

Sports as Fiction¹

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Sarah's Dad is reading a scary story to her. She shows inordinate distress, so he reassures her: "It's just a story." A group of children are playing tag. Sam bursts into tears when he is tagged. "Don't worry," his Mom says, "it's only a game".

Sports and competitive games of many kinds—from tag to chess to baseball—are occasions for make-believe. To participate either as a competitor or as a spectator is frequently, if not invariably, to engage in pretense. The activities of playing and watching games have this in common with appreciating works of fiction and participating in children's make-believe activities, although the make-believe in sports, masked by real interests and concerns, is less obvious than it is in the other cases. What is most interesting about tag and chess and baseball, however, are the ways in which the make-believe they involve differs from other varieties, from that of theater, for instance.

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In watching a stage play you root for the hero and boo the villain. You "care about" characters you like and wish them well. Spectators feel badly when Romeo and Juliet come to their tragic ends; some even shed tears. Likewise, sports fans root for the home team, or for a team or player they "like." Fans of the Boston Red Sox or the New York Yankees cheer their victories and bemoan their losses. Alumni follow the fortunes of their school's athletic teams.

Romeo and Juliet don't exist, and the spectator knows they don't. How, then, can she care about them? This is a puzzle. Sports events do not present an equally pointed puzzle. The Red Sox and the Yankees exist and they really do win and lose baseball games. They are there to be cared about, and people do, sometimes, really care whether they win or lose.

There is a lot to explain about sports, however. Why should people care about the Yankees or the Red Sox? Their fortunes on the field have no obvious bearing on the welfare of most fans. Why does it matter whether the home team wins or loses? Life will go on afterwards just as it did before, regardless. But the spectators, some of them, scream their hearts out during the game, as though it is a matter of life and death. Some people pick which teams or players to "like," which ones to root for, more or less arbitrarily, on whims—because they find the team logo or uniforms attractive, because a player's name is the same as that of an old flame, whatever. Yet they may let themselves be carried away during the game, as though genuine and substantial values or self interest is at stake.

¹ This is an abbreviated version of a paper titled "'It's Only a Game!': Sports as Fiction," forthcoming in my *In Other Shoes: Music, Metaphor, Empathy, Existence* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Are fans irrational? Do they believe, falsely but sincerely, that it really is a matter of life and death? Have they lost their minds? This hypothesis is no more attractive than the idea that readers of a story lose their senses, temporarily, and believe in goblins or hobbits or magic rings. Many sports fans, like many readers of stories, are otherwise sensible people who know what matters and what doesn't. Some will tell you, if you take them aside and break the spell of the game, that it doesn't *really* matter a whit who wins. Many forget the game quickly after it is over, much too quickly for people who care as much as they seem to care during the game—for people whose hearts leap to their throats as they spring to their feet to watch a long fly ball that may or may not be caught before it clears the fence. It is hard to resist comparing the avid sports fan to the playgoer who sheds bitter and voluminous tears over the tragic fate of Romeo and Juliet, and twenty minutes later has a jolly good time with her friends at an espresso bar. The fan imagines that the outcome matters immensely and imagines caring immensely—while (in many cases) realizing that it doesn't actually matter much, if at all. She is caught up in the world of the game, as the spectator at the theater is caught up in the story. Afterwards, like the playgoer, she steps outside of the make-believe and goes back to living her life as though nothing much had happened—even if the home team suffered a devastating and humiliating defeat. It's just a story; it's just a game.

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It isn't always *just* a game, however, and sometimes it may not be a game at all. There remains the fact that, unlike Romeo and Juliet, teams and players exist and really do fare well and ill in competition. So we can genuinely care about them, and sometimes we do; sometimes it really matters. It usually matters to the competitors; the salaries and careers of professionals are on the line, and so are the egos of amateurs. Spectators also may care about the competitors' welfare, especially if they are friends or classmates. And one might be of the opinion that a winning home team will shake loose large alumni donations to the fund that supplies one's scholarship.

But these grounds for caring are often blatantly insufficient to account for the intensity of spectators' reactions during the game. And considerations such as the prospect of alumni contributions are likely not to be on one's mind while one is caught up in the game; they are likely not to be reasons one tells oneself for "wanting" the home team to win. Superimposed on a modest genuine interest in the outcome, there is, frequently, a pretense of much greater concern, and of concern which is not, in one's pretense, of the kind one actually has. It is typically indeterminate in the pretense what kind of concern this is, why it matters who wins and why one cares; it is fictional *just* that it matters a lot and that one cares a lot. In games of tag, there is a pretense that being "IT" is undesirable, but there is no answer to the question

what, in the pretense, is undesirable about being “IT.” This is another respect in which sports and competitive games differ from literary and other fictions. We can give reasons why, fictionally, Romeo and Juliet don't deserve their fate and why we care.

A spectator's actual interest in the outcome of a sports event and the interest she fictionally has in it, when both are present, do not merely coexist; usually they interact, reinforcing one another in various ways. The spectator is likely to experience sensations of excitement, pleasure, and disappointment as the game proceeds, because of her genuine concern, quite apart from any make-believe (although her participation in the make-believe also plays a role in generating such sensations). These sensations can then serve as props in the make-believe. She imagines them to be sensations of excitement concerning something that matters greatly, and in (probably unspecified) ways different from the ways it actually matters. Fans who place bets on the outcome make it really matter to them more than it would otherwise, and they probably let themselves in for more thrills and chills, or more intense ones, which then figure in their make-believe in the manner I described. Betting can be just business, like playing the stock market; one hopes to make a profit. But it can also be a way of enhancing make-believe, a way of making the make-believe more “realistic” (in one sense). If the bet is a large one, it may be true as well as fictional that the outcome matters greatly to the fan, although he may imagine that it matters in a way that is not simply financial (even if there is no specific way in which it matters, in his imagination). His attitude may not be simply that of a cold businessman.

