The Image of the Sports Journalist in Novels

Alan Tomlinson
University of Brighton UK

alangtomlinson@gmail.com

A surprising gap

There continues to be an intriguing lack of novels featuring the sports journalist as a significant character or protagonist, a kind of lacuna given the rising profile of sport over the last century. The interests of the media and sport have dovetailed as at its highest levels élite sport has become a global commodity, also linked to forms of consumption in clothing and style in the cultural industries of the more affluent economies of the advanced world. Sport as a theme has been powerfully employed in novels as either a contextual frame or a metaphorical device. In setting contexts, the world of sport is presented as embedded in identifiable or credible narratives specified by particular details of time and place, narratives which may be in particular places specific to certain cultures. As metaphor, sport and its purported values are identified as sources influencing the choices we make as to how our lives might be lived, accessed as a kind of playbook for everyday ethical behaviour. In these uses of sport in fiction there are no fixed outcomes, despite the ethical and moral high ground that is often claimed for particular models of sporting practice. Sport can enrich a life, or threaten it, at all of its participatory levels from the recreational to the highest level of performance and performativity. Numerous novels feature sport in these ways.

For instance, in relatively recent U.S. fiction, Don Delillo’s Underworld is framed by a long opening section of more than a hundred pages covering an historic real-life event, the third of a three-game play-off between the Dodgers and the Giants at the Polo Grounds, New
York, in early October 1951. The stakes were high: the winning side would claim the National League’s championship pennant. Bobby Thomson’s home run pitched the Giants’ player and his team-mates into baseball legend, on a day that the Soviet Union sparked a new phase of international conflict by exploding a nuclear bomb.¹ Delillo depicts the importance of such a moment in a national sport event played, witnessed and experienced in a context of exclusive masculinity, but also transcending class divisions in the bleachers as celebrity figures, including Frank Sinatra, are captivated by the game in just the same fashion as are ticketless adolescent kids from the neighbourhood who have leapt the turnstiles into the stadium. One such kid, Cotter Martin, makes off with the ball that Thomson has powered into the terraces, establishing a core theme in the narrative – a search for the ball by collectors, including Nick Shay, who for $34,500 has bought himself a cherished object that can remind him of that unforgettable moment in 1951, back when the world seemed simpler, when sport could cast its spell on those present, on achievements and moments that could not be diluted by replays, or endless forensic re-analysis of great and memorable performances. Delillo makes use of a real-world historical event whose consequences embrace a wide range of fictional characters. The late British writer and novelist Gordon Burn noted in an essay in The Guardian Review that “Underworld … has been called America’s great love song to baseball”.² But in that love song there is no role for the sports journalist, beyond the narration and commentary of the action of that history-making feat that ensured Bobby Thomson’s life-long fame.

In this essay I revisit two well-established U.S. novels in which particular roles are played by sports journalists/writers: Bernard Malamud’s The Natural (1952) and Richard Ford’s The Sportswriter (1986); and a very much less well-known novel, The Man Who

¹ See Jeffrey Hill, Sport and the Literary Imagination: Essays in History, Literature and Sport (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 95-96.
Hated Football (2004), by UK journalist Will Buckley. The focus is on the representation of three male sports journalists or sportswriters, following essentially male-dominated sports: Max Mercy in The Natural, always chasing the background story or scoop concerning the world of baseball; Frank Bascombe in The Sportswriter, more feature-writer than “beat” journalist; and Jimmy Stirling, a disillusioned soccer-hating football journalist covering the top tiers of English football/soccer. These three novels cover over half-a-century, focusing upon different sports at different times, and feature respectively the sports journalist as fixer/opportunist, failed careerist, and fraudulent iconoclast. Yet the representation of the three figures shares some key emphases and themes: masculinity and patriarchy at the heart of the sports writing business; the sheer mundanity of the sports-journalistic task of reportage; and the negativity of the sports culture that has provided the backdrop to the career of generations of sports journalists.

Max Mercy

Max Mercy appears in the early pages of The Natural, in an opening section entitled “Pre-game”. He is introduced to the young Roy Hobbs, a pitcher of raw talent travelling by rail to Chicago for a try-out with the Chicago Cubs. Roy is accompanied on the journey by Sam Simpson, former baseball player for two seasons (1919-1921) for the St Louis Browns. Sam encounters an established star on the train, Walter the “Whammer” Wambold, travelling with Mercy to negotiate a bigger deal out East. The three men discuss a newspaper headline reporting the murders of an American Olympic runner and an all-American football ace, reporting their deaths by silver bullets shot from a .22 calibre pistol by an unknown woman. Mercy jokes to the Whammer that “he better watch out: “… she may be heading for a baseball player for the third victim” (p.18).

