Non-fiction football writing occurs at every level of the sport’s cultural strata. Historians, reporters, sports writers, agents, players, fans, referees and hooligans have written, ghost-written and inspired historical, topical and biographical accounts of the game and events that occur within its vicinity. In contrast, the football novel seems comparatively rare. As a result, commentators, including the editor of Norton Book of Sports, George Plimpton (1992), have dismissed football’s fiction. While some writers, including D. J. Taylor (1997) and Will Buckley (2005), argue there is much in football that lends itself to storytelling, Nick Hornby, credited with football writing’s rise to quality, argues, for the same reason, there should be enough excitement in the real thing for the reader to ever turn to stories from someone’s imagination. Yet football fiction, which has been in confirmed existence since the 1870s, is a genre with a very real and important historical longevity. It reflects the game’s ever-changing culture, and offers a literary, creative and imaginative space to better understand and examine the sport, its place and its representations in contemporary culture. To the unfortunate, though necessary, neglect of other media (including poetry, comic books and graphic novels, theatre, fanzines and short stories), this chapter will focus on the novel, as an easily isolated and comparable form (Moretti, 2003a: 67), to illustrate the length, depth and breadth of football’s fictive literature.

While anecdotal references place football fiction’s existence before the development of the modern version, the sport’s formal beginnings in 1862 are taken as the starting point for its literature. For the purposes of this discussion, football fiction is described as any work of fiction with a significant reliance on football as a central or substantive element, including but not restricted to narrative, voice, structure, setting and character development. It argues that football fiction exhibits modes of representation and repetition, which are primary requirements for a reader to recognise and situate a text. Genre constitutes a tacit contract between an author and a reader, which encourages a ‘shorthand’ that increases efficiency in communication, and acts as an agent of ideological closure that can limit the meaning of a given text (Chandler, 2004). Football fiction, like any genre is predisposed to respond to (Devitt, 2008: 576) and provide a narrative grammar that reinforces reader expectation (Gelder, 2004).
Football and its fiction

The methodological approach to this study builds on an intensive mapping process informed by Moretti’s *distant reading* model (2003a, 2003b) and a contextual scan of around 350 novels. Use of textual and content analyses allowed identification of key authors’ texts and conventions. These analysis methods are commonly used for quantitative and qualitative evaluation, particularly in the determination of patterns and systematic observation of recurrent themes and characteristics (Holsti, 1969; Stemler, 2001). A synthesis of the analyses highlights and strengthens the argument for football fiction’s consideration as a genre.

This chapter is not the first to break ground here; a range of analyses concerning individual works sit alongside a number of more expansive, overlapping explorations. These studies tend to speculate on why the form seems disproportionately scarce in relative comparison to non-fiction football works rather than discuss conventions in detail. D. J. Taylor’s seminal essay ‘Rally Round You Havens!’ (1997), Richard Cox, Dave Russell and Wray Vamplew’s *Encyclopedia of British Football* (2002), and, the most comprehensive, Peter Seddon’s *Football Compendium: A Comprehensive Guide to the Literature of Association Football* (1999), are primarily aimed at fans and collectors. This chapter, then notes, previous discussions of the genre’s early dismissal, before offering a brief overview of its historical development, and highlighting a range of identifiable conventions which mark the body of works in generic terms.

Early dismissal

Thirty years before, Plimpton (mirrored by Ian Hamilton in the 1992 *Faber Book of Soccer*) asserted his view that ‘soccer has no important literature at all’ (1992: 14) while Terence Delany’s 1961 anthology, *The Footballer’s Fireside Book* claimed football was without a literary tradition. Brian Glanville, regarded as one of the finest football writers of his – or any other – generation, noted the very act of writing about an essentially working-class game immediately discounted the work from literary consideration (2009). The sentiment is echoed by Delaney, who suggested it was not enough of a gentleman’s game when all worthy sports writing focused on racing, hunting, fishing and boxing (1961). And Steve Braunias scornfully dismisses it as second-rate and not in need of consideration (2002). If a lack of class or quality were valid arguments for the dismissal of a genre, the content and categorisation of library shelves would suffer greatly.

The perceived lack of academic scrutiny around the football novel may be a result of the increasing consumption of the professional game; successful club seasons are now stretched by tournaments and pre-season, revenue-generating, glamour events. The little space left between the end of one and the beginning of the next is consumed with the soft journalism most often used to generate out-of-season engagement, including transfer speculation, scandal and fans’ player knowledge. Diminishing ‘quiet periods’ in the football calendar make it difficult for fictional strands to find their spot.