Our make-believe involvement with a sports event may itself give us a reason for genuinely wanting our favored team to win. We look forward to the pleasure of experiencing, in imagination, a victory of the good guys over the bad guys—whether or not we have a special interest in the egos or salaries of the competitors on one side or expect a windfall in alumni donations. Playgoers and readers of stories sometimes take a similar pleasure in the fictional victory of good over bad.

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But tragic works of fiction have their appeal as well—and now we come to an especially striking difference between sports fictions and those of theater and other arts. Tragedies can be deeply moving, even satisfying, if not exactly pleasurable. So we sometimes want the bad guys to win, i.e. we want the work to have a tragic ending—even while we are, fictionally, rooting for the good guys. We may be pleased to be displeased in the world of our pretense.² This is rarely our attitude concerning sports. I doubt that fans are often moved by their favorite team's losses in

² Cf. my *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 193-194, 258-259.

anything much like the way people are moved by the deaths of Juliet and Romeo. The vaunted “Paradox of Tragedy” seems not to have much of an analogue in sports. Some of us are fair weather fans. We tolerate a few failures by our favorite teams or players, but after a few more we either change the object of our affection, find someone else to root for, or simply lose interest. It is convenient to be able to tell ourselves that it doesn’t really matter who wins and forget about the whole thing, or simply to step out of the make-believe, when we are denied the pleasure of experiencing, in imagination, victories of the side we favor. People do sometimes, in some moods, decline to experience tragic works of fiction, preferring fictions with happy endings. But for many of us, loyalty to fictional characters and willingness to feel with them empathetically, through thin as well as thick, far exceeds our willingness to stand by sports heroes.

In theatrical tragedies, it is partly *because* the good guy, the tragic hero whom we “root for,” comes to grief that the work is moving. We may appreciate sports events partly independently of who wins; a game in which our favored side loses can be enjoyable. But we don’t appreciate it *because* our guy lost.

Part of the reason for the absence of an interest in sports tragedies is probably the indeterminacy I mentioned. What makes tragedy moving is not just the fact that, fictionally, bad things happen, but also the fact that they happen for such and such reasons, because the tragic hero has such and such flaws despite being basically good, and faces circumstances of certain kinds. There is no answer, typically, to the question of why, fictionally, the competitors in a “tragic” sports event do or do not deserve the fate they receive, or to other questions concerning the circumstances surrounding the disaster.

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Indeed, there is probably no answer *in the sports event itself* as to what fates any of the “characters” deserve; there are no ready made good guys and bad guys in sports. In the case of theater and other works of art, a controlling author or artist typically decides who are the good guys and who the bad guys (and who are the ambiguous ones), and manipulates us into rooting for the former and against the latter. But sports fans are free to choose for themselves; each has his or her own personal heroes and villains. To root for Iago and revel in Desdemona’s death is to misunderstand Shakespeare’s play. But you are not getting anything wrong if you root for the Tigers instead of the Blue Jays, or the Blue Jays instead of the Tigers. If your choice suffers miserably in the competition, you may regard the event as something of a tragedy (though probably without appreciating it as such), but for other fans it will have a wonderful happy ending. Tragedy in sports is in the eyes of the beholding fan.

Sports events do not generally have anything like a controlling author or artist at all. They are not anyone’s creation in the way that *Romeo and Juliet* is Shakespeare’s, and they do not

qualify as *works* in the sense that theatrical productions and other works of art do. Many sports events are not meant for audiences at all (dominoes in the park, tag, pickup basketball). But even in the case of spectator sports like professional baseball games and track meets, no one arranges the events of the game to best advantage for appreciation—at least no one is supposed to. The participants play to win, not to put on a good show. The resulting spectacle is largely a by-product of their competitive actions.

Some sports events do turn out to be “good shows,” however, and others do not. There are great games and sorry ones; ugly games and ones that are remarkable, wonderful, memorable, if not beautiful. But the quality of the game—the game as a whole, as opposed to the play of individual teams or competitors—is something of an accident, not something that anyone can take direct credit for. A close score helps to make a game good or great; so do multiple lead changes, and a result that is deemed an upset. But the competitors try to produce these circumstances only insofar as doing so serves their interest in winning. They will be eager to make the game close when they are behind, but once in the lead they aim for the opposite result—the pleasure of the fans, the opposing ones at least, be damned.

In the bottom of the twelfth inning of the sixth game of the 1975 world series, probably the greatest baseball game ever played, Carlton Fisk ... hit a long ball toward left field in Fenway Park. It seemed to curve foul, but Fisk gyrated his body, put some English on the air space between home plate and the arching ball, and bent its trajectory right into the left field foul pole—thus winning the game as he jiggled around the bases.³

Fisk’s ambition was not to create a great game, for the amazement of the spectators and the wonderment of sports historians. Arguably it would have counted as even closer than it was, and even greater, had it gone to a 13th inning. And Fisk was not aiming for the foul pole.

Spectator sports are not quite show business, even if spectators pick up the tab. This of course is the way we want it, even when our interest in who wins is partly or largely make-believe.

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³ Stephen Jay Gould, “The Virtues of Nakedness,” in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 37, No. 15 (October 11, 1990), p. 3.