Sam recognises Mercy: “Excuse me, mister, but ain’t you Max Mercy, the sportswriter? I know your face from your photo in the articles you write” (pp.18-19). The third-person narrator then gives us a far from flattering picture of both Sam and Mercy:

But the sportswriter, who wore a comical moustache and dressed in stripes that criss-crossed three ways – suit, shirt and tie – a nervous man with voracious eyes, also had a sharp sense of smell and despite Sam’s shower and toothbrushing nosed out an alcoholic fragrance that slowed his usual speedy response in acknowledging the spread of his fame. (p. 19)

Sam’s drunkenness is later referenced by Mercy, though his first sight of Mercy was hardly impressive either, as he labelled the writer a “short, somewhat popeyed gent” (p.18). But the reputation of the writer now shifted Sam’s tone as he introduced Roy Hobbs to the “syndicated sportswriter” (p.20). It is clear from Mercy’s very first appearance that he is more than a mere sportswriter and that he is a dealmaker in the professional game, a gambler of sorts and a very bad loser. His influential journalistic writing gains Mercy access to the heart of the sports business and culture, creating also further spheres of interest such as involvement in financial aspects of the business.

A young woman, Harriet Bird, also meets the men, flirting with the Whammer and then favouring Roy after the youngster outpitches the Whammer in an improvised contest overseen by Mercy at a rail-side carnival. The sportswriter’s attitude to Sam and Roy is radically revised: “The sportswriter was greedy to know more, hinting he could do great things for the kid” (p.34), though rebuffed by Sam. The old St Louis “catcher,” though, had been injured during the contest between Roy and the Whammer, and dies as people are seeking to get him to hospital. Harriet Bird has also spurned Roy’s clumsy sexual advances and disappears.
Roy therefore arrives in Chicago truly alone, in awe of the scale of an urban jungle, warned by the lost Sam of the threats of “so many bums, sharers and gangsters” (p.37). Reaching his skyscraper hotel, settled in on the seventeenth floor and “standing higher than he ever had in his life except for a night or two on a mountain” (p.38), Roy anticipates an interview/trial with the Cubs in which he would “go in tomorrow and wow them with his fast one, and they would know him for the splendid pitcher he was” (p.38). But there would be no tryout, no tomorrow for Roy. Harriet Bird calls to invite him to her room in the same hotel. Roy is welcomed by a scantily clad all-but-naked figure who, donning a black feathered hat on her head and taking a small shining pistol from the hatbox, shoots him in the stomach.

Max Mercy, meanwhile, has seen the confidence of his protégé the Whammer dissipate in shame, and has no knowledge of where the young Roy has vanished in the big city. The opportunist sportswriter has lost his story.

Mercy reappears years later, when Roy Hobbs makes a mysterious debut in a top-level game with the New York Knights as an aging 34-year-old left fielder, after playing at semi-professional level for the Oomo Oilers. In his early days with the Knights Roy encounters Mercy, still dressed in an expensive striped suit. Roy looks away from the journalist, ashamed that his past might be revealed, as the club trainer Doc Casey introduces the veteran writer to him:

And the hawk-shaw with the eyes is Max Mercy, the famous sports columnist. Most newspaper guys are your pals and know when to keep their traps shut, but to Max a private life is a personal insult. Before you are here a week he will tell the public how much of your salary you send to your grandma and how good is your sex life. (p.52)

Max, whose moustache and sideburns are now greying, grants Doc Casey a hollow laugh, saying to Roy that he hadn’t caught his name. When the nervous parvenue utters “Roy Hobbs”, Mercy shows not the remotest sign of recognition. His curiosity would be aroused later as Roy Hobbs emerges from obscurity to local legend and national fame. Initially
though Roy, unpursued by an as-yet far from curious Mercy, makes his reputation with the bat – nicknamed Wonderboy - as well as in his catching. “He can catch everything in creation,” writes one anonymous journalist (p.81). And as his fame grows, more and more people want to know more about Roy’s origins and background, his life and career.

“Reporters kept after him for information and Max Mercy, who for some reason felt he ought to know a lot more about Roy than he did, worked a sharp pickaxe over his shadow but gathered no usable nugget” (p.89). Myths abound about Roy: he’d played as a kid for an orphan asylum team; his roving father was an itinerant worker, his mother said to be a burlesque actress: “Stingy with facts, Roy wouldn’t confirm a thing. Mercy sent a questionnaire to one thousand country papers in the West but there were no towns or cities that claimed the hero as their own” (p.90).

The local hero though was still all but on the breadline for a performer of such repute, on the meagre holding contract of $3,000 compared to some team-mates who were bringing in a hundred thousand whatever their form or impact. Roy, also calculating the odds in his romantic pursuit of Memo, widow of one of his former team-mates, would be negotiating for a flat $45,000 for the rest of the season, plus an agreed percentage of the gate money. His demands are not met, his patience stretched – whose wouldn’t be, in the strained situation in which he finds himself in the middle of his fourth decade? – and Max Mercy is now no longer holding back in his determination to find the untold story of the mysterious latecomer’s background.

