In Search of the Female Sportswriter: A Mass Communication Mystery

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If you were a girl in the early 1900s, you were an eyewitness to many changes in society: there were new technologies like the wireless telegraph (soon to morph into the wireless telephone, or radio), and popular modes of entertainment like motion pictures (they were silent at this point, but by the mid-1920s, there would be the “talkies” too). While most girls were still being encouraged to think of marriage and children as their main goal in life, a growing number of young women were graduating high school,¹ and some were even going to college. With literacy rates continuing to rise, reading for pleasure grew as a popular pastime, and both boys and girls enjoyed it.

In past generations, many books for girls had focused on home and family and finding the right man to marry, but the 1910s and 1920s brought exciting adventure stories of girls who knew how to fly airplanes; girls who had their own automobiles and drove them to interesting places; girls who knew something about the new mass medium of radio; girls who wanted to be movie stars; girls who loved the great outdoors; and girls who were amateur detectives.

In several of the books for girls, journalism was part of the plot: the lead character worked as a reporter, either for her high school newspaper or for a publication owned by her father, as we saw in the 1908 book Dorothy Dale, a Girl of To-day. In the first book of the series, the pseudonymous Margaret Penrose introduced us to Dorothy, who sometimes helped her father, Major Frank Dale, to cover stories. But while we were told he ran a local newspaper called The Bugle, there was no mention of anyone covering sports—a strange omission given how popular
schoolboy and amateur sports were at the local level back then. And although we know from historical photographs, as well as mentions in newspapers, that many women and girls attended sporting events, especially baseball games, Dorothy never mentioned any interest in baseball, or any other sport. And Dorothy was not alone. Equally strange is that although many of these female characters were depicted as independent, inquisitive, and adventuresome, they seemed totally uninterested in participating in (or even keeping up with) sports. And lest you think that was a quirk of the 1910s and 1920s, even in the late 1930s, we could still see the same pattern. In 1937, a fictional newspaper reporter named Torchy Blane (played by Glenda Farrell) made her movie debut. She was attractive and confident, described as a “fast-talking, wisecracking” female reporter. She helped to solve a murder, but sports were not her beat. Similarly, the character of Lois Lane appeared for the first time, in Action Comics in June 1938 (the same issue where the Superman character also debuted), but as with Torchy, there was no mention of Lois ever reporting on sports.

Agreed, during the 1910s-1940s, there were not a lot of women sportswriters that authors could have used as inspiration. But there were a few. One of the best known was Ina Eloise Young, who wrote about college sports, as well as semipro and minor league baseball, for the Trinidad (Colorado) News. She reported from 1906 to 1912, and some of her work was picked up by newspapers in bigger cities like Denver and Fort Worth. She even covered the 1908 World Series and was praised by her male colleagues for her knowledge of the game. Later, in the 1930s, Marion Foster Downer, then-wife of former Negro Leagues player Fred Downer, sometimes covered the Negro Leagues All-Star game for the Chicago Defender, and Nell Dodson (later Nell Dodson Russell) reported on college football, track and field, and Negro Leagues baseball for the Baltimore Afro-American. During the war years, when many men were
serving in the military, a few more women stepped up, including Willa Bea Harmon of the Kansas City Call, another sportswriter who covered everything from boxing to track to the Negro Leagues. But even if there were no women covering sports in real life, fiction writers could easily have invented some, the way they invented female pilots or female detectives or female crime reporters. And yet, for some reason, they did not.

In the movies of the 1910s-1930s, the number of women sportswriters wasn’t much greater than it was in books. Filmgoers could see the occasional “girl reporter” (as women journalists were often called back then) like Torchy Brown or Tess Harding (played by Katharine Hepburn in the 1942 comedy-drama Woman of the Year), but women characters who covered sports were few and far between. One of the only films with a female sports reporter came from the silent era. It not only featured a female character who wrote about sports, but she was also a ballplayer—and a good one. “The Tomboy,” was described in print as a “comedy-drama,” and it came out in the spring of 1921. It introduced us to Minnie Ann Thomas, played by Eileen Percy, a young woman who dressed in overalls, and who was the star of a local baseball team. (This would not have been implausible to many movie-goers: at that time, there were numerous “Bloomer Girl” teams that barnstormed all over the country; some of them competing against men’s teams.)

