

Novels – Basketball players; Iowa | University of Nebraska Press | Paperback, 335 pages | 2004 | \$16.95 | ISBN 0-8032-9317-8 (978-0803293175) | Originally published by Simon & Schuster in 1984

“David Shields is such a keen observer of humanity that plot becomes secondary, and his seemingly offhand observations about the nature of life in the middle of the country take over the book in a most satisfying manner. This is the kind of novel that, after you finish it, you pick up the phone and recommend it to friends.”—Bob Greene, *Chicago Tribune*

“*Heroes* takes the reader into the not-so-pure world of college basketball and its impact on the personal and professional life of one local journalist. Although *Heroes* was first published in 1984, the relentless growth of big-time college sports during the past 25 years has made its themes even more relevant now. Set in an Iowa college town, the novel also shows the ways in which basketball reflects the larger dramas of life and the dilemmas it involves. Albert Biederman faces a conflict between his journalistic instinct to uncover an ugly scandal and his shying away from the harm his work would cause. His conflict exemplifies the difficult choice any whistle-blower faces between pursuing the broader good and doing so by harming people he knows.

In his introduction, former *New York Times* sports columnist Ira Berkow notes that *Heroes* “goes beyond the bounds” of its surface subject: “from a good seat and perspective in the press box,” the novel tells its reader about the dynamic of watching the action rather than participating in it. The aging Biederman can no longer grasp the transcendence basketball once provided him. Yet he still pursues it through his reporting and the figure of a lone inner-city star who appears to provide what one reviewer called “proof that there still is purity, perfection, transcendence in the world.” Biederman’s hope is for Menkus to give him a release from “regular time” and his modest life. By focusing on Biederman’s pursuit, *Heroes* probes the larger issue of whether we can use vicariousness to infuse the workaday world with new significance. It also shows us how to continue drawing significance from ordinary life if and when that transcendence fails to emerge.

Discussion Questions

1. *Heroes* begins with Albert Biederman describing how urban renewal has “ruined this town.” The novel goes on to describe the emptying out of River City: its historic buildings are replaced by shopping malls and parking lots. How does this process reflect the novel’s focus on Biederman’s attempt to recover his youthful enthusiasm for basketball through Belvyn Menkus?
2. Basketball lifts Biederman out of the uninspired routines that make up much of his life. Biederman calls Menkus “the first player to stir my imagination in eighteen years of covering River State basketball” and claims to be willing to “trade a year of my life” for two hours inside Menkus’s skin. How do the tangled realities of Biederman’s later relationship to Menkus reveal this as false escapism?

3. Biederman's son, Barry, is an extremely unathletic boy; he has a diabetic condition that requires frequent insulin shots. Barry's infirmities present a sharp contrast to Menkus's athletic grace, yet in some ways Biederman seems more comfortable with the homely task of caring for his son than in reporting on Menkus's basketball brilliance. How does this comparison illuminate Biederman's character?
4. The central narrative of *Heroes* is Biederman's discovery of the academic fraud that allowed Menkus to attend River State. Biederman eventually decides against exploiting this discovery to break a major news story that would land him at a big-city newspaper. What does Biederman's handling of the situation tell us about his true desires?
5. Biederman's wife, Deborah, is deeply analytical and intellectual; she is a stark contrast to Biederman's search for transcendence through sports. Her long-term, academic perspective focuses on examining the past rather than living in the present and reporting on day-to-day events. Yet she's also able to recognize the "athlete's grace" in Menkus. Why does Biederman remain drawn to her even while having his affair with Vicki Lynch?
6. A vignette in the middle of *Heroes* describes Biederman's trip to Los Angeles to see his dying father and attend the ensuing funeral. The father lives for tennis but is distant from his son. Biederman emphasizes the failure of "sports clichés about getting tough" in the face of his father's heart attack. How does the father's death show Biederman the limitations of sport in the face of real life and his son's frailty?
7. Biederman's infidelity to his wife and the revelation of Raeburn's transgressions unfold gradually over the course of the novel. Are we meant to see these two men as parallel characters and to compare their moral failings? If so, what elevates Biederman above Raeburn's morality?
8. Midwestern states such as Iowa, Indiana, and Kansas are known for being unusually devoted to high school and college basketball. Biederman shares this devotion to prep basketball but also wants to escape a fairly small Iowa city for the more urban atmosphere of Milwaukee. Yet at his job interview with the *Milwaukee Journal* he says he "couldn't" reveal the Menkus story that would have given him that job. Before the interview, he says his investigation left him with only "a love letter from myself to the game." Why is Biederman more loyal to the basketball culture of his Iowa town than to his journalistic ambition? Why is he comfortable with this seeming downfall in status?
9. What is the meaning of the contrast between Deborah Biederman's academic life and the pure talent and unformed intelligence of Belvyn Menkus? *Heroes* examines the basic conflict between athletics and academics that arises when young men are expected to devote at least as much time to playing a sport for their college as they do to their studies. How would the academic scandal at the center of the novel's plot play out today?
10. Compare Vicki Lynch's aggressive pursuit of the Menkus story with Biederman's growing reluctance and eventual decision not to exploit the story for his professional gain. In their last phone conversation, Vicki tells Biederman, "You're happy here." Why is Vicki more devoted to her profession than Biederman is?
11. Menkus is viewed solely through Biederman's perspective, and we learn more about him through Biederman's research and thoughts than through the direct things he says and does.

Given that *Heroes* focuses in part on the ways Menkus is manipulated by larger forces, why do you think the author chose to portray Menkus indirectly? How does this choice underline the novel's theme of vicariousness?