Mercy tails Roy around the city, trying to get the memory right of where he’d previously known the man. “The mystery was like an itch. The more he scratched the more he drew his own blood” (p.97). Mercy directly addresses Roy in the street, emerging in sinister fashion from under a foggy street lamp on the corner, asking him how things had gone in his meeting with the club bosses concerning a raise. What is he hiding, Mercy probes:
“I ain’t hiding a thing” (p.98) counters Roy, going on to reject Mercy’s offer of five thousand dollars in cash from his paper for five three-thousand-word articles on his past life, also offering his help to Roy to write them. Roy turns down this offer but nevertheless goes along with the journalist to a celebrity eating-house where Mercy introduces him to the glass-eyed Gus Sands, known across the sport gambling networks as the Supreme Bookie. Well beyond his role as objective journalist, Mercy is now manipulating situations that might clinch for him a Scoop of the Season or even the Exposé of the Era.

Mercy – deliberately without sensitivity or shame – lets Sands know that the owner of the Knights, known to all as the Judge, has swatted away Roy’s financial demands. Sands lets it drop that he has had dubious financial dealings with the Judge. Roy is in effect being groomed into the networks of corruption in and around the professional game, with the Svengali-style Mercy creating the directions of travel for the rookie turned celebrity. Roy is immediately drawn into a series of on-the-spot bets with Sands, all won by the gambling guru: “Max just couldn’t stop cackling” (p.106), as Sands embraces Memo, the woman whom Roy is seeking to favour. Roy’s response is to dash from the table for a few minutes and on return to surprise the bookie, the journalist and the widower with a succession of magic tricks, plucking a duck’s egg from Memo’s bosom, a dead herring out of the astonished Mercy’s mouth, and pouring a torrent of silver dollars onto the bookie’s plate, seemingly from his nostrils. A salami is extracted from a “glum” Mercy’s pocket, a bunny from Memo’s purse, and from “Max’s size sixteen shirt collar, he teased out a pig tail” (p.107). All other action in the place grinds to a swift halt as the M.C. switches the spotlights to focus on Roy’s astonishing showmanship, exhibited like a veteran of a travelling circus or the star act of a carnival. The customers howl as “Max pulled out his black book and furiously scribbled in it” (p.107). The one-eyed Sands can see no way out, but his glass eye “gleamed like a lamp in a graveyard” (p.107). Memo laughs hysterically to the point at which tears drench her cheeks.
and face. The magician’s tricks do nothing to slow down the burgeoning interest of the public in the mysterious past of their new hero; and Mercy stimulates the fans to get behind Roy Hobbs, writing in his column that their hero, labelled El Swatto by the journalist, has been denied any pay rise by the Judge.

Part of Mercy’s manipulative strategy is to make Roy a superstar, and his column is followed by a grass-roots response among the fans to hold a Day for Roy at the Knights Field, at which the overwhelmed Roy expresses his intent to “do my best – the best I am able – to be the greatest there ever was in the game” (p.108). The scene is set for the rise of Roy and the re-emergence of the Knights as serious contenders for the national pennant as a streak of victories inspired by Roy’s batting and catching puts the team in touch with their rivals, the Phils and the Pirates. The Day for Roy generates a shower of gifts that sparks an observation from Roy that this is the happiest day of his life. These gifts include a Mercedes Benz, in which he roars off with the suitably impressed Memo for a drive together to Long Beach and the ocean. All seems to be going well for the hero: the renaissance of the baseball team; the adoring public; the material goods showered on him; the encouraging response of Memo to his approaches. But Roy’s relative naivete and innocence, along with the vacillations of sporting prowess and fame, and the ruthless pursuit of his story by the dogged Mercy, conspire against him.

By the end of the narrative, Roy Hobbs is no longer the would-be greatest player that ever there was; he suffers a slump in form, loses friends, supporters, and patrons, and abuses his own body. His romantic relationships with Memo and other women who pursue him or he pursues are disastrous. His desperation tells when, bribed by the judge, he agrees to lose the final match of the season, which if won would secure the championship for the Knights. The bribe of $35,000 and more is a massive financial incentive to Roy. And although Roy’s conscience pulls him back from the brink, and in the match he is determined to win the game
for the team, the fans and himself, his form, charisma, and luck have gone. Even Wonderboy, his talismanic bat, splits in the run-up to the decisive encounter; seeking to hit a winning home run, he strikes “out”, and the pennant goes instead to the Pirates, helped over the finishing line by the cool aplomb of the unknown Herman Youngberry.

At first sight Max Mercy seems to have faded into the background as Roy copes with the vacillations of his form, but his determined pursuit of the facts of Roy’s 15 or so lost years does not fade. Other journalists cover Roy and his ups and downs on the field of play – “generally snotty to him during his slump” (p.159) but praising him to the skies when his form returns, even proposing him as a candidate for a permanent spot in the Hall of Fame at Cooperstown. Some speculate with great regret on what the Hobbs phenomenon might have achieved had he entered the professional game in early adulthood, at 19 years or so. Less visibly, Max Mercy keeps mining the profession nationwide, an exception to the rule in concerning himself with Roy’s past rather than his current profile and triumphs:

He spent hours in the morgue, trying to dredge up possible clues to possible crimes (What’s he hiding from me?), wrote for information to prison wardens, sheriffs, county truant officers, heads of orphan asylums, and semi-pro managers in many cities in the West and North-West, and by offering rewards spurred all sorts of research on Roy by small-town sportswriters. (p.159)