But Minnie was such a good hitter (the “Babe Ruth” of her team) that she played on teams with the boys. She was also willing to report on sports: it was she who encouraged the local newspaper to start a “sporting page,” and she became its editor. However, there was more to her decision to be cover sports than just a love of baseball. The movie’s plot involved a gang of bootleggers that was selling illegal booze and harming people in the community, including her own father; Minnie believed some of these shady characters hung around the ballpark, and she
wanted an excuse to meet them. If she could learn more about their operation, she could ultimately drive the gang out of town. Of course, even the filmgoers who found Minnie’s independence charming still expected Mr. Right to come along and help her learn to become more traditionally feminine (a plot device as old as Shakespeare’s “The Taming of the Shrew”). Minnie was no “shrew,” but the implication for this and many other movies was that what a “tomboy” really needed was a husband. In the end, Minnie won the heart of a handsome young man (a government revenue agent, played by Hal Cooley), who helped her to rid the town of the criminal element; presumably, the two married and lived happily ever after, but since no copies of the film seem to have survived, what we know about it is derived from movie reviews in newspapers and trade publications.

It wasn’t until the 1940s when we would see any other female sports reporters in movies. In the 1940 film The Leather-Pushers, a comedy-drama (more comedy than drama) starring Richard Arlen and Andy Devine, the female character seemed more invested in sports than some other women reporters in films. Astrid Allwyn played Pat Danbury, a newspaper reporter; as the plot unfolded, she was determined to use her column to bring about the downfall of an unscrupulous boxing promoter who was fixing matches. In addition to her interest in a good feature story, she was very familiar with boxing, something she learned from her father. Her articles were regularly on the sports page (where some readers thought “Pat” was a man). At the newspaper, her colleagues seemed to have accepted that one of the sportswriters was female, whether readers realized it or not. She had also earned the (sometimes grudging) respect of her editor, Henry “Mitch” Mitchell, who said after one exasperating debate about her criticism of an advertiser, “Heaven sent me one good newspaperman, and it had to wear skirts!” There is some romance, and several plot twists, including Miss Danbury becoming the manager of boxer “Kid”
Roberts (played by Richard Arlen) after winning his contract in a raffle. But throughout the film, it is obvious that the Pat Danbury character knows boxing and cares about the men who are involved in it.

A somewhat different, and more traditional take on the female sports reporter could be found in another boxing film, from 1944: *The Contender*, co-starring Buster Crabbe and Arline Judge. It was also described in newspapers as a “comedy-drama.” In it, the character of Linda Martin (played by Judge) was a columnist and feature writer. While her character did not seem to regularly cover sports, she was always seeking an interesting story. When she met Gary Farrell (played by Crabbe), a handsome former truck driver turned boxer, who seemed to be on a path that might lead him to a championship, she decided to write about him. But when we saw her at ringside covering his matches, she seemed more interested in him than in boxing. This was not surprising: screenwriters of that era frequently created female characters who were only working until they could find a husband; they might be good reporters, but in the end, once they found true love, they willingly said goodbye to their career. Thus, a woman in a non-traditional occupation like sportswriting was there mainly as a love interest for the hero, rather than as a woman who enjoyed reporting about sports.

In addition to the archetype of the female reporter who was really in search of a husband, there was the archetype of the female reporter who was unexpectedly asked to cover something she knew nothing about, and her struggles provided readers with considerable amusement. As far back as the 1890s, it was widely believed by male sportswriters that women knew nothing about the game. If they attended, even on “Ladies Day,” it was because their husband or brother was playing. But few women could make sense of what was going on, since the typical woman “doesn’t understand a hit from a foul ball.” And the clueless woman at the ballpark had already
been a staple of jokes and patronizing comments for decades. In line with this belief, some editors thought it would be amusing to send a women’s page reporter, someone who generally wrote about food and fashion and family, to write about baseball. The assumption was that she would not know anything about it and come back with a column that the readers would find entertaining. (However, a few women reporters refused to be underestimated: one good example was syndicated columnist Idah McGlone Gibson. Like most women of her day, she was expected to write about the arts or about homemaking. But in 1912, she wrote a series of articles about some major league ballplayers and managers she had interviewed, and the questions she asked them proved she knew what she was talking about.)

