered a description of basketball only based on the ability to play. As Lonnie narrates in description of one segment of a game, "For the next two minutes we played as if we were one person. For two minutes, it was what basketball is all about, muscles working, bodies barely touching other bodies, passes just getting past straining fingertips to your man. We were living fast and strong and just beyond the reach of the rest of the world. Their coach called time out, and it ended. It wouldn't be that way again in that game."¹¹ Such moments, it appears, are as fleeting as the two minutes Lonnie mentions, as basketball is more typically subject to other forces as well.

In *Slam!* some of the same themes appear as well, though gambling takes a back seat to young adult emotional development, as readers are told the story of Greg "Slam" Harris, a high school basketball player who has tremendous skill on the court, but struggles with his schoolwork and with the degree to which his temper gets him into trouble with both teachers and his coach. At various points, the book illustrates the degree to which the coach's decisions are based on factors other than Slam's ability to play. At one point, Slam's teammate Ducky, sitting on the bench next to Slam during the game, says about the coach not starting Slam in the game, "Maybe he's mad because you beat him that time."¹² Here, Ducky refers to Slam defeating the coach with a slam dunk in a one-on-one match when Slam first tried out for the team. Moments after Ducky's comment, Goldy, a former coach who now helps the team and who has

become a mentor to Slam, also admits that the coach might be influenced by similar motives. As Slam narrates,

We started warming up and Goldy came up to me.

“You want to play the second half?” he asked.

“What’s up with this ‘you want to play’ bit?” I asked.

“The coach thinks you’re a hot dog,” Goldy said. “He thinks you’re more interested in showing off your stuff than playing with the team.”

“I think he’s mad because I slammed on him,” I said.

“Could be,” Goldy said. “But that’s real life. What did you expect?”¹³

Soon thereafter, Slam explicitly contrasts the possibility that Goldy and Ducky mention against basing the game on ability to play. As Slam narrates, “‘That ain’t got nothing to do with playing today,’ I said. The coach was playing with *my* mind because *his* game was raggedy. I didn’t even know how to deal with that.”¹⁴ In these examples, the characters speculate on the degree to which the coach is making game decisions based on his own personal feelings toward players rather than their ability to play. This issue lingers throughout the book.¹⁵

Additionally, readers see the theme of a game being played in a way to highlight a select individual. In this case, it is Slam’s teammate, Nick, who is looking for this basketball play to help him become accepted to Brown University. Before the game, Nick says to Slam, “The coach called me last night and said that a college scout is coming to see me today. I can’t look good if you and I aren’t playing together.”¹⁶ Moments later, as the coach explains that the game “has to be a team effort,” Slam notes silent recognition of what this means as he states, “Ducky looked over at me. He dug what the coach was really talking about. The whole thing was to make Nick look good.”¹⁷ Again, in this scenario highlighting the play of one player supersedes playing well and winning as the overriding objective on the basketball court.

While these instances illustrate the politics of sport, throughout these representations Myers’ works do not offer jeremiads bemoaning the downfall of sport or overt lamentations chastising sports for not living up to abstract ideals of purity and innocence. This sentiment places Myers’ works in contrast to much popular discourse.¹⁸ Indeed, the politics of sport are represented in Myers’ works as having been with the game in the past as much as the present. For example, in *Hoops* it is clear by Cal Jones’ past that point shaving has been around basketball for awhile. This theme is also apparent when Myers turns attention to sports history. In *The Journal of Biddy Owens: The Negro Leagues, Birmingham, Alabama, 1948* (hereafter called just *The Journal of Biddy Owens*), Myers tells the