While the contextual scan for this study includes just over 350 texts, the survey that led to it noted in excess of 1,000 football novels. Based on the view that genres are determined by subject matter, style and conventions that change over time (Gelder, 2004; Hartley, 2007), an understanding of football fiction’s development is integral to its theoretical construction in generic terms. The next section will highlight common ‘movements’, key texts and authors and note the contemporary state of play.
History

The modern origins of football in fiction arguably began with the celebrated novelist, Arnold Bennett (Cox et al., 2002: 199). He wrote of the lives of professional footballers, a novelty at the time, and a match between two fictional teams in The Card (1910). A Mother’s Son (Fry, 1907), a thinly veiled ‘fictional’ sports memoir that includes football among its meditations arrived a couple of years earlier. The earliest example of novel-length football fiction noted is Football in Coketown, or, Who Shall Be Captain? (Burrage, 1893). The football content in these books is minimal, but they make appropriate and in some cases expert use of the game’s vernacular.

There is ample evidence of football fiction published in short-story form and weekly serials in a range of Victorian boys’ journals and magazines. The Boys Realm of Adventure and Sport (1908) and The Champion (1922) were aimed at young male audiences and set the cast for the football fiction comic strip. Its popularity has waxed and waned over the last century, but the form has continuously remained in print.

Football fiction’s popularity, in line with the game itself, blossomed in the 1920s (Cox et al., 2002: 199). While the texts tended to be limited to inexpensive pulp fiction and serials, rapidly growing post-war interest in the burgeoning professional game fuelled interest. Writers, such as R. A. H. Goodyear (Strickland of the Sixth (1922)) and Herbert Hayens (Play Up Kings! (1930)) drew on formulaic public schoolboy plots with football as a vehicle for lessons about class and playing as a team (Taylor, 1997: 90). The period also saw the football heroine placed at the centre of the game (Melling, 1998: 98). Characters such as Ray of the Rovers (Hinckes, 1915), Meg Foster and Rose and Olive in Don Grey’s Football Factory, battled for their rights and their place as workers in profit-sharing cooperatives (Melling, 1998: 98).

Prolific author Sydney Horler published 157 titles between 1920 and the mid 1950s, including 20 football fictions, such as Goal! A Romance of the English Cup-Ties (1920) and The Ball of Fortune (1923). Between 1925 and 1931 authors such as Kay Gray, P. W. Bottom and Harold Graham contributed stories to a number of publications including the 88 titled Aldine Football Novel series, predominantly aimed at young adults (Seddon, 1999: 520; Cox et al., 2002: 200), and the Amalgamated Press’s celebrated 566 issue Football and Sports Library, which carried the titles discussed by Melling (1998). Jock McPherson’s rags-to-riches bildungsroman, Stick It Ginger! (1922), Warwick Deeping’s conscientious exploration of class, Sorrell and Son (1925) and J. B. Priestley’s literary work The Good Companions (1929) represent typical forms and content in football fiction of the time.

In the 1940s and 1950s trends within the football novel changed. Published as a crime fiction involving football as opposed to the football novel with crime, the reissue of Sydney Horler’s McPhee as The Great Game (1945) underlines the dispensing of romanticism (and moralising) abundant in his and other writers’ earlier works. Leonard Gribble’s The Arsenal Stadium Mystery (1939) and its horribly titled The Arsenal Stadium Mystery: The Replay (1950) reinforced the influence of hard-boiled crime fiction and marked the early chalk outline for the role of serious crime in football fiction.

Football novels, which offer complex, emotionally charged, sociopolitical commentaries began to emerge in the 1950s with Robin Jenkins’s highly acclaimed The Thistle and the Grail (1954). The football field, ‘the pitch’, markedly became a place for working-class writers to express themselves; The Match, included in The Loneliness of a Long Distance Runner (Sillitoe, 1994 [1959]), is noted by Taylor (1997: 92) and Kuper (2005) as an excellent short fiction example. Taylor argues writers were afforded opportunities to engage with their playing experiences and cites Bill Naughton and Glanville as authors whose texts are reputedly rooted
in personal experience. Writers were also afforded much deeper explorations of the social context of football. Glanville’s realist work, *The Rise of Gerry Logan* (1965), eloquently illustrates the footballer’s struggle and is regarded by critics and writers alike (Taylor, 1997: 99; Braunias, 2002; Buckley, 2005; Kuper, 2005) as one of the foremost literary works of football fiction. Hanna Bell’s novel *Hollow Ball* (1961) focuses on football and politics (Bairner, 2000: 32). Barry Hines’s powerful novel *The Blinder* (1966) speaks to the working-class context around the sport. Acclaimed football writer, Hunter Davies’s *Body Charge* (1971) featured an exploration of sexual identity and Gordon Williams’s novel *From Scenes Like These* (1968) was shortlisted for the 1969 Booker Prize.