Yet, the stereotypical belief that women couldn’t understand sports persisted; it was still around in 1951, when it was utilized in the comedy *Angels in the Outfield*. As the movie opened, reporter Jennifer Paige (played by Janet Leigh) was sitting in the press box at a Pittsburgh Pirates game. She delivered a monologue in which she explained that baseball was not something she knew much about—her normal job was working on the “women’s page,” offering helpful hints for the housewives. But her editor wanted an article about why the Pirates were such an awful team that year, and he wanted it from “the woman’s angle.” And that led her to write a column criticizing the Pirates’ manager, Aloysius X. “Guffy” McGovern (played by Paul Douglas), for his vulgarity, and his cruelty towards his players. She said his behavior was to blame for why the team was losing. It was the kind of “human interest” story that women were often expected to write, the kind not generally found on the sports pages of that time. Later, when she saw Guffy at a restaurant, she asked his opinion of her article, but she was quick to point out that she wasn’t really a sportswriter. And yet, there she was at the next game, and the one after that, trying to
learn the slang and trying to understand what was going on, as her male colleagues regarded her with amusement.

The movie’s other plot device was angels: they were visible to an adorable young orphan girl who had been praying for the Pirates to win. Eventually, they were visible to Guffy too: they offered to help the Pirates win if he would just change his vulgar and combative ways. Jennifer then wrote an article about the manager who talked to angels, which led to further complications for Guffy. (It also led to a clever scene that featured cameo appearances by several celebrities, including Bing Crosby and Joe DiMaggio, who weighed in on whether angels were helping the Pirates). But Jennifer the reporter was soon replaced by Jennifer who was attracted to Guffy (and the feeling was mutual). And by the movie’s end, not only had the Pirates become a winning team, but another miracle occurred: the orphan girl found a couple who wanted to adopt her (Guffy and Jennifer). And whether Jennifer became a baseball fan or not (or whether she would have become a successful sportswriter) wasn’t important: the main thing was that she found true love.

In 1955, we were introduced to another fictional character who covered sports: Gloria Thorpe, in the hit Broadway musical “Damn Yankees.” Another woman in a man’s world, she wrote about baseball, and was among those who initially accepted that Joe Hardy, the Washington Senators’ amazing new player, was exactly who he claimed to be; she even gave him the nickname “Shoeless Joe from Hannibal, Mo.” But gradually, she became suspicious of his origin story. Eager to get a scoop, she began investigating, and she also questioned the mysterious Applegate (who, unbeknownst to everyone, was actually the Devil in disguise). But Applegate was able to outsmart Gloria; he tricked her into spreading a false rumor that Joe took a
bribe and threw a game in the past, which put Joe’s success (and his soul) in jeopardy—until a last-minute plot twist saved him.

The role of Gloria was first played on stage by Rae Allen, who reprised it when the play became an equally popular movie in 1958. But if you looked for Gloria in “The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant,” the 1954 book by Douglass Wallop, upon which the musical was based, she wasn’t there. Instead, the inquisitive baseball writer who becomes suspicious of Joe Hardy was a pipe-smoking male columnist named Luster Head. Since Wallop helped to develop the stage adaptation of his novel, he may have had a part in the decision to change from a male reporter to a female one, but I have seen no interviews in which he discusses it. As for Gloria on stage and in film, the character seems more aligned with Jennifer, the female human interest reporter from Angels in the Outfield, who, eager to get a good scoop, inadvertently causes problems. And depending on the reviewer, many identify Gloria’s character simply as “a reporter,” or they focused on qualities often associated with women: a “nosy reporter” or even a “prying reporter.” (It is worth noting that historically, including in folk-tales, as well as in films and on TV, women have been depicted as excessively curious, which often gets them into trouble.) Meanwhile, far fewer newspaper articles specified that Gloria Thorpe was a sports reporter, or depicted her neutrally.

By the 1970s and 80s, second wave feminism had brought numerous women (myself among them) into non-traditional occupations. Thanks to Title IX, there were now more women playing sports, and there were also a few more women becoming sportswriters—a fact not everyone was happy about. One woman baseball writer, Melissa Ludtke of Sports Illustrated, had to sue Major League Baseball in 1977 for the right to go into the locker room like her male colleagues and interview players. But in film and on TV, there were still not many female
characters who covered sports. Television had some popular programs about fictional newsrooms, and those programs featured women who were producers or researchers, or reporters. Among the best-known female newsroom characters were Mary Richards (Mary Tyler Moore) and Murphy Brown (Candice Bergen). There were also fictional reporters at magazines and newspapers, including lifestyle columnist Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), and music magazine writer Sabrina Spellman (Melissa Joan Hart). And what they all had in common was none of them covered sports.

