Cohan, Noah. *We Average Unbeautiful Watchers: Fan Narratives and the Reading of American Sports*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Hardbound, $45.00.

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Like all good cultural scholarship, Cohan’s book resists the monolithic, all-or-nothing take, and as an optimistic cultural critic, Cohan seeks to demonstrate the “transformative power” of sports fans to “subvert the patriarchal and corporate imperatives embedded in the broadcast and the box score” (4). To reach this goal, Cohan examines a wide range of fan texts: novels, memoirs, films, and blogs, across a number of major sports. Readers familiar with David Foster Wallace’s essays might recognize the book’s somewhat unusual title, which points to the paradox at the heart of the fan experience: those of us who fall short of athletic genius (thus leaving us “average” and “unbeautiful” by the inevitable comparison) are ultimately disappointed by the athlete’s inability to explain her/his own powers and their impact on us (2). Given that we all struggle to define and describe the meaning we derive from sport—and sports—Cohen’s book offers numerous insights into that process from the fan perspective.

Cohan’s texts range from materials that could be counted among the Sport Literature canon —DeLillo’s *Pafko at the Wall*, Coover’s *Universal Baseball Association*, Exley’s *A Fan’s Notes*—to authors and auteurs discussed in the pages of *Aethlon*—John Wideman, Spike Lee, Bill Simmons—and films examined and/or reviewed (and sometimes graphically quoted at SLA conferences)—*Fever Pitch* and *Silver Linings Playbook*. Some of Cohan’s texts—especially the blogs—would not be considered canonical, yet these are nonetheless significant and important examples of fan-made meanings. Each of the chapters contains carefully and effectively constructed comparisons of these far-reaching texts to ultimately illustrate “the potential for alternative narratives that remake or reshape fans’ understanding of their role such that they subvert or reconceptualize that hierarchical structure [that] is always present …” (201). Because it treats some of the same texts as the early sport literature analyses of Michael Oriard and Christian Messenger, Cohan’s book expands those treatments by focusing on the fan’s role.

Despite Cohan’s accurate and needed analysis of electronic texts, Chapter 5 and his Epilogue reminded me that some aspects of sport narrative have remained unchanged across the century and a half of sports journalism. The bloggers examined in Chapter 5 effectively serve as an alternative perspective, yet the numerous excerpts illustrated how these fans turned writers were just as prone to flights of fancy as the “clever journalists” in love with their own wit who drew H.L. Mencken’s sharp criticism of the profession a hundred years ago. Last month’s flap over the former Houston Astros assistant GM’s comments highlights memoirist Stacey May Fowles’ point about the dangers of losing sight of players as human beings (208); however, this perspective is hardly new: Ella Black, writing in the *Sporting Life* in 1890 called for the same accountability both on and off the field. Though she did not use the term “hypermasculinity,” Black was not unfamiliar with the concept. Cohan’s analysis does not shy away from the excesses of sports fans—c.f. Coover’s Waugh or Exley’s fan, and recent excesses of sports fans can certainly be counted among the extremes that had Michael Schulman addressing “the dark side” of popular culture fans who are “more powerful than ever” in the September 16 issue of the *New Yorker* (26). As a suggestion for future research, the hows and whys of sports fans making meaning across generations is another area ripe for similar investigation; it could be something as simple as what Michael Chabon does with his and his father’s love of the original *Star Trek* series in the November 18 issue of the *New Yorker* (24). With the apparent demise of *Dead Spin* and the precipitous decline of *Sports Illustrated*, perhaps space will open up for a new publication dedicated to sports fans.

At the end, Cohan returns to his optimistic cultural critic perspective when he writes, “Reading sport isn’t just something fans can and should do for personal fulfillment, but also a form of labor that can be directed to improve the games themselves” (209). Just as I drew comfort at a recent conference from philosopher Alva Noë’s argument that keeping score at a baseball game is an exercise of “knowledge production,” Cohan’s argument also sits well with me, even as I do my best (with mixed success) to root for sport in general over any particular team. Cohan’s book will appeal to cultural critics, fans of all stripes, and American Studies scholars as it thoroughly and convincingly examines an understudied and undertheorized perspective of the Sport(s) Media Industrial Complex.