Just as football fiction’s literary position was affirmed, the advent of tabloid journalism in the mid 1970s saw football and football fiction dramatically change direction. Professional players’ lives were thrust into the limelight and a few cashed in. Works with much more sensationalised appeal and content became popular. Derek Dougan published *The Player* (1974), a fictionalised account of his relationship with the manager of Wolverhampton Wanderers, the club he played for at the time. The increasing prominence of sexual and profane content led to series such as *Hazell* (1974–6). Terry Venables infamously collaborated with Gordon Williams, under the joint pseudonym P. B. Yuill. The four-part series featured stories of corruption, drugs and scandal and was later televised. Famous player/notorious drinker, Jimmy Greaves put his name to a series of titles, including *The Ball Game* (1980), a misogynistic player’s misadventures. Philip Osbourn’s soft-core pornography, *The Winners* (1976) claimed similar ground. The second of Brian Glanville’s football novels, *The Dying of the Light* (1978) and Robin Jenkins’s *A Would-be Saint* (1978), along with J. L. Carr’s *How Steeple Sinderby Won the FA Cup* (1975), which recaptures and parodies the romance of the 1920s and 1930s, proved to be notable literary exceptions.

Nick Hornby’s *Fever Pitch* (1992), it could be contended, is football writing’s most important work. Jeff Hill (2008: 130) presents a persuasive argument why it should be regarded as a work of fiction, but it is not. It is an angst-ridden autobiography about the nature of one fan’s compulsions. As Haynes notes, it was influenced by the emergence of erudite writing in football fanzines and a widening of culture tastes (1995: 1). It almost single-handedly made football and its culture fashionable (Redhead, 2004), at least among the middle classes.

Its success heralded a proliferation. There were cultural lows, among them Karren Brady’s books *United* (1997) and *Trophy Wives* (1998), soft porn title *Playing the Field* (Coldwell, 2010, c1998), and sensationalised crime-related works such as former football agent, Mel Stein’s *Marked Man* trilogy (1996). While Hunter Davies’s satire, *Striker* (1992), failed to bridge the gap between the celebrity footballer stories of the 1980s and those marked as ‘new football writing’ (King, 2002, in Redhead, 2009: 27), an impressive roll call of literary authors did succeed including Whitbread Biography Award Winner D. J. Taylor, Booker Prize winner Roddy Doyle (*The Van* (1991)) and Indian novelist Nalinaksha Bhattacharyya. The latter’s debut novel *Hem and Football* (1992) and its sequel, based on the life of Jasminder Bhamra, a London-based Sikh footballer, achieved unprecedented success a decade later when it inspired the movie (*Chadha et al.*, 2002) and subsequent novelisation of *Bend It Like Beckham* (Dhami, 2002). In each case football, ‘at once refuge, palliative and escape route, ceases to be football and takes on a wholly figurative significance’ (Taylor, 1997: 97). Cox, Russell and Vamplew contend the ‘new football’ writers found an audience in middle-class suburbia and in doing so captured the moment when football found its place on society’s highbrow agenda (2002: 202). Steve Redhead describes these writers’ work as a ‘burgeoning movement of football writing which was essentially seen, self-consciously, as a new bourgeois genre in literature’ (2004: 294), and
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frequently refers to them as the ‘soccerati’, the label collectively assigned to the writers by Tony Parsons (1994: 126).