story of a season of Negro League baseball through the eyes of a fictional player named Biddy Owens, who plays for the Birmingham Black Barons. The season covered occurs at the same time as the second season of integrated major league baseball play, following Jackie Robinson's breaking of the color barrier in 1947. While integration led to inclusion of African American players in major league baseball, it also significantly influenced the decline of the Negro Leagues—a point to which the “Historical Note” alludes at the end of the book.¹⁹ Thus, the story occurs during one of the last viable seasons of Negro League baseball. Within the story, readers see the effects of Jim Crow laws on Negro League players, while also hearing news of the continuing efforts to integrate major league baseball throughout the country. Additionally, the situational context of the book illustrates the degree to which playing a sport was based on more than just one's ability. Readers are told, for instance, that the Negro League teams could not play just anyone, when Owens mentions that the House of David team was “one of the few white teams we played, and we couldn't play against them in the south.”²⁰ Additionally, readers see how athletes had been and continued to be excluded from major league baseball on the basis of race, including how even those players who were included in these early years of integration were subject to scrutiny on the basis of more than playing ability. As Owens writes in his May 8 entry, “It seems to me that what the major leagues are looking for are players who act in a certain way. That means you don't just have to be good but you have to act like the major-league teams want you to act. Piper said that when people yell things at Jackie from the stands, or when one of the players says something nasty to him about him being black, he doesn't answer them. That must be hard on him.”²¹ Owens' comment suggests how avoiding retaliation, even in the face of abuse, was used as a qualification for African American ballplayers to be allowed to play in the major leagues. Several pages later, Owens offers an additional qualification, when, referring to the Negro League team the Indianapolis Clowns, he writes, “A team like the Clowns fools around before the ball game and sometimes even during the game if they can get away with it. The way I figure, they'll be the last ones to get into white folks ball.”²² Seriousness at all times, it would appear, was required for African American players to be allowed to play in the major leagues.

The Journal of Biddy Owens illustrates that the politics of sport are nothing new. Indeed, the book suggests that, if anything, it was the past that was lamentable, not the present. Myers' biography of Muhammad Ali, *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali*, echoes that sentiment in connection with race. In this book, Myers tells the story of the life of Muhammad Ali,

from his birth through his legacy at the turn of the twenty-first century. Like in *The Journal of Biddy Owens*, readers see the ways in which race has affected the degree of participation that has been afforded African American athletes, including the historical context in which African American boxers have fought. For instance, Myers tells of how the first black heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, “fought for years without having any hope of getting a championship fight.”²³ Johnson did finally get a match and won the heavyweight belt, but eventually “was arrested on a trumped-up morals charge and had to leave the country”—a situation that also led to the heavyweight championship being taken away from him.²⁴ Similarly, in *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali*, readers learn of Muhammad Ali being stripped of the heavyweight championship because he did not report for service in the Vietnam War after his petition to be declared a conscientious objector was denied. Myers points out that something other than Ali’s performance led to his loss of the heavyweight crown when he writes, “Muhammad Ali, unbeaten in the ring, had finally fallen.”²⁵

Beyond discussion of race, *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali* conveys the sense that the sport of boxing in general, like the sport of basketball in *Hoops*, *The Outside Shot*, and *Slam!*, is subject to factors other than actual play. In particular, Myers indicates that the forces that drive boxing are different from actual in-ring performance when he explains that

Even when a fighter turns professional and is good, there is no reason to believe he will get the kinds of fights that will offer him a large purse. Fighters and their managers form a team that competes for purses and titles. A good young fighter, someone with the skills to be matched with the better fighters and therefore get more money, will simply be avoided by the other fighter-manager teams. The object of pro boxing is not to win matches, but to make money. Why should a manager at the lower levels of boxing sign his fighter to a match he might lose? Good fighters who are not well connected with a management team can be on the shelf for years waiting for a chance that will never come.²⁶

The message here is that one certainly has to be a good fighter to attain success, but without the right management and promotion, being good in the ring is typically not enough.

Rather than lamenting forces beyond actual play that influence sport, Myers’ works convey a sense of acceptance, recognizing the need to balance playing the game against other factors when participating in sports practices. This sentiment is apparent in many of the aforementioned examples, as factors other than simply ability to play the game are assumed as given characteristics of the world of sports and young adult

