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“steel on water frozen calm”

The Poetry of Hockey in Richard Harrison’s *Hero of the Play*

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Given hockey’s prominence in Canadian life and culture, it might seem odd that there is so little Canadian poetry focused on hockey. In recent years, a substantial body of fiction about hockey has appeared in English Canada—some of the best examples are discussed elsewhere in this collection—but until very recently, Canadian hockey poetry has consisted of only a few passing references and isolated poems. This lacuna is no doubt related to the snobbery with which the Canadian cultural elite has treated hockey historically. As Jason Blake notes in his seminal study *Canadian Hockey Literature*,

Hockey belongs to low or popular culture, and for much of the twentieth century it was kept away from serious fiction. George Woodcock’s observation that “literatures are defined as much by their lacks as by their abundances” says much about perceptions of proper cultural topics. Even while the literati chased distinctively Canadian themes to validate a new literature, they ignored hockey. They ignored the body in favour of the strictly cerebral. (2010, 23)

If those forging the landscape of our country’s fiction have avoided hockey for so long because of its association with “low or popular culture,” one might presume that our poets would be even less likely to write about the game.

One exception is Al Purdy, whose 1965 poem “Hockey Players” remains the finest and perhaps most influential poem written about hockey (2000, 71). “Hockey Players” famously describes the game as “this combination of ballet and murder.” A prolific and important poet whose “everyman” perspective on Canada reshaped the landscape of what was considered literature, Purdy addresses both the dangers of the game—“broken arms and legs and / fractured skulls opening so doctors / can see such bloody beautiful things” (lines 2–4)—and the

intoxicating “swift and skilled delight of speed” (l. 65) that make hockey so compelling to play and watch. Throughout the poem, Purdy evocatively describes hockey’s intensity as it is experienced by players, fans, and even the nation:

We sit up there in the blues
 bored and sleepy and suddenly three men
 break down the ice in roaring feverish speed and
 we stand up in our seats with such a rapid pouring
 of delight exploding out of self to join them why
 their and our orgasm is the rocket stipend
 for skating thru the smoky end boards out
 of sight and climbing up the appalachian highlands
 and racing breast to breast across laurentian barrens. (lines 24-32)

“Hockey Players” was the first hockey poem by a major Canadian poet, and it broke the ground for later poets. Not only did it demonstrate that hockey could be the topic of a powerful and challenging poem, but the poem’s rich imagery and thematic network offered a glimpse of how much more could be written about the game. It would take nearly thirty years, though, for another poet to seize the opportunity revealed by Purdy’s “Hockey Players.”

Richard Harrison’s 1994 collection *Hero of the Play* is a landmark of sport literature in Canada. While it is not the first Canadian book of poetry about hockey—John B. Lee’s *The Hockey Player Sonnets* (1991), for instance, precedes it by three years—Harrison’s book is certainly the most recognized and widely read collection of its kind. *Hero of the Play* is the first book of poetry ever to be launched at the Hockey Hall of Fame and the first to be read from at the Calgary Saddledome, two venues that had never before hosted literature in such a way. Since then, *Hero of the Play* has been reprinted six times, including in an expanded 10th Anniversary Edition—a rare achievement for a volume of poetry in Canada.

Along with the success of *Hero of the Play*, Harrison himself has become a prolific commentator on the game. Between 2004 and 2018 Harrison wrote over a dozen conference papers, articles, and book chapters about hockey. His 2005 poem about the NHL lockout, “NH Elegy,” was published by newspapers around the world, and in 2006, he was one of the featured

experts talking about hockey on CBC's ten-part television series *Hockey: A People's History*. Shortly after the death of Jean Béliveau in 2014, Harrison's poems were featured in a piece by NBC Sports national columnist Joe Posnanski, "Gordie and Mr. Béliveau," published on the NBC Sportsworld website. Posnanski places Harrison's reflections on meeting Gordie Howe and Jean Béliveau alongside commentary from luminaries of hockey journalism, including Michael Farber, Roy MacGregor, and Cam Cole. Posnanski brings literature and sport together by combining his prose with four key passages from "A Lifetime of Moving the Body Just So" and "Béliveau Teaches Me How to Handle the Puck," poems that Harrison wrote for and read to Howe and Béliveau, respectively (Harrison 2004, 85, 86). Serving as epigraphs to four of the six sections of Posnanski's piece, the passages are the linchpins of the essay, allowing Posnanski to capture both the personal stories of the players and the qualities that made each of them so much larger than life. With the help of Harrison's poems, Posnanski depicts Howe and Béliveau as hockey royalty who are immortalized in verse and legend as much as in the record books.