Luckless for the most part, Mercy’s relentless search for the Roy Hobbs story hits the jackpot when one respondent offers to give him information on Hobbs should two hundred dollars be sent his way. Paying right away, Mercy gets his first break from “an old sideshow freak who swore that Roy had worked as a clown in a small travelling carnival” (p.160). The information includes a poster of Bobo the Clown sporting red and white warpaint on his face, bursting through a paper hoop. This is Roy Hobbs, “sad-eyed and unhappy.” Mercy sees a sensational scoop here and gets the picture printed on page one with the story underneath
headlined “Roy Hobbs, Clown Prince of Baseball” (p.160). Most buyers and readers see this as fake, and those who believe that this is indeed the Roy Hobbs of the lost years have no objections at all; if anything, it makes his appearance at the Knights Fields a still bigger and better story!

Roy meets Mercy the next evening, in the Midtown lobby, and the journalist compliments the player for leading journalists and others on such a wild-goose chase over the years. Roy nods an acknowledgement, and does not reappear on time at the local steakhouse to eat with the club manager and Mercy and another colleague. But Roy is there alright, disguised as a German waiter with a schmaltzy accent and a handlebar moustache. Drawing upon his circus and carnival skills, he spills soup all over Mercy, serves him an uneatable steak, drops dishes onto the journalist’s lap, and spills Mercy’s own beer all over his trousers. When it comes to fisticuffs, Roy lays the under-siege writer “across his knee, and … smacked his rear with a heavy hand” (p.161). But Mercy would have the last word if not laugh.

As a bedraggled, shamed Roy Hobbs – who has thrown his bribe money all over the Judge, escaped an assassination attempt by his former lover Memo, and battered Memo’s on-off lover, the Supreme Bookie Gus Sanders – wanders the streets late into the night after the pennant match was lost, the headline of a newspaper is thrust in front of him by a young boy, Max Mercy’s merciless byline rendering Roy voiceless: “Suspicion of Hobbs’s sellout – Max Mercy” (p.223). Mercy has tracked down a photograph of a 19-year-old Roy Hobbs, prostrate and felled by a bullet as the naked Harriet Bird danced around him.

The veteran syndicated journalist and columnist has the last and most influential words of all then, stunning the disbelieving kid: “Say it ain’t true, Roy,” the young boy pleads as Roy hands the paper back to him. And here Max Mercy the journalist is the history maker as Roy could muster no response in words, lifting his hands to his face as he “wept many bitter tears” (p.223).
The presentation of Max Mercy in the novel contributes to our perception of the image of the sports journalist in several ways. Mercy represents a mix of the sensationalist and the investigative. His immersion in the sports culture that he is reporting upon gives him access to key figures in the sporting world. Seen too as a “hawk-shaw” (a detective or gumshoe) he is both respected and feared by those who provide him with his stories. Mercy’s journalism brings to the world of sport elements of the investigative, muck-raking journalism of the early twentieth century.

Frank Bascombe

Frank Bascombe gets to the point from the very beginning: “My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter.” But what we see is not necessarily what we get – or is it? Bascombe is the first-person narrator in a self-confessional overview of his own private and professional life in the previous dozen years or so. The real-time framing of the novel is no more than a few days, over an Easter period in the early 1980s when, among other things, his best male friend (or friend who had perceived Frank as his best friend) commits suicide, his current girlfriend backs off from him and effectively ditches him, and he frets over a feature on a wheelchair-bound former footballer for which he has conducted a chaotic and directionless interview.

Frank is without doubt a sportswriter, and a privileged one at that, with back-up researchers, editors and colleagues at the headquarters of the glamorous New York magazine that has employed him for 12 years from the early 1970s. He drifted into sports writing after receiving good money for the film rights for his first – and only – published fiction, a book of short stories, and beginning but stalling work on a short novel. He lives in an affluent neighborhood (Haddam, New Jersey), comfortably ensconced in a large Tudor house. His marriage to “X” has produced three children, one of whom died tragically at a young age.
The loss of his son Ralph stimulated a difficult period in his life during which he drifted apart from X, leading to a mutually agreed divorce and separation, with the two other children moving with their mother to a house across town.

The secure job that has sustained the family’s comfortable life for 12 years came about without much effort, almost by accident: “[W]hen I was twenty-six, and in the blind way of things then, I was offered the job as a sportswriter by the editor of a glossy New York sports magazine you have all heard of, because of a free-lance assignment I had written in a particular way he liked” (p.9).

Sports writing is not the only thing that Frank has done for a living. He spent three months, after the traumatic early death of his son, teaching literature in a small private college in western Massachusetts. This was not to his taste, and he returned to Haddam as soon as the contract was fulfilled: “[C]ouldn’t wait to leave and get back here to New Jersey and writing sports” (p.9).

We learn all of this in the very first page of *The Sportswriter*, and over the next 380 pages a sort of laid-back melancholy characterises the reflections and confessions of the 38-year-old writer. There is a consistency of tone in the book, in its even-tempered trip back through time as it covers a breadth of experiences from his college love-affairs to his recent sexual and romantic encounters and often messy relationship with his divorced wife and his two children.