characters like Lonnie and Slam are often faced with the prospect of coming to terms with this lesson. The lesson is made somewhat explicit toward the end of *Hoops*, when Lonnie says, "I figure there are going to be a lot of Tyrones and O'Donnells, you know, good guys and bad guys, that I'm going to have to learn to deal with. I know I can't win all the time, but I got to keep myself in the game, got to keep my game together, so at least I have a chance."²⁷ Here, accepting that one has to deal with these factors is offered as a much more productive and useful approach than lamenting the fact that they are there. However, acceptance that one has to deal with these factors does not mean acceptance that one has no power to change things. After all, Lonnie does break up the gambling operations in both *Hoops* and *The Outside Shot*, Slam does gain some approval from his coach, black ballplayers did continue to fight for opportunities in major league baseball, and Muhammad Ali did join the struggle for civil rights and use the system of promotion to assist his career. In each of these cases, though, to make change the individual had to accept that he was going to have to negotiate against the politics that were in place. By choosing to recognize that, so Lonnie's logic goes, one still has a chance and is still in the game. Otherwise, one is not in a position to affect anything. Myers thus does not leave readers hanging on to a sense of hopelessness, as if all meaning of sport is taken out of the hands of the individual. Rather, Myers' works offer means of finding fulfillment within sports by characterizing sport as a source of emotional satisfaction, a source of meaning, a source of hope, and a means of expressing identity.

Sport as a Source of Fulfillment

As a source of emotional satisfaction, Myers characterizes sport as a means through which to feel better. In *Hoops*, Lonnie expresses this sentiment explicitly, when he narrates, "Playing ball, even shooting baskets by myself, always made me feel better."²⁸ Later in the book, Lonnie offers similar statements, including "I had to play some ball. It was the only thing that ever really relaxed me" and "All I want to do for the rest of the summer is to play some ball and forget what happened."²⁹ *Slam!* also conveys emotional satisfaction through basketball, when Slam describes the feeling of dunking a ball by stating, "When my palm slapped against the rim it felt good."³⁰ Later, Slam also suggests that the basketball itself can provide emotional pleasure when he admits, "I don't tell a lot of people but I like the little pebbles on the ball, the way they feel against my fingertips."³¹ In *The Journal of Biddy Owens*, the very first line of the book conveys emotional satisfaction in connection with sport,

as Owens writes on opening day of the season, “Baseball. Man, I love this game! This was probably the most exciting day of my whole life.”³² That sense of love is also explicitly noted in *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali*, as Myers explains that “the second lure of boxing was the same for the fighter as for the fan – the sport itself, the exciting, primitive appeal of two men fighting in a ring. Civilized men might control their impulses to hit people, deny the rush that violence can sometimes produce. But in the ring it was, and still is, allowed. ... It is a sport in which naked brutality is the norm. If a fighter doesn’t love it, he needs to be in a different place.”³³ In each of these cases, emotional satisfaction exists as a major reason to keep playing the sport, despite the politics that athletes face.

The theme of emotional satisfaction is also depicted as magic in some of Myers’ works. In *Hoops*, Cal describes his feelings about basketball with reference to magic, as he says, “The only thing I ever had in life was my game, Lonnie. It was so sweet, people who didn’t know a thing about it would come to see me play. You know how women come to the games sometimes. They want to see your body in the air doing things that other cats can’t do. You know how that feels to you when you’re doing it. I would touch the ball and I would know something was going to happen. ... It was a kind of magic.”³⁴ Lonnie echoes the theme in *The Outside Shot* when he explains, “Sometimes, when my game is on, I get a sense that I’m magical, that I can float through the air and reach out from anyplace on the floor and just stuff the ball through the hoop.”³⁵ Later, Lonnie adds, “There were times, on the basketball court ... when I would be on the floor and the ball would come to me and the world would be round and pebble-grained and in the palm of my hand. Other dudes would be around me, trying to get the ball, trying to snatch my play away, but they couldn’t. Suddenly I would feel full of power and full of life. There was no place on earth other than the court where I had ever felt that, and the moments were like some kind of crazy magic that was happening to me.”³⁶ In this last example in particular, the sense of power and of being “full of life” most explicitly indicates the emotional satisfaction that the magical feeling creates.