The larger framework for the poems in *Hero of the Play* is sketched out by Harrison in "Ten Years with the Hero: On Hockey and Poetry," an introductory essay to the 10th Anniversary Edition. Here, Harrison examines the connections between hockey and Canadian identity. Discussing the debates over where hockey was first played, he argues, "What's important isn't where the origin of hockey is found in Canada, but how Canada finds at least a part of its origin in hockey" (2004, 16). He draws connections among hockey, national myth-making, and what compels him as a poet to explore both:

Like all creation myths, hockey is also about Canadian light and Canadian darkness. All creation myths have a place for the way their people experience not just the light and the dark of the seasons and the day, but the light and the darkness in themselves. Hockey's simplicity and childish roots offer us the play that we love for its own sake; its skills and speed give us what we admire in those dedicated to excellence. Its violence gives us a view into our own. (17)

As this passage suggests, Harrison approaches his project from the perspective of a lover of the game and a keen observer of the game's larger place in the Canadian experience.

The form of the poems in *Hero of the Play* is noteworthy. Harrison set himself the challenge of treating the blank page like a clean sheet of ice, with no poem being allowed to stretch beyond the boundaries of a single page. In addition, he “wanted to make the poems look like they came from the sports pages, specifically, sport page columns. I wanted them to look like clippings—the kind of writing that sometimes ends up pinned to locker room bulletin boards.”¹ To maintain this structure and appearance in each poem, Harrison created a further restriction, a system he called the “prose-poem line break,” which allows him to “take control of the ends of the lines as well as their beginnings” and thus prevent the prose poems from becoming straight prose. If what he wanted to be a single line overshot the right margin, he would either adjust the kerning or the margins “or re-write the line so [he’d] get what [he] wanted, a line that did break but not so [the reader would] notice it because the longest line ended no more than 5 strokes away from the shortest in any poem.” He also typeset the book himself “to make sure all those choices would be preserved.” In making these decisions, Harrison was anticipating the responses of potential readers:

If the poems *looked like poems* before they were read, the aversion to poetry in our culture as a whole, and certainly its alienation from our athletic culture, would mean that sportspeople—players and fans and commentators—would rarely if ever read them. But if I approached language poetically within the frame of the appearance of that language that they were familiar with, they’d give the poems a chance. And they did.

Within these formal and aesthetic restrictions, Harrison offers up prose poems rich in imagery and metaphor that address a wide array of themes, figures, and events from the game. The compact form delivers his work to audiences in a way that opens them to seeing poetry and hockey in a new light. While it is frequently said that poetry is meant to be read aloud, Harrison takes his hockey poems a step further by regularly performing them aloud from memory. His performances on radio, television, and YouTube, and in his public readings, suggest that for him, the poetry of sport is enhanced by the physicality of performance. The core hockey poems that

¹ The quotations in this paragraph are from an email to the author, 21 March 2017.

Harrison tends to perform in public—including “Stanley Cup,” “Rhéaume,” and “Elegy for the Rocket”—are those that have also had the widest reach and have been included in many anthologies.

Many of the poems in *Hero of the Play* offer portraits of important figures in the game. In “First Round Pick: Paul Coffey” (43), for example, the poet describes what it is about Coffey, one of the greatest defencemen ever to play the game, that leads him to choose the player first in his hockey pool. In listing the reasons for his choice, Harrison also captures the essence of Coffey’s stellar career: “Because two years ago he skated around an entire / team”; “because we / capped him at a hundred points in the pool”; “because he is constantly one behind the / greatest stars, feeding them the puck.” The poem culminates, though, in a poignant connection that the poet draws between Coffey and the poet’s father:

because
his nose is my father’s, his look intense as I
remember my father running the day I finally
passed him, running my heart out.

This linking of the poet’s own experiences and identity with his understanding of the game and those who have played it carries through many of the collection’s poems about players.

The desire to feel or play like one’s hockey heroes resurfaces in various poems. In “Lindros” (54), for instance, the poet observes how

Lindros is afraid of breaking
nothing. I saw him bust a man’s collarbone in Maple
Leaf Gardens, and nearly break another man’s leg,
score one goal and assist on another. The fans went
wild, and it proves how little we have for ourselves:
given the chance, I’d be him.