Hooligan literature, which can be traced to Richard Allen’s Skinhead (1970), reached something of a zenith in terms of quality if not in production in the late 1990s. While it could not have been further from the literary style of ‘new football’, key texts proved incredibly popular, they include Kevin Sampson’s Awaydays (1996) and Dougie Brimson’s novels The Crew (1999) and its sequel, which have since been adapted as films. The nature of violence in football fiction and the intrinsic cultural role of the fan, Redhead (2004: 394) argues, take a central role in the work of John King. They also play at the periphery of works by Irvine Welsh, particularly in Marabou Stork Nightmares (1995) and The Acid House (1994). As part of what Redhead ironically referred to as the Repetitive Beat Generation (2000: 7), their writing could be seen as a working-class football fiction response, designed to disturb those not traditionally seen as supporters, who’d taken an interest ‘post-Hornby’ and then just as quickly dropped it (Redhead, 2004: 395). D. J. Taylor suggested, ‘the literary audience … were puzzled by the football stuff. I think the football audience was puzzled by the literary stuff’ (2009). The popularity of the work of writers like Welsh, King, Brimson and Sampson would suggest the football audience, at least, had it all worked out.

In more recent years a relatively large number of divergent football fictions have been published. Alex Gray’s contemporary Scots’ crime fiction Pitch Black (2008), J. M. Gregson’s Only A Game (2010) and Arild Stavrum’s Exposed at the Back (2014) see the practice of combining football with murder continue. ‘Hoolie lit’ is still popular. It seems, however, to be largely as a result of big-screen adaptations rather than new and original work. After the success of a number of fictional works, including those by Sampson (1996) and King (1998), making the leap to the screen, a large number of non-fictional works have been adapted for film, including Cass (2008) and The Rise of the Footsoldier (2010). Brimson’s Green Street Hooligans (2005), a fictional tale inspired by his non-fictional works, led to poorly received sequels in 2009 and 2013.


In terms of new ground, a substantial number of self-published football fiction titles are now available. They tend to aim to capitalise on perceptions around football fiction’s ‘alleged’ scarcity or attend to ‘disguised’ authorial agendas. Examples include Soccer: The novel (2006) published in the US by Gianni Mininni and Football Widows (2008) by Margaret Hickling. The soccer mom phenomenon and with it the soccer mom novel has coincided with the game’s growing popularity in the US (Montoya, 2008), Australia and Canada. These novels do not often fully address the definition of football fiction. Titles range from practical, humorous and horror fantasy to the contemporary equivalent of football-watching, bodice-rippers such as Ninja Soccer Moms (Apodoca, 2004), The Secret Desires of a Soccer Mom (Harding, 2006), Demons Are Forever: Confessions of a Demon-Hunting Soccer Mom (Kenner, 2012 [2006]). It’s worth noting that a great many soccer mom novels never see a football pitch and would not be included.

The growth of the young adult fiction market has led to the emergence and proliferation of more sophisticated, complex and often hybridised football fictive works such as Mal Peet’s Paul Faustino series, The Keeper (2003), The Penalty (2006) and the Guardian newspaper 2009 prizewinner, Exposure (2008). Indicative of football fiction’s history, texts aimed at young men
learning to read and early and reluctant readers, have used football as the hook throughout the fiction’s history. Johnny Warren and Deborah Abela’s *Jasper Zammit* trilogy (2014), Neil Montagnana-Wallace with Mark Schwarzer’s five-book *Megs Morrison* series (2007–9) and Tom Palmer’s work on series such as *The Squad* (2012–13) along with novels by authors such as Matt Christopher and Michael Hardcastle are good examples. It is worth noting that this is also where players are most likely to be involved. David Beckham, Theo Walcott (Arsenal and England), and Frank Lampard, continue to prove the form to be extremely popular. Today, alongside these works, a vast proportion of contemporary football fiction for young adults is aimed at female readers. Cath Crowley’s *Gracie Faltrain* (2004–8) series and Liz Deep-Jones’s *Lucy Zeezou* series (2008–10) follows young female footballers through relationship trials and football-related tribulations.

An understanding of the historical development of football fiction makes it possible to identify common patterns and literary elements that form the basic narrative grammar of ‘the football’ novel. These patterns or literary techniques and devices include setting and narrative structure, the role of football and its impact on the protagonist, the role of the protagonist, the development of the football voice and other aspects particular to football fiction such as language use and player stereotypes.

**Conventional play**

Theorists such as Hartley (2007), Devitt (2008) and Chandler (2004) argue that rigid notions of a genre with anything like a stable boundary are beyond contention. Genres simply change with every new addition to their body. As a result, definitions tend to be based on conventions shared across content (such as theme or setting). While there are no fixed models of what a football novel should look like, there are recognisable patterns and characteristics. Classification of these characteristics enables generic distinction.