Myers also depicts sports as a source of finding meaning. In *The Outside Shot*, Lonnie suggests meaning by indicating the importance of basketball when he says, “Playing ball had always been the most important thing in my life.”³⁷ Later, Lonnie describes how basketball gives him meaning by providing something to do when he explains, “Weekends at Montclaire were garbage if we didn’t have a game. Sometimes, if we had a game Monday or Tuesday, we’d have to practice on Sunday. It was better than doing nothing.”³⁸ In *Slam!*, Goldy acknowledges the importance that

basketball can play in one's life when he tells Slam, "I enjoyed the game, though, like you do. It was important to me."³⁹ Slam himself recognizes basketball as a source of meaning more explicitly in terms of reality and truth. At one point, Slam suggests the degree to which basketball provided the basis for his reality when he states, "Sometimes I set stuff up in my mind like it's going to be true, even though in my heart I know it's not true. It's when I want something so bad it gets real to me before it even happens. I could see me doing this with the basketball tryouts. I mean, like, I knew that nothing I did on the basketball court was going to get my grades up and everything, but somehow I still had this vision of me busting out on the court and then everything being all right. It didn't make sense, but there it was."⁴⁰ Later, Slam relates basketball with truth, when he recalls hanging out with his childhood friend Ice, stating, "What else we knew was basketball. We'd play all summer, sweating from morning to late afternoon, and in the winter we'd shovel the snow away in the park so we could still play. We had the neighborhood and basketball and each other and those were the truths we had. Everything else was a maybe or a could be."⁴¹

Myers' works also offer the sense of sport as a source of hope. This theme is perhaps most prominently embodied in *The Outside Shot*, when Lonnie works with a socially challenged boy named Eddie as a part-time job. While no one has gotten through to Eddie before, Lonnie is able to do so by playing basketball with him. The method works so well in connecting with Eddie that at one point, when Lonnie arrives at the clinic to work with Eddie, Lonnie notes, "It was like he was desperate to have me play with him right away."⁴² Later in the book, other characters suggest that basketball has served as a source of hope, particularly during desolate times. After a fellow basketball player named Ray kills himself, his widow tells Lonnie that Ray "just put so much into it and when nothing worked out for him, I mean with the basketball and everything, he just took it so hard."⁴³ Soon thereafter, Lonnie's roommate, Colin, admits that he hopes to become "a big-time ballplayer, or at least finish school" because he doesn't "have anything else to believe in."⁴⁴ Myers also conveys this sense of hope tied to playing a sport in *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali* when he notes that "boxing would bring young Cassius Clay out of the cultural ghetto."⁴⁵ Additionally, in *Slam!*, readers see characters associating basketball with hope. At one point, after Slam slams a basketball for some kids, he watches them as they go "onto the next court and [start] their own hoop dreams."⁴⁶ Later, Goldy implies a deeper explanation of how basketball can provide hope when he tells Slam, "If science is your life, then you got to love science and do science

with everything you have. If basketball is what you're about then that's what you got to do. You have to keep your eyes open and see what's going on around you, of course. But what you do you got to do it to the max. ... For whatever reason we don't always have the chance to do what we love. That's a special gift from God. But when you are doing what you love, you got to bust it. And when you do, it works. I can't tell you how it works, but it works."⁴⁷ Here, Goldy suggests that hope exists, as long as one is dedicated enough to doing the thing that one loves.

Myers also offers readers the sense that sport can serve as a means of expressing identity. This occurs along two lines. Along one of those lines, Myers explicitly portrays sport as a means through which individuals feel that they are expressing their own personal identities. In *Hoops*, when Cal's girlfriend, Aggie, sings for Lonnie, it reaches Lonnie so deeply emotionally that he feels the need to give something back to her. Lonnie explains, "I felt like running outside and playing some ball for her, or doing something," thus noting basketball as his most compelling means of returning expression.⁴⁸ In *Slam!*, the idea of basketball as a means of expressing personal identity is conveyed when Slam describes in vivid detail how basketball is his "thing," meaning that it provides him with the clearest sense of himself of any activity. The book starts off with Slam telling the reader,