Sport is hardly to the forefront of the Bascombe consciousness, as the state of what he calls dreaminess is described in relation for the most part to his personal relationships, and he is far from the stereotype of the fanatic sportsman for whom the upcoming fixture is the Pick of the Week, and the outcome of every minor fixture is talked over as if it were a matter of life and death. Frank is the kind of friend who you think you know but are most likely to
discover that you never really knew. What is it then that makes this sad, dreamy young suburban family man a sportswriter at all?

Frank’s take on athletes frames his approach to the sportswriter’s profession. He states that he has always admired athletes, while never himself having felt the need to be an athlete or even to take them very seriously. In an extended reflection on the make-up of athletes he expands upon his premise that athletes are for the most part content to let their actions speak louder than their words, “happy to be what they do”:

… when you talk to an athlete, as I do all the time in locker rooms, in hotel coffee shops and hallways, standing beside expensive automobiles – even if he’s paying no attention to you at all, which is very often the case – he’s never likely to feel the least bit divided, or alienated, or one ounce of existential dread. He may be thinking about a case of beer, or a barbecue, or some man-made lake in Oklahoma he wishes he was water skiing on, or some girl, or a new Chevy shortbed, or a discotheque he owns as a tax shelter, or just simply himself. (pp.68-69)

Further, in Frank’s characterisation of his main subjects, the athlete is not a worrying type. Employing a strong sense of selfishness, he - there is little if any recognition of women athletes in the Bascombe worldview - has no concern with what you the interviewer, or anybody else around, might be thinking. Athletes live a literal life, as Frank terms it, making “literalness into a mystery all its own simply by becoming absorbed in what they are doing” (p.69). The actions of athletes, Frank believes, anchored in dedicated and extreme forms of training, develop in them a “self-championing one dimensionality” that can reap spectacular rewards in the sporting field. Recognising this, the Bascombian approach to athletes themselves involves a form of conceit; the interviewer or writer must even suspend his own views, avoid too much complexity, and sideline any tendency towards contingency or speculation. This creates a safe space for the athletes, a tone and a discourse that is dominated by the athlete’s own voice. Frank concludes: “And if you are a sportswriter you have to tailor
yourself to their voices and answers … it will be *their* simpler truth, not your complex one” (p.69).

This sounds to some extent patronising but Bascombe is also generous in his interpretation of these aspects of the athlete’s character. Above all, the athlete does not let feelings bother him too much, and the sportswriter greatly admires this quality: the athlete knows “what makes him happy, what makes him mad, and what to do about each. In this way he is a true adult” (pp.69-70). So, there we have it; in the broadest of generalisations, the sportswriter gives us his formula for the success that he has had in his dozen years in the profession. He adds, too, that getting too close to an individual athlete can be counter-productive, as everybody can appear just the same as anybody else, “unsurprising and factual.” To avoid this, Frank sometimes chooses to show less than he sees, claiming that many of his journalism colleagues “make a mistake with in-depth interviews” (p.71). None of this prevents Frank from writing a heartstring-pulling story, as he concedes; a rags-to-riches story that slots neatly, he might have added, into the American dream of social mobility and celebrity. He also gets the defence for his sports writing model into place quickly and neatly:

If all this makes it seem that being a sportswriter is at best a superficial business, that’s because it is. And it is not for that reason a bad profession at all. Nor am I, I will admit, altogether imperfectly suited for it. (p.71)

But the Bascombe formula doesn’t work when he encounters the wheelchair-bound Herb Wallagher, a former football star who has been confined to his silver wheelchair by a water skiing accident. The interview is a disaster, but the encounter between Frank and Herb on a dank and snowy lakeside “beyond the perimeter of true Detroit suburbia” (p.157) is perhaps the most illuminating episode in the novel – concerning, at least, the profession of the protagonist.
Frank slots in the interview whilst taking a break from New Jersey with his current girlfriend Vicki Arcenault, a nurse at his local hospital whom he met when she tended his cut hand after an accident with a garden machine tool. Vicki, fleeing a dysfunctional relationship in Dallas, Texas, has moved to New Jersey to be nearer to her parents. Their sexual attractions belie any common interests in politics, sport or culture. Frank sets off for the interview in a hired cab after a tense night with Vicki. Finding Herb’s home requires enquiries at two gas stations where Frank is drawn into one of his typical reflections on the nature of the sportswriter’s lot, realizing “just how often I am with people I don’t know and who don’t know me, and who come to know me – Frank Bascombe – only as a sportswriter” (p.158). No confidants, no everyday allies, and just the current lover Vicki, Frank reminds himself; but then he rallies:

I could have things much worse. At least as a stranger to almost everyone and a sportswriter to boot, I have a clean slate almost every day of my life, a chance not to be negative, to give someone unknown a pat on the back, to recognize courage and improvement, to take the battle with cynicism head-on and win. (p.158)

And so, Frank arrives at Herb’s in a relatively upbeat mood, to be welcomed in the snow by a surprisingly small-looking figure whose welcoming handshake almost grounds him. But Herb is not what he once was; his legs have shrunk, his shoulders bony rather than muscular. A more normally sized head and arms give the former football star a “gaping, storkish appearance behind his thick horn-rims” (p.159), with shaving cuts on his face doctored with toilet paper. Frank finds it difficult to see in Herb the athlete that he once was. Herb can be no older than thirty-four, but looks fifty.

