

Basketball; Seattle SuperSonics; United States—Race relations | University of Nebraska Press | Paperback, 223 pages | 2006 | \$13.95 | ISBN 0-8032-9354-2 (978-0803293540) | Originally published by Crown Publishers in 1999

“A risky and brilliant book.... It compares favorably to Frederick Exley’s classic *A Fan’s Notes*. It is an emotional journey into Jock Culture’s heart of darkness..... Shields [is] willing to write himself naked about the hungers and envies that move across the grandstand like the wave.”—Robert Lipsyte, *The New York Times*

“. . . brilliant . . . In *Black Planet*, Shields uses his gift for mediated observation to astounding effect. He has produced one of the best books ever written on the subject of sport in America, which is to say a book that is about a great deal more than sport. . . . *Black Planet* not only investigates the tension between the grimness and the grace, but implies that we can’t have one without the other. Our obsession with race is what gives our obsession with basketball its thrill, its texture and, yes, its color.”—A.O. Scott, *Newsday*

Issues of race have consumed the United States since its colonial beginnings. *Black Planet* is ostensibly and superficially about the Seattle SuperSonics’ relatively unremarkable 1994-1995 season. The diary follows the Sonics’ struggle to overcome their own divisions and achieve a successful season. However, the description of that effort is overwhelmed by the analysis of how sports, rather than offering a refuge from the troubled black-white relationship at the core of the American experience, both complicate and magnify that relationship. Instead of a look inside an ephemeral season in the NBA, David Shields produces a six-month diary that gives tight, uncomfortable scrutiny to the nature of being a white fan of a mostly black sport.

Absorbed in the NBA and the culture it creates, Shields burrows so deeply beneath the surface that the reader forgets how well the Sonics are doing: the petty drama of wins and losses is replaced by the abiding drama of the lives of the players themselves, and the fans who follow them. He delves into the remarkable tension within this relationship, exploring its ramifications and expressions with exactitude. The result is the production of an X-ray of not just race relations and himself but the reader as well: we are all involved in the strife the book describes.

### Discussion Questions

1. In analyzing the Sonics’ season, the author makes a point of his position as a writer who primarily observes the actions of Gary Payton, Shawn Kemp, and other players. This position gives him the authority to frame the season to suit his own goals, while the players exist solely as figures who can be manipulated by the author. At the same time, he expresses envy of the players’ sheer physical skills; the players are also financially secure, while he scrambles to meet the financial burden of following/covering the team. How do these elements underscore the power dynamic he returns to throughout the book?
2. *Black Planet* is firmly set in the Puget Sound region, and the locals’ response to “their” team is the central off-court element of the season. To what degree does *Black Planet* rely on an

exploration of the racial dynamic unique to the Seattle area? How would the book differ if were set in another U.S. region? Or would the dynamic be essentially the same in any city with an NBA team?

3. The issue of slavery persists in *Black Planet* as a lingering key to the relationship between blacks and whites. Black players in the NBA become millionaires through their physical talents, which, as free agents, they are able to sell to the highest bidder—typically, a team with white ownership. However, the players are still being evaluated as essentially physical talents: judged for their bodies, not their minds. In the introductory note, the author observes that these players “have some of the power, much of the money, and all of the fun.” How, then, does the legacy created by slavery exert itself in the NBA and other sports leagues that judge blacks by their physical productivity?

4. One of *Black Planet*'s apparent goals is to make the sports fan see the deeper meaning of the sports he follows and recognize the complexities involved in being a fan. Do you agree with the author's arguments about the constant subtexts to the basketball season he describes? Or do you think that people can and should watch, say, the NBA without implicating themselves in the deeper meanings of the game?

5. Consider the substantial changes in the NBA in the decade-plus since the season described in this book. These changes include the simultaneous emergence of white, European players and high school graduates, usually black, as significant presences in the game. How have the changes influenced the racial dynamic under examination in *Black Planet*? Do you think the book's issues were particular to its setting? Or do they remain relevant in today's basketball landscape?

6. *Black Planet* is the product of both the author's examination of his own life and his analysis of the environment in which he lives. However, the internalized nature of his diary frequently overwhelms the broader setting for the book. Its original reviewers emphasized the deeply personal nature of the author's experience of this NBA season. Many of them nonetheless identified with his responses to it. Do you feel a kinship with his life as a fan, or is it something distant from you?

7. The author talks extensively about the failures of communication, whether between coach George Karl and his players, between blacks and whites, men and women, parents and children even Easterners and Westerners. He seems to say that communication inevitably falters and language fails to bridge the gap between people. In fact, the book closes with the line, “All that space is the space between us.” Do you think Shields puts too much stress on the inadequacy of language? Or is he correct in focusing so intently on what language fails to do?

8. Much of *Black Planet* is about the fantasies, dreams, and hidden thoughts that basketball and race inspire in the author. The game that's played on the court frequently appears to be only a spark for the game Shields and others perceive in their minds. The deeply internal nature of the diary also underlines the book's two central themes: the communication failures that plague the Sonics and everyone else in the book, and the extent to which racial images, biases, and stereotypes provide the constricting frame within which the game is played. How do these two themes interplay? How do you see them interact in your own life?

9. By emphasizing the community of the athletes themselves, Shields deflates the “us against them,” team-versus-team mindset many sports fans assume when cheering on their preferred teams. He sets the players’ shared experience on the court against the external “noise” of fans, the media, and everything outside the court. How does this perspective on sports change and undercut the meaning of the fans’ cheers?

10. In his introductory note, the author emphasizes how he has looked past the details of the Sonics’ season to focus, “to the point of obsession,” on the ways white people “think about and talk about” black people. How did this approach of explicitly turning the season into a vehicle for discussing other issues change your own experience of the season described by the book? Did you come to it with an interest in basketball and the Sonics themselves, or only in the racial issues the book focuses on? Or both?

11. The author reveals many intimate elements of his personal/private life in the course of his journey watching the Sonics’ season. Shields occasionally feels embarrassed by the seeming absurdity of leaving his wife and toddler daughter for the night to watch strangers play basketball. He also worries over possible signs of a stutter emerging in his daughter. Yet he continues to pull himself away from her to watch the Sonics play. How does the conflict between his life as a father and his life as a basketball fan exemplify the themes of distance and miscommunication in *Black Planet*?

12. A reviewer of *Black Planet* praised its critique of the “please-everyone Seattle attitude” that seeks to eliminate drama and tension from life. Thinking about the many moments in the book when codes of etiquette and courtesy are either broken or upheld, do you see the author as truly rebelling against this attitude? Also, how do these codes exemplify the racial tensions being explored in the book?