Basketball is my thing. I can hoop. Case closed. I'm six four and I got the moves, the eye, and the heart. You can take my game to the bank and wait around for the interest. With me it's not like playing a game, it's like the only time I'm being for real. Bringing the ball down the court makes me feel like a bird that just learned to fly. I see my guys moving down in front of me and everything feels and looks right. Patterns come up and a small buzz comes into my head that starts to build up and I know it won't end until the ball swishes through the net. If somebody starts messing with my game it's like they're getting into my head. But if I've got the ball it's okay, because I can take care of the situation. That's the word and I know it the same way I know my tag, Slam. Yeah, that's it. Slam. But without the ball, without the floorboards under my feet, without the mid-court line that takes me halfway home, you can get to me.⁴⁹

Even others suggest that basketball is Slam's form of expressing personal identity, as when Goldy says, "I know the game and I know what you got in here," while tapping Slam's chest, as if it signify that basketball is in Slam's heart.⁵⁰

Along a second line, in *Hoops* and *The Outside Shot* Myers represents sport as a means of expressing masculine identity. This theme is evident in *Hoops* when Cal challenges Lonnie at various points by questioning his

masculinity. At one point, Cal says, "A friend of mine from the pros is going to be at the practice tomorrow. Show up if you're man enough."⁵¹ Soon thereafter, Cal asks Lonnie, "You going to sit there, or don't you think you're good enough to play this man's game?"⁵² Later, Cal challenges the entire team in a similar fashion when he says, "It takes a man to have enough pride to go out there and play the second half like he means it. And I don't think you guys are men enough!" and again later when he says, "You guys ain't men enough to play with me."⁵³ Lonnie even recognizes the theme more implicitly when, upon being challenged to a game of one-on-one with Cal, he realizes, "He was going to play against me, and right away I sensed that we were going through a manhood thing."⁵⁴ In *The Outside Shot*, the theme has stuck with Lonnie as well, as he states, "I had been man enough to struggle and get over in Harlem; in Montclare I was struggling just to let people know I was for real."⁵⁵ In these instances, characters associate the ability to play basketball with the ability to show one's masculinity.

In all, Myers' works illustrate means of fulfillment that can coexist with acceptance of the need to negotiate the politics of sport. One can attain emotional fulfillment through sport and one can express oneself through sport even as one recognizes that factors other than how well one plays the game will affect what goes on within the game. Indeed, Myers' works ask the reader to recognize that one is able to attain higher levels of satisfaction and expression when one accounts for the politics of sport. In *Hoops* and *The Outside Shot*, for instance, Lonnie is better off once he recognizes the need to account for gamblers and their various ways of getting action on the games. The title of the first book itself conveys such a sentiment in its play on words; there are "hoops" through which one must pass to play basketball (i.e., hoops). Meanwhile, in *Slam!*, for as talented as Slam is, he is able to use that talent more effectively once he understands more fully how to work within the system of politics that exists around him. For Muhammad Ali, mastery of utilizing promotion enhanced his status and drew attention to his matches as well as his causes. Recognizing the politics of sports practice makes for an earlier and greater readiness to negotiate with them and still find satisfaction in one's play. To do otherwise is a recipe for cynicism and disappointment, since the ideal that one seeks will never be attained. When Slam, for instance, becomes disgruntled with the way his coach handles him, Goldy's advice and intervention point him in the direction of the sources of fulfillment to be found in sport despite the politics of sports practice. As one exchange goes,

"He'll put you in this half," Goldy said. "Play for yourself. Go for it."

“Then he’s going to think he got me to play hard by keeping me out the first half,” I said.

“Now you got it,” Goldy stood up. “And it’s up to you to play for yourself and show what you can do.”

“It’s not right man,” I said.

“Are you hard enough to handle it, anyway,” Goldy asked. “Hard enough to do what’s right for Slam?”

“Yeah, I’m hard enough.”