The disabled athlete and the sportswriter then take a walk to Walled Lake during which Frank’s expressed areas of interest are brushed aside by the volatile Herb, announcing that he no longer plans to offer advice to players on the basis of his experience. Herb offers so little that Frank has not taken a single note; nor has he touched his tape recorder. Frank
thinks and feels, as an experienced journalist and interviewer, that the interview has not yet got started – a rushed interview, he reminds himself, generates distortions and misrepresentation, “the first signs of a badly written story” (p.162). The interview never does take off, though, with Herb saying how mad and boiling he can be, commenting on a halo that he purports to see above Frank, and quoting the obsessions of a dying Ulysses Grant. Herb goes on to tell Frank what it is like to lose the use of one’s legs and Frank’s attempts to pose some questions are rubbished by Herb, branding Frank as an “asshole”. In a subsequent surrealistic rant Herb goes on to describe his recurrent dream in which he longs to murder, by strangulation, three old ladies whose car has stalled in a dark road. In manic fashion, he rollicks with laughter after the telling of this nightmarish tale. Frank seeks to normalize the situation, saying that he’s got all he needs for a good story. Herb’s smiling response to Frank is that the sportswriter is “full of shit.”

When Herb seems to calm down, he confesses that football was “a pretty crummy preparation for life,” and that his plan to go to law school has made sport no more than just a memory. But Herb’s mood swings continue in bizarre fantasies of the past and the future, and Frank can think only of how Herb hovers on the edge of aggression and violence, ready to strangle anyone who might come within his reach: “When you have spent so much of your life whamming into people and hurting them, it must be hard just to call a halt to it and sit down. It must be hard to do anything else, it seems to me, but keep on whamming” (p.169). As Frank is driven off in his booked Checker, Herb waves goodbye to its tail lights, “his sad face astream with helpless and literal tears” (p.170).

It is too tragic a trajectory for Frank Bascombe to narrate; as the sportswriter concedes at the end of the novel, he “never properly wrote about Herb Wallagher and had to accept defeat there” (p.375). Frank also meets, in the magazine office at the end of the Easter weekend, a young Dartmouth intern, Catherine Flaherty, with whom he has a fleeting affair,
thereafter acting as a kind of mentor to her, feeding her story ideas – not Herb’s, but equally challenging ones - should her plans for a medical training not work out. Dreamy or cynical, Frank Bascombe might be, but he also shows signs of securing a kind of legacy in the world of sports journalism.

Overall, Frank Bascombe’s model of sports writing pays tribute to the subjects about whom he writes, respecting the extreme commitment of the athlete/subject to his/her vocation. His selective focus on features recognises the power of inspirational themes in sporting careers, but also emphasises an everyday mundanity in the task of the sportswriter.

**Jimmy Stirling**

We meet football journalist Jimmy Stirling with kids Charlie and Nancy at breakfast in their rambling South Norfolk home in England’s eastern region of East Anglia. Their new home on moving from London includes a neglected stable building among other, crumbling outbuildings and a leaking woodshed, and a borderless lawn overtaken by invading weeds. It is a far from auspicious start to a novel on the life and career of an established sports journalist.

Stirling has become a football writer in part because he had no other direction in life. At the end of the 1980s he had made a living for himself writing quizzes for lads’ magazines. And then, when he struck lucky and a newspaper sent him to report on a soccer match between Southampton and Coventry, doors opened. He did a longish stint on football, reported on a summer of tennis, worked on a tabloid for a year, covered the Olympics one season with some success, and came out of this as “Chief Football Writer on a Sunday paper with a long past and a short future” (p.4).
The detached cynicism that Jimmy Stirling adopts to his professional calling at least allows him insights into the range of opportunities and positions open to the football journalist. Drawing upon caricatures of colleagues, football writers with whom he ate and drank at and after events, Stirling constructs a typology of the football journalist, listing the kind of journalistic work that is undertaken by the different categories. He names the individuals by colours. There is White, grossing around £300,000 a year plus the luxury of global club class air travel. He hosts a live TV show in which besuited males talk football trivia and minutiae with a level of seriousness bordering on the absurd. For Stirling this is both objectively funny and subjectively sad. Second, there is Green, racist, sexist and homophobic, and married four times. Third, the very dim Brown, ghostwriter’s ghostwriter, with thirty-seven books to his name, clearly more than he has ever read as Jimmy observes. Pink is the Grand Old Man of British Sports Writing, who can be convivial when sober, and excessively, achingly nostalgic when drunk. Finally, the conventionally good-looking Blue – for Jimmy, the worst of the lot – younger and better-educated than Jimmy, with a tendency to open his pieces with quotes from the ancient poets, no doubt alluding to his education at Oxford or Cambridge; Blue considers that football journalism is the “best job in the world” (p.52). Jimmy does not locate himself within this categorisation, in which White, Green and Brown are all labelled as “fat and white”, and Pink as “gaunt and white”. It is an ignoble line-up and a scathing commentary from the inside on the nature of the British football journalist. Will Buckley’s personal experience as a senior sportswriter at the Observer has clearly been put to good use in this depiction of the range of types of sports writing in the British press.