The pitch, the game surface and arena for the action, is a vital element of the setting in football fiction in literal and figurative terms. Whether the events of the text take place in or outside a stadium, in a local park, school or pub, there is a pitch, even if it is not explicitly marked out with goalposts at either end.

On-the-pitch action is an important part of a football fictive narrative. In *Lucy Zeezou’s Goal* (Deep-Jones, 2008) for example, it becomes the place where characters express themselves through football. In *Kickoff* (D. King, 2007) it provides an opportunity for a character to redefine her home. *The Diary of Darren Tackle* (White, 1998) marks the pitch as an ‘office’, the place where an average professional footballer does his job. It is the setting for employment in *Granville Tingate* (Lawson and Larkin, 2001), or at least somewhere for the protagonist, a telepathic talking football, to have an existential crisis about his role in the world.

Many football novels step away from the grass to where events ‘on the pitch’ are viewed by an observer or a spectator. When the protagonist is a manager, the pitch becomes the platform for them to prove their worth in choosing and motivating the team to win the day. The team, those who use the pitch, and those who manage them, often form the basis for conflict in football fiction. In *English Settlement* (1996) for example, which follows a fictional club (based loosely on Fulham FC), author D. J. Taylor uses a simplistic story to illustrate the impact of the policies of a particular political regime on the sport as a whole. The club and their exploits on the pitch, at least their results, provide leverage for sociopolitical commentary. *The Keeper* (Peet, 2003) is constructed around a journalist’s interview with a former international player and his reminiscence of his rise to fame and the origins of his ability. The pitch is where he exercises his power and ability. In texts such as *The Season Ticket* (Tulloch, 2000), a seat in the stadium,
a view of the pitch, is the protagonists’ goal, as two innovative young men try to raise funds to see their favourite team.

A number of novels operate even further away from the pitch. These include works concerned with football-related violence like *Awaydays* (Sampson, 1996) and *The Crew* (Brimson, 1998) and soccer mom texts such as *Soccer Mom Secrets* (Gunther and Holstein, 2007). The works of Irvine Welsh and John King on fan culture very rarely glimpse the playing surface, and Mel Stein’s football crime fiction happens in and around football clubs, but rarely takes notice of the players’ on-field efforts. They are however, culturally entrenched in the sport. The characters and events that take place in each story would not exist without the game. Though unseen by the reader, the pitch is often carried as a motif or a symbol for competing teams and players, their successes and failures, and its impact on the characters. *The Football Factory* (King, 1996) for example, figuratively uses the pitch to dissect masculinity in 1990s British society. The novel works its way through the confrontations and rivalries of large groups of men, fighting teams if you will. These clashes, dependent on football in the FA Cup draw, form the book’s structure and bring the story to its inevitably violent conclusion.

This literal and figurative relationship with and the amount of time spent on the pitch in the course of a football novel is a direct consequence of the protagonist’s relationship with the game and is determined by the intended audience. With few exceptions, the protagonist of football fiction plays, has played, watches or works in football. In young adult football fiction the protagonist is most often a player. Multiple-part series such as *Mega* (Montagnana-Wallace, 2007–10) and Bali Rai’s *Stars* series (2008–10) offer good examples where the characters work their way around a problem as a team. A great deal of page space is spent in games, playing football; the method commonly used to demonstrate the larger themes in the works, such as loyalty, friendship, teamwork and other qualities often tied to notions of good citizenship. There are exceptions of course. Danny, the protagonist in Tom Palmer’s *Foul Play* series (2008–10) for example, is a detective and fan rather than a player. The adult protagonist is more likely to be an observer of the game, a manager, former player or spectator such as *Striker* (Davies, 1992), and *Pitch Black* (Brentnall, 2004), which explores the fan’s position in the modern game. This difference between young adult fiction and adult fiction is due to expected levels of engagement with the reader. Young adult readers are more likely to play the sport or have an interest in playing the sport.

The lead role in the football novel has an impact on the point of view of the narrator. A majority of adult football fiction narratives are written in the male third-person perspective and are also written by men. This is not reflected in young adult football fiction where female protagonists, and authors, have greater representation. As a reflection of the protagonist’s role, first-person perspectives are less common but relatively more popular in young adult fiction. In very rare instances the main character is not interested in football, but football still has a crucial role in their character development, such as *Kestrel for a Knave* (1969) where one of the book’s pivotal scenes in terms of our view of the protagonist takes place on the football pitch. *The Damned United* (2006) uses some rare second-person narration.

