

SPORTS STORIES WITH PREDICTABLE PATTERNS

The pinch hitter and other sports stories. Scott Young. Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., 1991. 130 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-00-647046-7.

With *The pinch hitter and other sports stories* the author of *Scrubbs on skates* brings together five stories he wrote in the same era, the 1950s, those “heady days, before even the goalies in hockey wore masks; before protective equipment, before the slap shot, pick plays, sports agents, renegotiated contracts, lawsuits” (Introduction). The same range of emotions found in Young’s hockey novels—from emotional and physical anguish, through depression and self-doubt, to the ecstasy of victory and the sense of wholeness offered by teammates, family, and the sport itself—is found in these stories about over-the-hill players (“The pinch hitter”), the consequences of sport violence (“The bean ball” and “Dangerous ice”), rivals of equal calibre (“Maloney’s last stand”), and the loss of a mentor (“Goodbye grandpa”).

The stories are structured conventionally, with a conflict rising to a climactic point—at which the protagonist realizes, in John Wayne fashion, that he must do what he must do—and then falling off in a denouement that reconciles the protagonist to himself, his family, his team, if not to his opponents. The pattern is satisfying, popular, and sells; it helped Young supplement his journalist’s income and feed his family.

“The pinch hitter” is a representative example of Young’s craft. John Cunningham is a baseball player who is past his prime, who spends most of the game sitting on the bench, and whose burning desire is to be his son’s hero. Through Cunningham’s self-examination, Young underlines the fact that in the world of sport a player’s worth is heavily judged by his age. Once the reader is in full sympathy with Cunningham’s dilemma, Young brings the son, Bobby, into the stands, then shifts out of introspection and into the climactic action. The suspense level climbs when Cunningham finally gets a chance to bat. On the second pitch, Cunningham gives it his all and hits deep between the centre and right fielders: a stand-up triple, with two runs batted in. Final score? 2 to 1 for the good guys. The happy ending is clinched by the gleam in Bobby’s eye as his father looks over to the stands.

Young’s faithful depiction of these sports and their players is a testament to his journalistic skill, and makes his book riveting reading, particularly for the sports fan. The combination of dialogue, description, and the emotional roller-coaster ride made me feel as if I were actually sitting in the stands watching these games live. *The pinch hitter and other sports stories* will be enjoyed by twelve-to-seventeen-year-old readers, and perhaps also by older ones for whom *Scrubbs on skates* is a fond memory.

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