Holdefer, Charles*. Don’t Look At Me*. Montclair, NJ: Sagging Meniscus Press, 2022. 284pp. ISBN 9781952386350

Charles Holdefer’s 2022 novel *Don’t Look At Me* is a multi-genre coming-of-age story

that opens with one of Emily Dickinson’s most erratic and honest poems: “I’m nobody! Who are

you?” which mirrors the struggle of Holly Winegarten, the ex-athlete who must reconcile the life

she has lived with the new life she must embrace. While working in the special archives section

of the university library, she discovers romantic letters between Dickinson and an Irish

soldier—the same soldier who had been paid to replace her brother in the American Civil War.

Verisimilitude is important in sports literature, and Holdefer gets it right with the

basketball play-by-plays, the graduate seminar stressors, and the relatable antics of a

dysfunctional family. Holdefer grew up in the Midwest and captures the essence of the

Midwestern university that Holly attends. His strength is authenticity and humor, knowing the

ins and outs of the culture. In addition, an Irish soldier really did replace Emily Dickinson’s

brother in the American Civil War (Zander). However, we don’t know in real life if a romance

ensued.

In 1991, Donald M. Murray published an article titled, “All Writing is Autobiography”

where he claimed, “I have my own peculiar way of looking at the world and my own way of

using language to communicate,” and I don’t think Charles Holdefer could have written Don’t

Look At Me without his experience in the Midwest. How else could he have nicknamed Holly’s

university “Grainball U?” How else could he have captured the reverence of Holly’s father, a

stoic sports fan in the middle of America? Holly’s father learned lessons from the baseball

players he followed and passed those lessons down to Holly, which helped her when she was in a

pinch, trying to take a crack at academia. The irony of something common like baseball helping

Holly with something “high-brow” like academia is not lost on the reader. Holdefer expertly

crafts this scenario into the novel with good plotting and characterization. As a result, the reader

realizes how inseparable sport is from higher education, even when an athlete loses her

scholarship. Sport is society; society is sport.

*Don’t Look At Me* combines many forms and genres in one sitting: historical fiction,

epistolary writing, poetry, sports literature, and academic comedy. This book is similar to Jane

Smiley&#39;s Moo and Chad Harbach’s The Art of Fielding because of the academic setting, but

Don’t Look at Me pushes the boundaries of what is possible in the genre. The only time the

verisimilitude was threatened was when the narrator employed old-fashioned words like “plump”

and “busty” to describe women. These words felt dissonant in a novel centered on a young

female protagonist. However, the reader might forgive this slip in voice when they read the scene

where Holly plays basketball in high school and shoots the winning basket with an injury. A

poignant flashback illuminates Holly’s grief in the scene where:

“the pain shot up her spine, excruciating and for a moment she actually forgot

where she was and what she was doing. She saw flashes of blue and then green,

and it seemed as if somehow she was outdoors. Not playing basketball but simply

standing and waiting. The blue was pieces of sky and the family was on summer

vacation and her father had taken them to a hot grassy field where something

terrible had happened” (20).

This is the peak of her glory and the start of her decline. It sets up Holly as an athlete has-been, a

common trope in sports literature, but it is fresh in the context of her trying to find her way—it

adds to the drama. As Virignia Woolf wrote, sport was the structure that gave American writers

substance, especially Ring Lardner’s novel *You Know Me Al* (Woolf 103). *In Don’t Look At Me*,

the reader is rooting for Holly to find a new center, something that can replace basketball,

something that can give her life structure. Her brain is still wired to play basketball and this

affects how she approaches academia.

It’s hard enough for female athletes to carve out a place in the world. The drama is

compounded for Holly because she is a former female athlete who must find new structure for

her life. In the words of Susan Bandy, the female athlete is cast “upon a stormy sea in a sailboat

without a compass, map, or companion” while the male athlete navigates the world of sports as if

in a “motorboat down an often-traveled river with his friends; the banks of the river where the

cheering audience stands clearly mark his passage to a familiar and comfortable place” (Bandy

84). Holly’s life preserver was falling in love with Dickinson’s poetry in an English class and

making the discovery in the archives, which would have never happened had she not gone to

college on a sports scholarship. In Holly’s journey, sport brought her to literature. It’s with the

merging of the two worlds that Holly comes into her own confidence and establishes herself as a

serious contender in the cutthroat competition of the MLA conference. She uses the

competitiveness she learned in basketball to throw down at the conference and the grace she

learned from Emily Dickinson to make the delivery of her throwdown palatable.

Tender subjects such as cancel culture, harassment, and fetish are addressed in this novel

with a delicate recklessness that represents the clashing of two ideals: the first is the need to be

politically correct with a surface level sense of morality; the second is the need to see the

humanity in each individual, which is a deep-rooted sense of morality that transcends the passing

of philosophical trend cycles. Holdefer writes from the interior of the characters, even the

problematic ones, which gives them shape as three-dimensional, somewhat redeemable

characters, despite their flaws.

Readers with an appreciation for sport, a good comeback story, and a coming-of-age

narrative will find comfort in this novel. Those who also enjoy historical fiction and poetry will

appreciate the pages of fictionalized letter correspondence between Dickinson and the Irish

soldier. Anyone ranging from having a healthy relationship with academia to completely

loathing it will find truth and humor in Holly’s journey. She is the female hero that both subverts

and triumphs over the expectations set for her in the academic sphere as well as society at large.

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