The characters populating the stories, like those who feature in the western or the spy novel, for example, form an interesting cast of football stereotypes. This is evident where the novel focuses on a team or group of players or fans. This would require further research, but football fiction regulars include ‘the rock-like defender humbled by the jinking imp’ (Taylor 1997: 97). This deliberate choice of scenario and its explicit contrast highlights a very common subplot in football fiction. The ‘David and Goliath’ relationship, physical, emotional and spiritual growth in the face of overwhelming obstacles and, where 11 players against 11 players,
using the same rules and one ball, the football field becomes a ‘great leveller’. Class, race, colour, creed or background cannot equate to the character’s ability to play football, which can and often does transport them from their surroundings. The brutish Turk McCabe of Robin Jenkins’s novel The Thistle and the Grail (1954) carries the tension between his ability to play well against his poor nature as a person. He is able, allowed, to transcend any transgression as a result of his standing on the pitch. His beating of his mother is forgiven because he plays heroically through injury. The same atavistic force that leads to his beating his mother is used to drag his teammates from the brink of disaster. His place in Jenkins’s novel allows exploration of the dualities in sporting success and a great many more themes. In contrast, Alex Slingsby is a hero. The inspirational captain of Steeple Sinderby Wanderers (Carr, 1975) leads his team through strength of character, dedication and fortitude on and off the pitch. Slingsby’s moral fibre is tested often and harshly (his wife dies and he has to politically manoeuvre an unfavourable governing board), the player continually proves his mettle. The ‘cheeky, gifted rogue’, embodied in Joe Swift, the mercurial, exuberant and often comedic protagonist of Striker (1992), is another football fiction regular.

These characters’ voices and/or the narrators are generally inflected with football vernacular. As expected, the use of football language becomes a characteristic in and of itself. Even those texts, which feature very little football, reflect an immersion in the sport’s vernacular. The first example below is from The Football Factory (J. King, 1996), the second, from The Season Ticket (Tulloch, 2000):

Norwich hit a beautiful long pass that cuts the Chelsea defence and the farmers [Norwich] bury the ball in the back of the net.

(J. King, 1996: 108)

Gerry and Sewell sank lower in their seats. The ball swung in from the corner; a straining group of heads rose to meet it.

(Tulloch, 2000: 145)

‘The long pass’ is a standard strategic kick from deep in one team’s half to an attacking player in the opposition half. To ‘bury the ball in the back of the net’, is the act of scoring a goal, and, ‘the ball swung in from the corner’, indicates the attacking team won a corner kick; it is played into the defending team’s goalmouth, where the attackers try to score. These phrases, which could have come from a match description in a newspaper report, offer the novel football authenticity through setting, place and dialogue. These very specific signifiers orient reader expectations (Hartley, in O’Sullivan et al., 1994: 128). The author understands football and anticipates the reader does too.

In an apparent effort to engage a potentially dissonant adult reader other narrative techniques such as plot (out with football), character development (not players) and setting (away from the pitch) are employed to aspects of the storytelling. These can lessen the importance of the part the football plays. Again this is something for further research. The use of football language can also present issues for a non-football reader. Overuse of jargon or punditry will impact on the reader. The sports report, the most common form of football writing, is often parodied for its clichéd lexicon and repetitive nature. Martin Amis’s London Fields (1989) parodies the form, while Terry Pratchett uses a match report to change perspective to an omniscient third-person perspective to deliver match action in its entirety in Unseen Academicals (2009).

The ‘distance’ the novel sits from football impacts and is impacted on by the narrative structure. In team-based texts such as Dominic Holland’s The Ripple Effect (1989) and Des...
Dillon’s *Return of the Busby Babes* (1993) the plot follows a tournament with a highly prized trophy to be won. This commonplace convention lends football fiction a natural structure and an obvious climax. For the reader it is an easy-to-follow tension which is used to thread other narrative elements together. There are many examples of individual players’ journeys that follow this same structure, including *Hem and Football* (Bhattacharyya, 1992).

