

Body Politic: The Great American Sports Machine

Written by David Shields

Nonfiction – Literary | University of Nebraska Press | Paperback | 2007 | \$16.95 | 978-0-8032-6032-0 | Originally published by Simon & Schuster in 2004

ABOUT THIS BOOK

“[Shields is] one of the most necessary, if discomfiting, commentators on American sports today. In this collection of slyly observant, personally inflected essays, he patiently lays out the various elements of athletic myth that come wrapped seamlessly around other signature American obsessions—money, celebrity, self-reliance and, most of all, race.”—Chris Lehman, *Washington Post*

The sporting arena is effectively our only national cathedral, the one place where we all gather to study our national mythology. Shields relentlessly examines the way we tell our sports stories, both fictional and nonfictional; considers the kinds of athletes we choose as heroes; delineates the lessons and values we glean from sports; explores the intricate and telling relationships between athletes, coaches, fans, black and white players, immigrant and native players, male and female players, players and broadcasters, players and fans, players and advertisers . . . and in the process shows us the stories we Americans tell ourselves about the kind of people we believe ourselves to be.

Chapter by chapter, a portrait emerges of a country both in conflict with itself and in denial about the sort of nation it has become. Shields turns his scrutiny on Charles Barkley, the faux-rebellious NBA star turned broadcaster who packages conventional platitudes as outrageousness, thus giving us the comforting sense that our American complacency is a form of glamorous rebellion; on two college teammates and best friends—female basketball players, one a fundamentalist Christian, the other exuberantly irreligious—whose unlikely friendship reflects our national struggle to believe without submitting to the strictures of belief; on the changes wrought in the sporting landscape by Asian immigrants to baseball’s major leagues and European immigrants to the NBA; on the history of the tattoo in the NBA, and the complex reaction to it by players, team owners, and fans; on the narrative conventions of sports movies; on the behavior of white coaches and their relationship to black players; on the fragile psychology and short career span of the garden-variety athlete. . . . Gradually, the reader sees the outline take form of an America that believes itself to be simultaneously (and impossibly) the Best of All Possible Countries and a land of perpetual rebellion. To read this book is to understand the essential mystery of early 21st-century America: a country utterly at odds with itself, perpetually believing in its own restlessness as it settles back into the pillows of Empire.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what ways does the narrator's stutter draw him to the fluency of language in announcers like Howard Cosell and athletes like Charles Barkley? Specifically, how does mimicking Cosell help the narrator, at least for a while, get outside his stutter? How do sports help all of us get outside ourselves?
2. How are sports used in the book to connect to something larger than ourselves? How does the narrator's own journey into his obsessions reveal out culture's capacity for myth-making?
3. Consider the drive of most ancient myths—the way they touch deeper nerves of human failing; do sports function in this way or is the function of these new modern myths something else?
4. In "Heaven Is a Playground," Shields explores the depth of his love for sports movies, most of which center around a losing team or individual who rises above impossible odds and triumphs. In what ways does this inform America's image as a place in which all of us can make something of ourselves?
5. In what ways is Charles Barkley both a truth teller and a scam artist?
6. The narrator debunks myths about the difference between the East and West coasts of America, and yet the myths persist. Why?
7. As much as we are drawn to the brilliant play or to the winning team, we also have a huge capacity to enjoy failure (blooper reels being just one example). What is the draw?
8. In "Bring the Pain," in what ways do athletes show us how we, too, can be our own worst enemies?
9. If sports is a story or narrative, what is the plot?
10. Compare the figures of Loree Payne and Kayla Burt in "Being Random Is the Key to Life." What do they tell us about what the difference between the image we present to the world and the reality of our interior selves?
11. After reading the book, do you still believe that Howard Cosell saved the narrator's life? If so, how and why? Shields writes, "Howard Cosell showed me the way across; he showed me where to look and, looking, how to stand." How exactly did Cosell show Shields where to look and how to stand?
12. Why is the book called *Body Politic*?

13. What are we meant to take away from the last chapter—the epilogue—of the book? Why tattoos? Can you think of other ways in which the book explores how we are “stamped”? Consider this line: “The body has no meaning. We bring meaning to it.”
14. Is this really a book about sports?
15. Who is your favorite athlete and why?
16. Before reading *Body Politic*, had you ever read any of David Shields’s other books about sports? Do you see any themes connecting *Heroes*, *Black Planet*, *Body Politic*, and “*Baseball Is Just Baseball*”: *The Understated Ichiro*?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Shields is the author of ten books of fiction and nonfiction, including the *New York Times* bestseller *The Thing About Life Is That One Day You’ll Be Dead* (which was published by Knopf last year and is now available as a Vintage paperback), *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (which is forthcoming from Knopf in February 2010), *Black Planet: Facing Race during an NBA Season* (a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award), *Remote: Reflections on Life in the Shadow of Celebrity* (winner of the PEN Revson Award), and *Dead Languages: A Novel* (winner of the PEN Syndicated Fiction Award). His work has been translated into ten languages.

The chair of the 2007 National Book Awards nonfiction panel, he has received a Guggenheim fellowship, two NEA fellowships, an Ingram Merrill Foundation Award, a Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation grant, and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship. His essays and stories have appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Harper’s*, *Yale Review*, *Village Voice*, *Salon*, *Slate*, *McSweeney’s*, and *Believer*, and he’s written reviews for the *New York Times Book Review*, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, *Boston Globe*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He lives with his wife and daughter in Seattle, where he is a professor of English at the University of Washington; he is also a member of the faculty in Warren Wilson College’s low-residency MFA Program for Writers, in Asheville, North Carolina.

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