

Hockey Books and the Young Reader

JON C. STOTT

Hockey in My Blood, Johnny Bucyk with Russ Conway. Scholastic-Tab, 1972. 142 pp. \$1.00 paper.

She Shoots! She Scores! Heather Kellerhals-Stewart. The Women's Press, 1975. 54 pp. \$.95 paper.

Brian McFarlane's 1975 Hockey Annual, Brian McFarlane. Clarke, Irwin, 1974. 160 pp. \$6.25 cloth.

Each of the books considered in this review faces a series of challenges and problems peculiar to its specific purpose and genre; but, taken as a group, they share the problems generally inherent in writing sports books. Team games can themselves be seen as artistic constructs, each one possessing its own medium (ice, playing fields, diamonds) and its own rhetoric (the specific rules and playing techniques). Success is to be found in the degree of skill, originality, and style with which the participants work within the conventions. In literature, success is measured in large part by the writer's handling of words. In hockey, we have physical rather than verbal articulation, and the artistry is seen in the execution of skating, checking, shooting, and passing. These actions cannot finally be translated into words, and when one sets out to write a hockey book, he is really only writing *about* hockey. He's using one art form, literature, to describe another, sport. Even at best, success in such a writing endeavor will be only partial. Moreover, in a work of fiction, one cannot betray the probabilities of the specific sport for the requirements of fictional conflict and resolution. Alfred Slote, writer of juvenile baseball stories, denied that he wrote sports books, saying that sport was merely part of the subject matter: "I don't think of my books as sports books; I think of them as books about people with a sport background. I use sports as the background because that's one of the things I know best."

The first book to be considered, *Hockey in My Blood*, the autobiography of NHL star Johnny Bucyk, faces particular problems: those of writing biography for children. There is, of course, the long tradition of moral biographies which have been written so that young readers may avoid the mistakes of less worthy subjects and emulate the virtues of the better. This tradition has been very noticeable in America. Its roots are to be found in Puritan notions of the utilitarian value of literature and finds its most famous example in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. William C. Spengemann and F.L.R. Lundquist have shown that American autobiographies are often written in terms consistent with cultural beliefs, specifically the myth of "The American Dream."

“The American Myth, in its most general form, describes human history as a pilgrimage from imperfection to perfection; from a dimly remembered union with the Divine to the re-establishment of that union.” One can see that this myth contains within it ingredients which would make autobiography a very useful tool for a culture wishing to shape the values of its younger citizens and that it contains a structural pattern which has long been a staple of children’s literature. The structure is that of the linear journey, the romantic journey in which the hero travels toward a goal, experiencing along the way adventures which help him to prove his worthiness to achieve the goal. It is the basic structure of *Pilgrim’s Progress* and of Book One of *The Faerie Queene* and it is found in the children’s favourites “Thumbelina” and “Dick Whittington.” Within American literature it has been seen as the rags to riches theme, with Benjamin Franklin, the Alger heroes, and Jay Gatsby the best known examples. Abraham Lincoln’s image as the poor, honest, hard working boy who made it from log cabin to White House epitomizes the form. Many critics argue that books treating the lives of this type of hero are dishonest cultural indoctrinations rather than well-written life stories.

Although this may seem to be totally unrelated to a review of a book on an Edmonton hockey player who became an NHL superstar, a closer look reveals how closely *Hockey in My Blood* relates to the patterns described above. The facts that the book was originally published in the United States and was ghosted by an American sportswriter, Russ Conway, give rise to suspicions that it may well have been shaped around the pattern of the American Myth. One might wish to retitl the book *The Quest for the Grail*, the Grail in this case being the Stanley Cup, awarded annually to the champion of the National Hockey League. The book traces the progress of Bucyk from an awkward school boy skating on outdoor rinks in Edmonton, through Junior A, minor league, and finally to major league hockey and two Stanley Cup victories with the Boston Bruins.

Bucyk follows his lines perfectly as he plays the role of the “childe” of the old romances. He was born of a lower income family; when he was twelve his father died; and Bucyk reluctantly quit school in Grade Eleven to sign a pro contract so that he could help his family with the \$1,500 signing bonus. In order to improve, he took necessary humiliations, agreeing at one time to submit to figure skating lessons. His advancement was steady, as he moved from lower to higher league. The trade from Detroit to Boston could be seen as the major test of our hero’s fortitude, for Boston during the sixties was the worst team in the league. While lesser men could and did slip into the Slough of Despond or succumb to the Giant Despair as the Bruins finished out of the playoffs for eight consecutive seasons, Bucyk persisted resolutely, enduring the pain of a bad back and the agony of no Stanley Cup playoff money.