“Get your attitude together and come on out for the game.”⁵⁶

It becomes apparent that Slam learns from Goldy in the exchange when, a few pages later, Slam tells the reader, “I pushed my mind back to the game and what Goldy was saying about dealing for myself when things weren’t going that tough. It all sounded good but just because something sounded good it didn’t mean it was easy. Sometimes it seemed that when you were into a thing with schools and officials or just about anything that wasn’t happening in the hood you couldn’t even figure out what you were going up against. It was like a game where everybody knew the rules but you.”⁵⁷ As this message goes, some elements of the game are out of one’s control and they affect the game beyond how well one plays, but one has to negotiate those rules and find personal fulfillment in the game in ways that the politics of the game cannot take away. As Slam learns, this applies not only to basketball, but also to school and to life in general. Sport, here, offers the opportunity to gain strategies for negotiating other aspects of life as well, which is a theme that reflects the broader ideological implications of Myers’ works, particularly as his works align with a multicultural project.

Sport, Politics, and the Multicultural Project

By accepting the politics of sports as a part of the game that participants and spectators must negotiate, Myers’ works not only reject the jeremiad discursive tradition, but, quite oppositely, offer a much more realistic, attainable, and practical promise for hope than such lamentations could ever seek to provide. This promise offers the opportunity to prepare individuals to negotiate the politics of sports practice when they are faced, rather than offering either an idealistic hopelessness that refuses to work with the politics of practice or an idealistic hopefulness that fails to even see the politics of sports practice. When preparation for politics is undertaken, individuals are more ready to confront the realities of the complex sports world in which they are engaged.

This ideological position holds particular significance, given the high degree to which Myers' works address issues of African American individuals and communities. In addition to the aforementioned allusions to race in *The Journal of Biddy Owens* and *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali*, the other three books all address the role of race in affecting opportunities to play. In *Hoops*, Cal sums this up for Lonnie when he explains that "for every black basketball player in the NBA under six ten, there's two more out here just as good who won't see the inside of the Garden unless he's got a ticket or a broom. Anybody that looks at a black guy and tells him that he can make it in basketball just because he's good is either lying or dumb. You got to be so special your feet don't touch the ground when you walk."⁵⁸ In *The Outside Shot*, Lonnie's college girlfriend, Sherry, points out how black and other minority athletes are asked to give up their own goals for the goals of the team more than white athletes are. As Sherry, who is African American, explains, "They want me and this Puerto Rican girl, Yolande, to run sprints because they figure we'll need less training than the white girls on the team for sprints. Everybody needs training for the mile, so they want to make us run sprints and them run the middle distances. But if you're good, you have a better chance of making the Olympic team in the middle or long distances than you do in the sprints. It's better for the team, but it's not better for me. It's not even good for me."⁵⁹ Later, NBA basketball player Earl "Sweetman" Jones, speaking as part of the Brotherhood, also indicates the double standard for blacks vis-à-vis whites when he advises Lonnie that "every brother that's out there playing gets jived around when one brother blows."⁶⁰ In *Slam!*, Slam questions the role of race in his white teammate being scouted instead of him. As Slam narrates, "My game was stronger than Nick's but the guy from Brown only had eyes for him. Nobody was talking about me. While I was in the shower I thought about it a lot. Nick had good grades and he had a nice look about him and everything. Or maybe it was just because he was white, I didn't know."⁶¹ In each of these cases, race is shown to be a significant part of the politics of sport.

As Myers addresses race as part of the politics of sport, his works contribute to a critical awareness of the significance of race in everyday practice that informs a multicultural project of celebrating racial diversity. Additionally, on a deeper ideological level, the general message about recognizing the politics of sport, whether specifically attached to race or as explicitly connected to other themes, contributes to that multicultural project as well, as it asks readers to acknowledge the politics that inform everyday life in general. These contributions to the fostering of a multicultural project correspond with multiculturalism's emphasis on