Jimmy’s disillusionment with the task of sports reporting is expressed in a late-night drinking session with his brother Graham: “I don’t know what I want but I know I want something. I don’t want to die having spent my life watching football. There must be something more to it all than that” (p.157). Jimmy’s frustration with a stifling parochial life
in the Norfolk town of Bungay explodes into a series of farcical encounters and a bungled affair with a local woman, culminating in stumbling upon a group sex session in a sports car in a pub carpark, in which his not-quite-lover Bella takes centre-stage, filmed by his own wife, B, and observed by a masturbating local taxi-driver: “What now? What was the etiquette of this one? What was U and non-U in the world of dogging?” (pp.228-229), Jimmy asks himself, at a loss to answer his own question. It is a ludicrous scene of excess, combining the satirical and the comical, nevertheless serving well to depict the crisis in Jimmy Stirling’s life as family and community relationships are collapsing, alongside his own escalating contempt for his profession as a sports journalist and leading football writer.

Away from the frustrations of his family, neighborhood and community life Jimmy has become increasingly estranged from his vocation. Even his most influential professional role model Pink – the Grand Old Man of the profession – exhibits a scepticism about their craft. Jimmy meets Pink in the multi-media room of a top soccer stadium in London. They exchange pleasantries and then share their views on the current state of their profession, Jimmy calling it “grim … Boredom doesn’t come into it. A form of Chinese Water Torture – Death by Football”; Pink agrees: “Precisely. Neither heaven nor hell but an everlasting purgatory” (p.191). The veteran sports writer then suggests an alternative to Jimmy, and they are observed by their “sniggering” peers as they slope off, exiting the media centre and the stadium, and hotfooting it to one of Pink’s clubs, Scuffles, where a barman and a TV screen showing Sky Sports Soccer Saturday set them up for their professional duties, without the trouble of a noisy crowd and a mêlée of football writers cramping their style and access at the match itself. Pink describes this up-to-date way of working:

All we have to do is sit here … and watch the tube. They give you everything these days: team news, time of goals and manner in which they were scored, entertaining incidents, managers’ interviews, the whole caboodle. It is then a moment’s work to ring the office and relay everything to our desk-bound inferiors. (p.191)
Pink and Jimmy, benefiting from the Rupert Murdoch revolution in football/soccer broadcasting, revel in this armchair mode of reporting, a bottle of claret within their reach, and facts and contexts pouring out of the screen. “Every so often a relevant statistic scrolled across the screen, some of which Stirling registered. By the end he was well placed to file a report that was both informative and accurate” (p.192). More and more, in the early years of the new century, the print journalist could see that the expansion of broadcast coverage on exclusive channels was challenging the power and profile of the established print media. This constitutes a significant sub-text of the novel; the central character, the disillusioned Stirling, acts as a catalyst for a critical commentary on the changing landscape of football journalism.

The likes of the veteran Pink and the forty-year-old Stirling were recognising this huge shift in the world of sports and football reportage. Standing at the top of the proverbial slippery slope Jimmy Stirling was playing a dangerous game, fabricating his reports, lying about his whereabouts (conning his editor that he was in Munich for a major football international between Germany and England), and delivering copy bordering on fiction after fieldwork interviews. Pink had been an inspiration for a sports-mad young Jimmy, who read everything that Pink had written. Pink’s style and “flamboyant phrasing” had shaped the journalistic aspirations of a generation of football writers:

Now his imitators were legion. Half wits clunking out overblown prose, forever ascribing great import to the trivial, and on the infinitesimally few occasions when football intruded on real life determinedly taking the wrong line. (p.192)

Jimmy Stirling shows no intent of hanging on as one of these imitators, yet ironically colludes with Pink in their bogus journalistic practices. Filing his match report on the Germany-England game, when supposedly in Munich, Jimmy writes his account based upon what he considers to be an exclusive source. As all the national football writers will be at the game, he knows that his plagiarism of British Eurosport coverage in his home study will go unobserved.
Sued for libel over fabricated interviews, suspected by his bosses as an increasingly loose cannon – Derrek Junior, the editor who inherited the position from his father Derrek Senior, labels Stirling a “cunt” and “a double cunt” on innumerable occasions – the professional world closes in upon the estranged, increasingly unreliable and erratic football writer. The move to Norfolk has rendered him friendless at forty, and it is inevitable now that he will also be jobless into the bargain.

