

## BOOK REVIEW

**Garry Whannel** *Media Sport Stars: Masculinities and Moralities*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. ISBN: 0 415 17037 0

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Seven years ago, a high-up loser who worked for a publishing concern with offices in London and New York wrote me a letter — people still did in those days — remarking that a paper I had recently given at a seminar had an interesting title. Would I care to have lunch and discuss the possibility of writing a book? So we worked out some recognition procedures to identify one another and duly met at a cafe, shaking hands and exchanging names. When the maven heard my voice, he said, as we made our way to the table, ‘Oh, you’re foreign. We can’t publish books by foreigners. They don’t sell here.’ I ordered the cheapest omelet on the menu and remained studiously polite as I pondered the mantra ‘Don’t get mad, get even.’ The hour together was dedicated to him droning on about the book trade. The next time I encountered Mr X was at a conference. Pushing a pram (sorry, stroller) he said ‘Hi, Toby. Can’t talk. You might infect my child.’ Thanks. First the voice, now the germs.

Vindication is sweet. Publishing is increasingly trans-Atlantic, and perhaps Mr X is entertaining people with even stranger accents than mine these days. For just as academic Spanish-language books now proliferate between Latin America and Spain — with the Spanish owning many outlets in its former colonies — so English-language titles must move across continents. Garry Whannel is well-qualified to make that trans-Atlantic crossing — and he’s better looking than Rod Stewart.

Whannel is a foundational figure in the study of sports and the media. He more or less pioneered critical leftist analysis in this field, as opposed to the polite positivism that counts and counts and counts. For 20 years, his writing has set a high standard. And it remains an inspiration to many, myself included. This is because he has worked so hard and effectively to bridge the gap between the oppositional critique associated with British qualtoids and the lapdog empiricism of US quantoids. In *Media Sport Stars*, Whannel looks at both British and US cases, from Ian Botham to Muhammad Ali. The book covers the spread of the media into sport, their interest in personality, and the way in which this has fed into and been informed by questions and crises of masculinity. Cultural capitalism’s penchant for personalization, when allied to the deregulatory fervor

of policy-makers, has generated a fascinating landscape, and Whannel is an experienced guide into questions of commodification, sexism, racism, and nationalism, as he takes us through the logics and practices of television and the tabloids.

Along the way, there are some missteps. These probably derive from the worthy attempt to devote equal energy to Britain and the US. Some of these are important, such as the remark that 'North America remains largely disinterested in soccer' (p. ix) — a strange claim, given the popularity of the sport in Mexico, US domination of the women's game, and the fact that the major Spanish-language cable TV networks in the US, which rate very highly, feature football all the time. Other problems are strictly for the anal, such as the statement that baseballer Joe DiMaggio went '56 games without striking out' in 1941 (p. 95). This is probably an impossible feat. DiMaggio actually got a *hit* in each of the 56 games — an extraordinary achievement, and one that has never been emulated, but some distance from not striking out at all (which might be equated with heading a goal in association football 56 games in a row or scoring an unbeaten century in cricket with the same frequency). But such errors are few in number, thanks to the breadth and depth of Whannel's erudition.

*Media Sport Stars* also opens up fascinating avenues for further research. This is especially true in two key areas, namely stardom and masculinity. I think we need more work, in the spirit of Whannel's interdisciplinarity, that will address issues of labor (often neglected in favor of capital and the state) and gender relations (frequently analyzed without reference to major economic changes in the US that position male stars as objects of the straight and gay desiring gaze in the interests of commodity fetishism). There is a very extensive, diverse literature on these topics, but it is normally not in dialog across discourses or with respect to sports. In the area of celebrity, we have high-quality sociological studies that track symbolic meaning and enable systematized textual analysis (summarized and extended by Gamson, 1994), regression analyses that correlate the presence of stars with the success of popular entertainments, problematizing the assumption that stars are always central to popular culture (e.g. Albert, 1998; Wallace et al., 1993), and labor-theory-of-value approaches that interrogate capitalist exploitation (Christopherson, 1996; Clark, 1995; King, 1987, 1992). In the arena of masculinity, a developing literature challenges the pieties of temperance feminism, *faux* male abjection, and impressionistic shibboleths (Alter, 1995; Badinter, 1995; Barham, 1995; Cole, 1993; Coleman, 1990; Halberstam, 1998; Hall, 1996; Harper, 1996; Kane and Lenskyj, 1998; Pope et al., 2000). If we can put these vital questions into play with Whannel's agenda, we can locate labor alongside capital, and changes in the sexual economy alongside the usual condemnation of masculinity.

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