providing “a realistic view of the lives of various groups of people,” which is a characteristic that has previously been attributed to Myers’ work.⁶² Additionally, as Myers addresses both the pragmatic politics of sport and the sources of fulfillment that remain despite those politics, his treatment of sport also aligns with multiculturalism’s emphasis on realistic portrayals by exemplifying the more general characteristic that has been called “a critical element of Myers’s artistry: The realism and the hope weave together to form a tapestry that not only ‘keeps it real’ but ‘keeps it right’ as well. The black literary legacy of resilience through adversity appears in a muted but real form that does not leave the reader with a sensation of emptiness; conversely, the reader is not filled with a tale of surreal, commercial fantasy.”⁶³ Both as Myers’ works explicitly address race and as they address other issues that are not explicitly linked to race, they prepare readers to take up a mindset that is more conducive to seeing broader issues of cultural politics. In particular, the more one recognizes that idealistic constructs of “purity, “innocence,” and so on, which have often been applied both to sport and beyond, are cultural mythologies, the more one is prone to see the racial and ethnic systems of domination that inform not only those terms, but so much of everyday life as well. In short, one becomes more disposed to recognizing politics itself as a condition of human society and, in the process, one more readily acknowledges the limitations of many aspects of dominant cultural expressions. With that mindset in tow, one is much more ready to engage the project of multicultural democracy.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Myers himself has said, “Sports books can be more than just a game or series of games, just as sport is most often more than just a ball bouncing off a backboard or a set of statistics. I want to bring an understanding to sports that I’ve developed in the streets of Harlem and on basketball courts across the country. ... I have an absolute need to bring meaning to the acts which attract so many young boys and, in increasing numbers, young girls.”⁶⁵ In his young adult works that have explicitly focused on sport, Myers offers some significant messages about how to think about the meaning of sports acts. Myers’ works ask readers to recognize that such elements as talent, skill, and performance alone do not determine the availability of opportunities in sport or the ways in which sports are played. Rather, other interests and factors can often serve quite significant roles in determining what happens. By addressing this, Myers asks young adult readers to begin to recognize the politics of sporting practice. In

doing so, Myers' works potentially prepare readers to be ready to negotiate the politics of sports as they participate in them. Additionally, Myers offers ways of thinking about sport that provide great potential for keeping these young adult readers from becoming disillusioned. In the process, Myers' works offer preparation for engagement with a multicultural, democratic world in which meanings are open for contestation and the process of negotiating those contestations is not only important, but necessary if the thriving diversity of perspectives that is fundamental to democracy is to occur. Pragmatically, Myers' works provide young adult readers with lessons on how to navigate the world of sports, while ideologically these works provide lessons on how to engage in a richer, more democratic, more multicultural world.

Myers serves as just one example of the kinds of themes that are offered in regard to the meanings of sport in young adult literature. The works of numerous other authors offer other possibilities for viewing and understanding the meaning of sport as well. These possibilities need to be mapped out more fully and specifically to gain a fuller sense of the messages about sport that are offered by young adult literature. In doing so, we might look specifically at the themes about sport that exist within these works, with particular attention to the kinds of messages these works offer readers and the deeper ideological implications of these messages. Such a project would entail continued examination of works like those in this study that explicitly focus on sports, while also involving examination of the deeper cultural meanings of sport that are embedded in use of or reference to sports in works that do not explicitly focus on sport. Myers could serve as a useful example here, as many of his non-sports works reference sports in passing or as one part of the narrative. Again, though, the works of many other young adult literature authors offer great potential for study along these lines as well. In the end, this project might give a deeper sense of the kinds of meanings that have been attributed to sports acts, with a more fully contextualized conceptualization of how what happens on the court, on the track, on the field, on the course, on the pitch, in the pool, and in the ring, in addition to what goes on outside of these spaces, informs the meanings of sports in young adults' lives and their continuing developments.

Notes

¹ Walter Dean Myers, *Hoops* (New York: Delacorte, 1981), 162.

² For some representative recent studies that address this topic, see Andy Smith and Michael Parr, "Young People's Views on the Nature and Purposes of Physical Education: A Sociological Analysis," *Sport, Education and Society*, 12 (2007): 37-58; Lynn A. Barnett, "Predicting Youth Participation in Extracurricular Recreational Activities: Relationships with Individual, Parent, and Family Characteristics," *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 26:2 (2008): 28-60; and Asha Ketteridge and Kobie Boshoff, "Exploring the Reasons Why Adolescents Participate in Physical Activity and Identifying Strategies that Facilitate their Involvement in Such Activity," *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 55 (2008): 273-282.