In “Bobby in Africa” (84), hockey becomes the opening for a conversation between the poet and “the manager of the Hôtel Ivoire,” who sees the Canadian flag on Harrison’s pack:

he says he loves my country, and he plays on the rink
 that lies chilled like a pie in a land where leaves rot as they
 grow and the air is sweet as apples with their dying.

The mention of Bobby Hull—“a man whose shot I saw push a goalie / into his own net”—builds an instant connection “between men / who’ve found enough to confirm the world and go on.” Anticipating his skate the next day “on this rink way ahead of schedule / and nature,” the poet imagines he “will be like Bobby Hull—each time / he touched the ice, he was every boy in love.”

The poet considers his affinity for yet another hockey hero in “Béliveau Teaches Me How to Handle the Puck” (86):

We used to have breakfast together in the 60s; me with
 a bowl and milk and my early-reading eyes, him on the
 back of a box of Shredded Wheat.

Recalling the majesty of that particular photograph of Béliveau “skating the edge between old world and new, Béliveau in charge / the way the eye of a hurricane is in charge,” the poet considers what he has learned from his hockey hero:

He teaches me
 not to look at the whirl of legs and arms and wood, or
 be impressed by the thunder of the puck striking the
 boards, filling the ear of the arena. He teaches me
The puck going into the net is silent.

The juxtaposition at the end of this poem of the noise, violence, and frenetic pace of the action on the ice and the silence of perhaps the only thing that ultimately matters—the small black puck making it past the goaltender and hitting the net—is but one example of many such contrasts and tensions that Harrison explores throughout the collection.

The poems about Hull and Béliveau are two of four poems commissioned by the Calgary Booster Club for a “Sportsman of the Year” dinner in 2000 and included in the 10th Anniversary Edition. The event was a tribute to four of the greatest players of all time—Maurice Richard, Gordie Howe, Bobby Hull, and Jean Béliveau—and each of these players was in attendance; it was the last time the four men would ever be together, and it was the final public appearance of Maurice Richard. At the event, Harrison read his poems to each of the men and presented them with their respective copies. Getting to meet and pay tribute to one’s heroes in such a direct and intimate way was an important moment personally and professionally for Harrison. He ponders the event’s significance in “Ten Years with the Hero,” his introductory essay in the 2004 edition:

No longer was I, or could I be, someone responding to hockey from the stands. I would be speaking in person, in public, and in their company, about men who were freely spoken of as legends, whose stories had become part of hockey lore. I would be speaking from my world of pages and ink, yet I would be speaking with the kind of men whose most trusted and intimate words are never meant for ink.

(Harrison 2004, 14)

Many of the strongest poems in *Hero of the Play* talk about the complex tensions among masculinity, violence, and identity. “The Use of Force” (52) portrays a fight between Lyle Odelein of the Montréal Canadiens and Randy Moller of the New York Rangers in a game that took place on 9 February 1991 in Montréal. The fight begins with the pre-fight ritual, described by the poet in almost erotic terms:

Gently, almost like
leaves on a stream, they drift towards Centre, their
hands naked now, their heads unhelmeted; this is the
undressing.</pext>

This quiet foreplay ends violently:

But then Lyle’s hand

pops free and his bared fist goes down and down on
Randy's face, and the crowd's anticipation, the listless,
frustrating play of the home team, bursts from the
throats of the 17000 at the Forum that night, a roar
I can feel tremble down the centre of my ribcage, my
stomach, my groin.

Odelein's "offering to the crowd," the poet suggests, influences the outcome of the game:

Randy has been brought to the ice,
his sky filled with Lyle's fist, and the Rangers do not
fare well this night, while the Canadiens find Caesar's
tide, and break the game open in their favour.

While the violence of this fight at centre ice propels the Canadiens to victory and causes a visceral reaction among the home team's fans, the poem on the page facing "The Use of Force" addresses how the lack of such a response can leave a team and its fans feeling impotent and let down in the wake of a tough loss. In "I Watch Him Break Sanstrom's Leg" (53), the poet refers to a violent hit on the LA Kings' Tomas Sandström in the 1991 Smythe Division Finals and wishes that such an action could be met with even greater violence:

I find myself longing for a big, tough man
with a nickname like *The Hammer* as if an enforcer
[. . .]
could protect
his friends from the kind of hit that ends a career,
the violence within the rules.