Fired by his paper, Jimmy is released from what Pink has called purgatory: he makes a bonfire of all his football memorabilia, stops drinking, enjoys a sexual renaissance with his wife, and dedicates more time to his children Nancy and Charlie. When invited to the newspaper’s annual awards session at the Sports Desk Christmas Party, to receive the “Cunt of the Year” award, Jimmy decides to make his mark. Receiving the award, he takes the podium and delivers a vicious rant condemning the profession that football writing has become (pp.252-256). There is no retrospective sentimentality here, following his opening gambit: “There could be no more perfect coda to what, barring a malign miracle, is the end of my football writing career. For over a decade I have written about matters football and during that time not a single remotely interesting thing has happened” (p.252). He omits here the effect that the 9/11 tragedy of the World Trade Center in New York had, for a shocked moment, upon his own sports writing, and goes on to damn the game that has given him his living, labelling it “the anaesthetic, the analgesic, the placebo for all the sad and lonely people who inhabit this land” (p.252). He shoots out direct attacks on various former colleagues such as Rob Parsons, who has watched 180 football games a year in his “mindless and endless pursuit of a little game played by dull men” (p.254). His insults escalate in proportion with the intake of red wine as the tirade proceeds. His most vitriolic invective targets “Tristan Tristam, Tristram, whatever your fucking name is” (p.255), the Mr Blue for whom, as we know, football writing is the best job in the world:
What a fraud. What a chancer. What a vainglorious cunt. He used to be a half-decent industrial correspondent, you know. But then he and his fancy friends thought what fun, and how lucrative, it would be to turn their hands to soccer as they initially called it. Oxbridge tossers the lot of them. Sages in their own lunchtime salad, all of them so very capable of knocking out thousand-word essays on the flimsiest of pretexts. Clogging the pages with ill-considered references to Marcel Proust during appreciations of Stuart Pearce … Desperately trawling through the week’s matches for an angle on the human condition without realising that none exists. (p.255)

Before launching such an attack Jimmy Stirling might have reflected on his own excesses, indulgences and fraudulent fabrication of stories; he might have apologised for the ghostwriting he undertook for a Welsh footballer for whom he had nothing but insults; or at least delivered his tirade in a more modified tone or sensitively nuanced way. But it’s all or nothing for the football journalist now, implicitly condoning his fellow writers for supporting the top tier of the game in England, a “monopoly provider” of “a game which now has become a sour corporate joke” (p.256), with the capacity and the tendency to abuse its position, profile and power for no more than its own financial benefit. Jimmy climaxes his acceptance speech by raising the trophy and with a savage sarcasm thanks his colleagues for the award. His build-up to this exit constitutes a biting critique of the EPL (English Premier League) lookalike, a decade or so on from its formation: “And they call it beautiful. Fuck the lot of you. Bored beyond tears at being surrounded, besieged and assailed by Dereks, dunces and shams, I, with customary grace, retreat to Norfolk. Having been sacked, I resign” (p.256).

A twist at the end of the narrative gives Jimmy the editorship of the paper for a short spell, in which his most successful initiative is simply to transcribe all on-the-spot sources for publication in his Sunday special. He also receives an unanticipated financial windfall that stabilises his domestic economy, beginning a new phase of his life out of debt as well as out of sports journalism.
Jimmy Stirling has run out of patience and steam with a sport culture that has transformed the nature of the football writer’s role. In his own warped practices he embodies the crisis of identity of a generation of sports writers, superseded by pundits, commentators, analysts, theorists, and know-all celebrities. Trapped in a professional situation that deteriorates day by day, and intensifies task by task, exit becomes his only strategy; the dream job has become the intolerable nightmare.

Coda

Reviewing the representation of the image and the role of the sports journalist in the three novels considered in this essay, we see telling examples of the price the sports journalist has had to pay to stay in the writing and reporting business. Decades and cultures apart, the figures of Max Mercy, Frank Bascombe and Jimmy Stirling exist in a sexist and bigoted male-dominated world that has reproduced generation after generation a dominant culture of masculinity and machismo. Their journalistic practices vary: Mercy the syndicated journalist placing himself within the sporting culture that he observes and the stories that he investigates; Bascombe the dreamy melancholic womaniser with a wide brief to provide magazine features, and a determination not to get too closely drawn into the lives of the subjects he observes and interviews; and Stirling, on a roller-coaster ride taking him further and further away from the action on which he purports to be an expert, but that he increasingly sees as trivial, mundane and irrelevant. The three sports journalists represent a spectrum from directly involved (Max) to emotionally detached (Frank) to outwardly hostile (Jimmy). Yet in their differing ways, they all confirm both the sheer mundanity of their own professional practices, and a darker side of sport culture that the sports journalist will inevitably face. It is no accident that Max Mercy has operated in his investigative mode for several decades, whilst Frank Bascombe and Jimmy Stirling both turn their backs on their
chosen profession as they consider how to develop new phases in their life, away from the pseudo-glamour of sports journalism practice. Their fictional fates and futures remind us of the slog of the job, the ethical dodginess of the trade, and the price paid in dysfunctional relationships of family and community for committing yourself to the career of the sports journalist. It is no surprise, on reflection, that few novelists have given serious consideration to the figure of the sports journalist, and to the creation of characters and protagonists who see the everyday world and the world of sports through the eyes of the sports journalist; and that those who have provide us with such messy, dysfunctional and chaotic characters in their own personal cum professional worlds.