Throughout the book, as one would expect in an autobiography shaped into conformity with the mythic pattern of a culture, Bucyk dispenses aphorisms on the means to success. He is against excessively rough play: “I don’t think a player can be both a hitter and a goal scorer on a consistent basis.” Like many folk heroes, he must live up to his name, in this case his nick-name, “Chief”: “There’s a lot of pride that

goes with the name, too. Being 'The Chief' you're supposed to be a leader, persistent, and not a quitter. . . . I think you have to live up to the name on as well as off the ice." He's always willing to learn: "The minute you think you know everything is the minute you go down the drain."

The point of this analysis is simple: one must realize that biography and autobiography may be documents of cultural indoctrination rather than life stories. That being the case, one must be aware of what lies behind the myth and, in Bucyk's story of life with the Boston Bruins, it may be necessary to read the other books that have come out on the team. After looking at the story as told about and/or by Phil Esposito, Bobby Orr, Derek Sanderson, Ted Green, and Gerry Cheevers, a fuller picture emerges, not all of which is suitable for children. While Bucyk himself seems to be a good person as well as a dedicated athlete, not all of his teammates are candidates for canonization, a fact that *Hockey in My Blood* doesn't make clear. Thus, one of the weaknesses of biography or autobiography for children becomes evident: many people believe it must be edited severely (censored) so that only values culturally acceptable and suitable for young readers are admitted.

Even if one accepts the myth, there is another question to be asked about the book: is it well written? In the case of *Hockey in My Blood*, the answer is no. The greatest criticism from the hockey fan will be that he doesn't really learn anything new about hockey in general or about life with the Bruins in particular. This may be because the book was originally written for a less knowledgeable American audience and so is rather basic. But one might have hoped for scenes and descriptions which brought dressing rooms, road trips, and personalities vividly to life. Hockey in the forties and fifties would be prehistoric to today's young readers and we would have liked to have seen it brought to life on the page. Similarly, life with the Boston Bruins from their days of ineptitude to their time of triumph would certainly have provided occasion for the kinds of anecdotes on which hockey fans thrive. But there are none.

In the end, Johnny Bucyk's *Hockey in My Blood* is interesting as an example of a mythologizing process and so as a cultural document; as a hockey book which should be interesting in its own right, it is a disappointment--strictly "expansion club" calibre.

Heather Kellerhals-Stewart's *She Shoots! She Scores!* faces a different set of problems. As the title indicates, it's about both hockey and a girl. The heroine, Hilary, wishes to play hockey and, finding that no one will join her to form a girls' team, joins the boys' mite team in one of the Edmonton Community Leagues and wins acceptance not only there, but also--more difficult--in a summer hockey school. Hilary thus joins the ranks of young fictional heroines bent on cracking one of the toughest barriers of male chauvinism, the prejudice against women engaging in contact sports. Ms. Kellerhals-Stewart has set herself two formidable tasks: she must write a convincing hockey story, while at the same time avoiding the trap of writing consciousness-raising propaganda instead of fiction. She succeeds only partially on both counts.

As a story with hockey subject matter, *She Shoots! She Scores!* reveals several weaknesses. For example, the first practice turns out to

be a full-scale exhibition. After a few minutes of warmup skating, Hilary finds herself playing right wing on the starting line and scores an assist on the opening shift. Anyone involved with Community League hockey anywhere will know that the first two or three practices involve endless skating, passing, and shooting drills. One is surprised during the book to see so few references to the fortunes of Hilary's team in league standings. Theoretically, mite hockey exists for recreational enjoyment, but the players are keenly aware of how the team makes out, and I suspect that readers of *She Shoots! She Scores!* would be interested in Hilary's team too. One wonders how good Hilary was on the ice: would she go into the corners, cover on her wing, and avoid cheap penalties? Did she improve? Did she help the team? One suspects that one doesn't find this kind of information in the book because the author isn't that familiar with ice hockey. This suspicion seems to be confirmed when we are told "The score was 1-0 for the other team in the last quarter." Everyone knows, or should know, that there are three periods, NOT four quarters, in a hockey game.