In this case, however, violence is not met by even greater violence, and the poet captures the lingering sense of helplessness this leaves behind:

Fact is, there is no fight;
 fact is, the Kings go down in six. We've just been
 through a war—even that is not enough when men
 are willing, the outcome is in doubt, and the ache
 in me is to strike, I who am not hungry, not broken.

It would be presumptuous to say that by placing these two poems side by side, Harrison is arguing that fighting is an essential aspect of the game. These two poems make it clear, though, that the players willing to sacrifice their bodies—to resort, heroically, to any means necessary to help their team win (even if they still lose)—are those, like “*The Hammer*,” who will be remembered by their teammates and fans.

“Stanley Cup” and “Coach’s Corner” are but two of the collection’s many poems that ponder men’s love for the game, and the love and loyalty between teammates, fathers and sons, players and fans. “Stanley Cup” (62), perhaps the best-known poem from the collection, begins with the image of how “Mario Lemieux hoists the Cup, kisses its silver / thigh” and then describes how players over the years have spent their time with the Cup. As the poet reminds us, “Every player on every / team who ever won the Cup gets to take it home,” and “even the guy who left it by / the side of the road and drove away, still he thinks / of it as holy.” Harrison sums up all the ways in which people have treated and revered the Cup with the final words of the poem: “This way / I have loved you.” “Coach’s Corner” (50) also points to love as what makes the polarizing figure of Don Cherry so compelling, even sometimes to those who find “the priest of rock ’em / sock ’em” to embody all that they dislike about the game. Even if Cherry “is loud and whiny and complaining” and “slams foreigners, / praises women in all the ways wrong for our time,” what makes him, in the eyes of the everyday fan, “their man in a way no / hero of the play could be” is love:

he is here
 because he is unafraid to love, love the game, the
 journeyman players, love the code that makes a man
 a man—and if you don’t know it I ain’t gonna tell ya.

There is, certainly, a nostalgic tone to much of *Hero of the Play*, and a sense that its poems work to portray a side of players and hockey that will soon be lost to the growing commercialization and homogenization of the game. Harrison's poems written for Howe, Hull, Béliveau, and Richard each contain a sense of wanting to pay tribute to these players before they are gone. The poem Harrison wrote about Richard for that event, "Maurice" (87), and his later "Elegy for the Rocket" (95) capture Richard's power and determination to persevere. In "Maurice," Harrison pays tribute to Richard's incredible determination and ability to win against all odds by comparing the elderly Richard's decision to come to Calgary shortly before his death to the legendary 1945 play in which Richard scored after dragging Red Wings defenceman Earl Seibert halfway down the rink with Seibert hanging onto Richard's sweater. Richard's ability to make plays that were larger than life, plays that transformed both the match and the sport, are what made him such a special player. In comparing how Richard's "eyes / ablaze and bituminous black" (87), as seen in the famous photo described in "Maurice," had faded by the end of the player's life to "a humble fire at the end of its use" (95), "Elegy for the Rocket" evokes the fading away of a player who redefined the game and, particularly in Québec, people's love for its heroes.

Despite the focus on men and the occasionally nostalgic tone, *Hero of the Play* embraces how hockey and society have changed in recent years, particularly with respect to the roles of women. The poems "Hockey Mom," "The Feminine," and "Rhéaume" delve into the connections between women and hockey, complicating the traditional assumptions about who the "hero of the play" can be. As Harrison writes in his introductory essay, "Hockey Mom," part of "The Hero in Overtime" section added for that edition, "finally addresses a gap in the original book pointed out over the years by hockey moms who've shared their sometimes-secret love/hate relationship with the game" (2004, 13). While the hockey mom in the poem supports and feeds the growth of her son on and off the ice, she cares more for her boy than she does the game. She is not among the

Spartan mothers

in the stands screaming in any one of murder's names
as if a woman's voice could arm her boy for the work
of wood and bone the men and audience all think is

part of the game forever. (89)

Although she stays away from the stands and keeps her eyes from the ice, she nevertheless catches herself sharing her son's aspirations:

you watch his hungry body disappear with
every bite and healing muscle into the player you surprise
yourself dreaming with him he'll be.

