Pour le Sport: Physical Culture in French and Francophone Literature (Liverpool UP) 2021

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This collection of 13 essays, written in English but about French-language texts, is organized into five sections: pre-twentieth century depictions of physical activity and games; Tour de France; running; football cultures; and a broad catch-all “Civilization, Marginalization, and National Identities.” The essays cover an impressive range of writers (from big names like Montaigne and Barthes, to many lesser known ones like Dominique Braga and Aminata Sow Fall), genres (novels, non-fiction, film, poetry), and sports (jousting, mountaineering, tennis, boxing, running, cycling, soccer, wrestling, rugby).

I must confess up front that when I picked up this book I knew little of French sport literature beyond a few cycling texts, so for me one of the pleasures of this book was learning about some fascinating French texts and issues central to French sport.

In their helpful introduction, Iowan editors Roxanna Curto and Rebecca Wines do a nice job of summarizing the rise of sport in French culture as well as explaining their use of the broad term “physical culture,” in order to allow for the inclusion of essays about works from before the mid-nineteenth century, which is when the concept of “sport,” as we know it today (“organized, quantified, competitive physical activities”) came into use in French culture. Only three of the essays deal with pre-twentieth-century sport, but these add a lot to the context of the project (especially the ones on medieval jousting and early modern *jeu de paume* or tennis) and I appreciated the attempt at a broad historical scope, when a collection like this could easily just focus on sports literature from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I’d like to mention a few highlights for me. Corry Cropper’s essay “‘Tennis Killed Me’: Sport as Failed Ritual in the Works of Prosper Mérimée,” offers a fascinating argument about how sports and games were portrayed as subversive emblems of modernity in fiction from the 1830s. Rebecca Wines’s piece on how Henri Desgrange’s writing from the early twentieth century influenced ideas of masculinity and cycling is terrific. Thomas Bauer’s essay on Dominique Braga’s 1924 running novel *5 000*, a first-person narrative about a runner named Léon Monnerat (based on the real Joseph Guillemot, who won gold in Antwerp in 1920), competing in a 5000m Olympic final, made me want to track down a translation of the book, which sounds a bit like Tim Krabbe’s cycling classic *The Rider*. And Luke Healey’s essay about three texts’ treatment of soccer star Zinedine Zidane as overdetermined globalized cultural phenomenon is compelling, even to someone like me who has tried but can only sort of care about soccer.

As is almost always the case with a collection like this, there are a few pieces that seem a curious fit or that could use more polish, but overall, it’s a success.

In their introduction, Curto and Wines make a point of how their collection promises to be different from others of its kind, “by situating itself at the crossroads of history, sociology, gender studies, postcolonial studies, and media studies, among other fields that have merged under the umbrella of sports studies.” On the postcolonial-sociological side, the book gets full marks; several of the essays engage with the work of social theorists like Loïc Wacquant and treat texts by French and Francophone writers of African descent, such as N. G. M. Faye, Thomté Ryam, Rachid Djaïdani, and Mabrouck Rachedi.

But on the gender side, I was a little disappointed to see that almost all the primary texts discussed by the essayists were written by men. Although Cynthia Laborde talks about gender in her essay on the *Le Petit Nicholas* book series from the 1960s and a couple of female critics (Simone de Beauvoir, for instance) do get mentioned by various contributors, the first major discussion of a primary text by a woman writer is on page 231, when Luke Healey talks about Anne Delbée’s novella about Zinedine Zidane, *La 107e minute*. The only other primary text by a woman writer discussed in the volume is the novel *L’Appel des arènes* by Aminata Sow Fall, which features in Christopher Hogarth’s excellent piece about Senegalese combat-sport fiction.

As someone who’s been in the editor position myself, putting together a collection of essays, I know it’s tricky to find the right balance of so many different factors at once: genres, periods, subjects, approaches, and gender of both essay writers and authors of primary texts. And if French sports literature is anything like English sport literature in this regard, it may just be that there are far more sports texts by male writers than female ones. (I suspect it’s a problem with sports lit everywhere.) I don’t want to make too much of a fuss about this point. After all, the fact that this fine collection was put together by two female scholars of sport literature is a promising sign for the future of the field.

As the editors explain in the introduction, the title “Pour le Sport” is a French expression meaning “merely for the pleasure of performing it, and that no practical object is involved”--an expression they chose for their title for the way it connects sport with literature, another pastime sometimes seen as “purposeless,” in the best possible way. But in the best essays here the issues and texts explored actually do both–they provide pleasure while also achieving the “practical objects” of analysis, insight, and provocation.