In the books of this period, however, there were a few female sportswriters, such as in the 1981 novel by David Ritz, *The Man Who Brought the Dodgers Back to Brooklyn*. It had a woman baseball writer named Oran Ellis (there was also a female ballplayer, a pitcher named Ruth Smelkinson.) And in Richard D. Rosen’s award-winning 1984 murder mystery *Strike Three, You’re Dead*, the lead character, Harvey Blissberg, centerfielder for the fictional Providence Jewels, was dating television sportscaster Mickey Slavin, whose beat included providing TV reports on how the Jewels were doing. But as society changed, fiction, especially the murder mystery genre, caught up. Thus far, there had been female characters in a few novels, although some only played a minor role in the plot. But in the late 1980s, there was finally a series where a female sportswriter was the lead character. This series also stood out because the author was a former sportswriter for the *Toronto Star*: Alison Gordon used her own extensive knowledge of covering a professional sports team (she was major league baseball’s first female beat writer, who traveled with the Toronto Blue Jays) to create the fictional baseball writer and sleuth Kate Henry.

In chapter one of the first book in the series, *The Dead Pull Hitter*, Katherine “Kate” Henry described herself as a “baseball writer by trade,” who had spent the past five years
covering the American League’s Toronto Titans for the Toronto Planet. She was a forty-year-old woman, self-described as “tallish, prettyish, and a lot more interesting than most of the people I write about.” And she genuinely loved baseball. She also loved writing about it, and was confident in her reporting skills, although she noted that some of her male colleagues had been waiting for years for her to fail. But she did not fail, and she finally “earned some grudging respect.”

The other Kate Henry crime novels included Safe at Home, Night Game, Striking Out, and Prairie Hardball, and they received many favorable reviews. Critics applauded Gordon’s insider knowledge of baseball, her respect for her characters, and her ability to tell a compelling story. For example, one reviewer, praising Night Game, said it was “a mystery with all hits and no errors.”

One other former sports reporter, Jane Leavy, who had been at the Washington Post, also wrote a book that featured a baseball writer as the lead character, but Leavy’s was no murder mystery. Rather, Squeeze Play, published in 1990, was described by critics as a “funny, terribly raunchy…most entertaining novel about being a woman baseball beat writer.” The fictional writer, A.B. (Ariadne Bloom) Berkowitz, covered the Washington Senators for the Trib, a fictional tabloid. Written like a diary, Berkowitz not only reported on the team but revealed the hypocrisy of the team’s televangelist owner, while using humor (and sometimes vulgarity) to call out the sexism female reporters encountered as they tried to do their job.

Since the 1990s, there have been a few more books that either features women sportswriters in key roles or focused the plot around them, including a series of baseball-themed murder mysteries by Jen Estes, the first of which, Big Leagues, was published in 2011. Estes, the pride of Neoga, Illinois, was always a devoted baseball fan (her favorite team was the Chicago Cubs). She worked as a freelance writer and sports blogger before writing her first novel,
which featured Catriona “Cat” McDaniel, a rookie sportswriter, who has just gotten her dream job, covering the Las Vegas Chips. Three subsequent Cat McDaniel novels in the series followed, Curveball, Double Play, and Brushback. All were well-reviewed.

These days, while we can find the occasional novel with a woman who covers sports, it is still not as common as the novels where the woman covers every other beat except sports. The same is true for television and films, where a female sports fan might be somewhere in the plot, but the woman who loves sports, and covers them for a living, is rarely the protagonist. That is puzzling, given the number of actual newspapers and magazines where women now work as sports reporters, and the many radio and television programs where there is a woman on the broadcast team – including some women who do play-by-play or offer color commentary. At least it is no longer unusual to read books where women characters like sports, or devotedly follow their favorite team. And fortunately, the stereotype of the clueless female who has no idea what a fly ball is no longer dominates comedy routines. But given how many young women and girls participate in sports, it still seems like a missed opportunity that they have so few opportunities to encounter female characters who love sports just as much as they do.

3 Roberta A. Cohn, “Look Up on the Shelf! Author Provides a Definitive Account of Superman’s Jewish Ties,” St. Louis Jewish Light, November 3, 2021: 15A.
10 “Anecdotes and a Story or Two,” Detroit Free Press, April 17, 1910: part 5, p. 4.


Oline H. Cogdill, “Author Batting 1.000 with Sport Mysteries,” *Fort Lauderdale South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, June 13, 1993: 9D.


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