In "The Feminine" (41), Harrison addresses the identification of players and lovers of the game as men and the caregivers and spectators of the game as women—something that may seem wildly out of date to the reader of 2018, when women's and girl's hockey is exploding at both amateur and professional levels, and boys, girls, and even NHL players are wrapping their sticks in rainbow tape to assert that "anyone can play." Hockey, in this poem, is a divider of men and women. The poet wonders if he could include a feminine figure in an imagined "deck of hockey Tarot cards." Even though "Canada's women's / team is the best in the world," the poet confesses, uncomfortably, that his vision of professional hockey is played by men:

This is not why I love the game, or why its symbols
work like runes in my language. This is a game
the women watch, its gentler moments taken in
their image.

For the poet and his partner, "the game divides us," not only in how they connect to such a gendered vision of the sport but also in how they communicate:

Again I've
come to a profession of love in words I cannot use
for you, with all the women left in the stands
where I demand you sit and applaud it all.

Harrison's poem "Rhéaume" (73) provides a counterweight for the unwillingness, expressed in "Hockey Mom" and "The Feminine," to accommodate a less gendered vision of hockey. The poem pays tribute to the pioneering goaltender Manon Rhéaume, the first woman ever to play a major junior hockey game and, by signing in 1992 with the Tampa Bay Lightning and playing for one period in an NHL exhibition game, the first woman ever to play in any major professional sports league in North America. "Rhéaume" revolves around Rhéaume's aspiration to be seen solely as a player and not as a hero or role model. The poem begins with "Here is the desire of Manon Rhéaume: to stop the / puck." Being a goaltender helps, almost, to make those watching her forget that she is a woman: the equipment and the mask give her the opportunity to "disappear into *goalie* the way / a man can be a man and not a man inside the / armour." The poem suggests, however, that her aim "[t]o forget in the motion of the save that we / do not forget she is always a woman and sex is / everything" might be impossible to achieve; even if she is able to "[t]o stop the / puck where the best are men," it is less likely that men will suddenly "be better / than they are." The poem ends, though, with an attempt to frame Rhéaume in way that her desire "[t]o be a woman / and have it be her play that counts" might be fulfilled. The poet describes a collage on the wall of the listener that features heroic "women with their arms raised." Alongside other great athletes and activists, goddesses, Catwoman, and Boadicea, we see, as the poem closes,

Rhéaume

and a glove save, the puck heading for the top
corner. Stopped.

(More than two decades after both Rhéaume's appearance in the Lightning net and the writing of Harrison's poem, that final image might well be closer to how she is understood today than how she was viewed in 1992.

Given the status of *Hero of the Play* as the first widely celebrated collection of poems about hockey, it is fitting that a significant theme of the book involves the relationship between language and sport. How can you capture in words a sport like hockey, where the action is so quick, multidirectional, and, for the uninitiated, challenging to follow? What can the specialized eye of a poet add to our understanding of the game? In "Using the Body" (51), the poem about

the fight between Lyle Odelein and Randy Moller, Harrison illustrates how a moment of hockey can be seen in dramatically different ways. While a fan might see only anger and violence exploding through the fists of a fighting player, the poet is struck by the incongruousness of the fighter's calm deliberation, using his body as "the agent of policy":

When a fight begins, we say it is emotion, but after
the game, the goon speaks clearly of the momentum
of play, doing what he had to do, a strict account
level in his head. Later, when he wears a suit,
when he coaches, you can see how he saw the
entire rink all along: he never looked at the puck,
the stickhandling, a man's cheek when his purpose is
clear and there's open ice before him.

The challenge faced by the poet-fan in attempting to articulate this rich tension between how fans and players see and experience the game resurfaces in "The Praise of Men" (42). Faced with a player he admires, the poet finds himself unable to express his reverence for and envy of his talent; yet, as an anonymous fan "with a seat in the blues," he has no trouble finding expression, "hiding my praise in the open":

Give me these players whom I will never
meet, to hoot and holler out my deep riskless love that
finds no softer words, no shame or venture, merely
a game.

The poem's opening line, "To their faces, it escapes me, words for the praise of men," distills the challenge Harrison sets up for himself in writing a collection of poems about hockey. In attempting to describe hockey through words and verse, then, *Hero of the Play* reminds us of the many angles from which to see and understand the game. Though Harrison's collection deals with an impressive range of topics and perspectives, ultimately the richness of it all emphasizes how much of hockey has yet to be explored through poetry and other media.

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