One salutes both Hilary's and the author's assertions that girls have the right to play traditionally male sports. But like many similar books, *She Shoots! She Scores!* tends to give in to sermonizing at the expense of a well developed plot. For example, when a friend, Sylvia, tells Hilary, "You're lucky Hilary, I wish I was you any old day, or maybe a boy even," Hilary replies, "You shouldn't think that, Sylvia. I'm not all that great, though I do sort of like being me." One would have liked to have seen more of Hilary's inner conflicts. After all, she is facing a big challenge. How did she feel in the early season, coping with both her limited hockey knowledge and her new teammates? How did the breakthrough occur? This is all hinted at, but should be more central in a good story. There are, as well, some inconsistencies. Hilary, at summer hockey school, is afraid of being discovered as a girl, but is determined at the end of the summer once again to try to start a girls' team. Is she concerned about playing hockey, or about a girl's right to play on a boys' team, or about the right of girls' teams to compete with boys' teams? A surer sense of Hilary's character on the author's part would have avoided these confusions.

In sum, *She Shoots! She Scores!*, based on an interesting and worthwhile idea, suffers from lack of hockey knowledge and from a certain lack of clearly defined purpose, both of which weaken plot and character development.

Brian McFarlane's 1975 Hockey Annual, by the ubiquitous star of "Hockey Night in Canada," is a slick production filled with photographs, quizzes, playing tips, and brief, informative articles. Like all such publications, it will become dated in a few years. However, for the purpose of literary discussion, one section of the book is most interesting: "The Kid Who Shook Loose," a story by Leslie McFarlane, Brian's father and author of several of the early Hardy Boys stories. It is the story of Tim Kiernan, young American hockey player seeking his fortune on one of the minor league professional teams in the Midwestern United States.

The story is a classic example of the formula-type moral sports fable

that was made popular early in this century because of the heroics of Frank Merriwell. Kiernan, down to his last seventy dollars, has hopped a freight on the way toward a pro tryout with the Wolves. He is befriended by a seedy character called Harry Sharpe and is attacked by a drunk who falls off the moving train during the struggle. Arriving at the hockey camp, Tim is an instant hit, a fact which delights the fans but disgruntles Striver, the has-been defenceman Tim replaces. Enter Harry Sharpe with a newspaper clipping describing the railroad death of a bum he claims is Tim's assailant. The result is blackmail: Kiernan must throw the playoff series or Harry will inform on him. In the end, Tim is proved innocent of the charges, Harry is on the lam, and Tim scores three late period goals to lead the Wolves to the championship. The story ends with Tim promised a major league tryout the following year. Bobby Clarke and Denis Potvin watch out!

The outlines of the fable are clear. We have Tim, honest, young, talented, innocent; Harry Sharpe, seedy looking to parallel his dishonesty; and Striver, the mean defenceman, using cruelty to compensate for lack of talent. Goodness prevails, but not before Tim is faced with an almost classic dilemma:

But when he looked at the situation squarely he saw that he was in a dilemma from which there seemed no possible way of escape. He could double-cross the Wolves [by throwing the game] and retain his freedom. Or, he could give himself up to the police, and let the Wolves go down the drain without him.

Luckily and predictably, Tim does the right thing and everyone who deserves to wins.

In outline, the story is laughable, seeming almost like a parody of the Frank Merriwell series. What saves it is the crisp, vigorous description and fast paced plot development. McFarlane both knows his hockey and remembers well the lessons about plot he learned while writing the Hardy Boys books. The on-ice action, with the exception of the last minute heroics, is accurate, vivid, and exciting. The story never lags, as Tim is precipitated, a victim of circumstance, the forces of evil, and his own naiveté, from crisis to crisis. I said earlier that it might be impossible to write a good hockey book, and ultimately this is so here. McFarlane falsifies the patterns of a hockey game in the end in order to enforce his moral fable. But for the hockey fan who is a reluctant reader, "The Kid Who Shook Loose" will make interesting reading, and may well provide a stepping stone to the reading of better books.

Each of the books here considered is so representative of a class of sports book that in reviewing it one is able to apply a series of general critical principles which may usefully be applied to similar books. As a concluding note, it should be noted that none of the books is a disaster. Each, within its limitations, has good points, and can be read and enjoyed by the sports fan.

Jon Stott, a former sportscaster, teaches English at the University of Alberta and has written and lectured widely on children's literature.