³ Chris Crowe, *More Than a Game* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2004).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Walter Dean Myers: Biography," <http://www.walterdeanmyers.net/bio.html> (accessed December 11, 2008).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Myers, 114.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰ Walter Dean Myers, *The Outside Shot* (New York: Delacorte, 1984), 168.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹² Walter Dean Myers, *Slam!* (New York: Scholastic, 1996), 108.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁵ See Myers, *Slam!*, 202, for another example.

¹⁶ Myers, *Slam!*, 152.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁸ For some works that have examined these kinds of discourse, see Steven W. Pope, "Negotiating the 'Folk Highway' of the Nation: Sport, Public Culture, and American Identity, 1870-1940," *Journal of Social History* 27 (1993): 327-340; Steven J. Jackson and Pam Ponc, "Pride and Prejudice: Reflecting on Sport Heroes, National Identity, and Crisis in Canada," in *Sport and Memory in North America*, ed. Stephen G. Wieting (London: Frank Cass, 2001): 43-62; Stephen G. Wieting and Danny Lamoureux, "Curling in Canada," *Culture, Sport, Society*, 4 (2001): 140-153; and Michael L. Butterworth, "Purifying the Body Politic: Steroids, Rafael Palmeiro, and the Rhetorical Cleansing of Major League Baseball," *Western Journal of Communication*, 72 (2008): 145-161.

¹⁹ Walter Dean Myers, *The Journal of Biddy Owens: The Negro Leagues, Birmingham, Alabama, 1948* (New York: Scholastic, 2001), 124-125.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

-
- ²³ Walter Dean Myers, *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali* (New York: Scholastic, 2001), 49.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 49.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, 65.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 76.
- ²⁷ Myers, *Hoops*, 183.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, 7.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, 17, 94.
- ³⁰ Myers, *Slam!*, 60.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, 75-76.
- ³² Myers, *The Journal of Biddy Owens: The Negro Leagues, Birmingham, Alabama, 1948*, 3.
- ³³ Myers, *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali*, 17.
- ³⁴ Myers, *Hoops*, 60.
- ³⁵ Myers, *The Outside Shot*, 62.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, 136.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 34.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, 95.
- ³⁹ Myers, *Slam!*, 42.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 9.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, 29.
- ⁴² Myers, *The Outside Shot*, 91.
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, 131.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 133.
- ⁴⁵ Myers, *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali*, 8.
- ⁴⁶ Myers, *Slam!*, 119.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 178.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 77.
- ⁴⁹ Myers, *Slam!*, 1-2.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 42.
- ⁵¹ Myers, *Hoops*, 23.
- ⁵² *Ibid*, 24.
- ⁵³ *Ibid*, 49, 118.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 40.
- ⁵⁵ Myers, *The Outside Shot*, 76.
- ⁵⁶ Myers, *Slam!*, 204-205.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 210.
- ⁵⁸ Myers, *Hoops*, 70.
- ⁵⁹ Myers, *The Outside Shot*, 49.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 165.
- ⁶¹ Myers, *Slam!*, 176.
- ⁶² Fran Levin, "Encouraging Ethical Respect Through Multicultural Literature," *The Reading Teacher*, 61:1 (2007): 101.
- ⁶³ R.D. Lane, "'Keepin' it Real': Walter Dean Myers and the Promise of African-American Children's Literature," *African American Review*, 32 (1998): 136.

⁶⁴ It should be noted that this mindset does not necessarily transfer from one system of domination to another, as, for instance, connections of sport to personal expression of masculinity in *Hoops* carry with them many elements of sexism and heteronormativity, particularly as masculinity is defined as strength and ability (thus, by implication, defining femininity as lack of strength and ability), while, additionally, on page 62, Lonnie uses the homophobic slur “faggot” to deride another member of his basketball team. Still, the potential does remain for the broader recognition of various forms of oppression that occur—a recognition that appears to have developed through Myers’ three basketball novels, particularly as various aforementioned references to being “man enough” in 1981’s *Hoops* turn to just one reference in 1984’s *The Outside Shot* and to the more gender-neutral phrasing “hard enough” that appears on page 205 in 1996’s *Slam!*

⁶⁵ Walter Dean Myers, “Of Games and Men,” *SIGNAL Journal*, 21:1 (1996): 21.