Football novels do take advantage of the game’s natural propensity for drama to explore and develop deeper, more emotionally complex issues. Hanna Bell uses real teams in an attempt to offer his novel *The Hollow Ball* (1990) a realist perspective that vivifies and intensifies the story’s impression on the reader. This verisimilitude can engage a fan in a football novel, particularly where it captures the action and atmosphere of the real-life event. The match provides context to greater emotional and/or psychological issues unfolding under the playing surface. The fans’ inherent knowledge reinforces and underpins their understanding of the action. It forces precision and it could be argued authenticity on the writer. The duality of mimesis is brought to the fore here. These impressions of the truth, regardless of how close they get to the real-life scenarios they aspire to recreate or represent, will always be fake. J. L. Carr acknowledges this and puts the question back on the reader. The author asks what interest a reader looking for an authentic football experience would have in reading his story about an amateur team winning the FA Cup, English professional football’s most prestigious and lucrative prize (1975: 1). This question, a return to the first convention identified, also speaks directly to the literal and figurative relationship of football to a text. The focus on this and other conventions identified has been made with an understanding that genres are malleable, that their growth is fluid and change dependent on how it is affected by each new contribution. While conventions represent shared meaning and patterns within a genre, inventions present the new and unfamiliar.

Cartwright’s *Heartland* (2009) and *The Damned United* (2006) by Peace are works of literary fiction immersed in the vernacular of football. They play within conventions and push football’s fiction into new territory. Cartwright’s novel is divided into equal halves like a football match. It offers structural parallels and comparisons between an international game and a local game. Peace’s novel fictionalises the brief tenure of Brian Clough, one of British football’s most notorious managers. Both works experiment with voice, use intertextuality, and challenge preconceived notions of structure. Neither text offers an expected climax. Their closes are appropriate to their context, but there is no real sense of the win in traditional terms, no trophy to hold aloft. Gordon Williams’s *Scenes Like These* (1968), a careful study of a man who plays football in a poverty-stricken coal town in Scotland, *Football Seasons* (1998), a novel ‘about Sheffield, gay culture masculinity and modern football’ (Redhead 2000: xviii), and a number of others blur the boundaries and conventions at the traditional and contemporary heart of football fiction. There are recognisable similarities in the midst of this variety. It has modulated fluidly since Jenkins in 1954, if not earlier. This growth in diversity has continued. The existence of these examples and their allusion to the process of continuing invention, which, while holding true to the genre’s conventions, stretch and challenge the patterns and levels of expectation and provide strong evidence that football fiction substantiates description as a genre.

**Conclusion**

If we are able then to describe the body of works as a genre, there is much room to exploit and explore the rich treasure of football fiction. Understanding of the genre, and arguably the nature of fiction associated with other sports codes, and the use of narrative techniques within,
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would benefit from deeper exploration and identification of a number of additional character stereotypes and further research of the conventions.

Football fiction refutes the disparaging commentary aimed at its source. It brings vivid colour to the detail and lesser aspects of a game, like the simple pass or the taciturn defender, all too often played out in blinding, big money technicolour. It provides the opportunity to digest and meditate on the game’s meaning, to consider the lives of those it affects beyond the million dollar wages, and entertain through the romanticism of its ability to level the mighty (something which is happening less and less in the real game). Amid the seemingly endless consumption of fixture lists and wrangles over televised rights, football fiction offers new perspectives on a game where alternatives are tired match reports, jaded player interviews and bloated personal histories. The quiet periods for the football fan have become non-existent, making it more difficult for fictional strands of consumed football to make their mark, but that does not mean they are not present. Like a pocket of fans in a Wembley crowd, they can be overlooked, but, when they’re given the space they need, you’ll notice more about them than you’d ever have imagined.

Notes

1 Nick Hornby discussed his distance from football writing on the Penguin website in 2006. He has not written about football since Fever Pitch and the anthologies he edited immediately afterwards.

2 Galeano is among those who suggest football fiction may have started with Shakespeare’s nods to football in King Lear (1606) and The Comedy of Errors (1592). A deer-skin football made in the 1540s, pre-dating both these references, suspected to have belonged to Mary Queen of Scots, was discovered in Stirling Castle in Scotland in 2006.

3 Captured in Marking out the pitch: a historiography and taxonomy of football fiction (McGowan 2015).


5 Listing close to 150 adult and young adult novels, children’s literature and many more anthologies and collections of short stories, plays, poetry and art, The Football Compendium (1999 [1995]) is the largest current catalogue. It does contain anomalies. Unfortunately, timing of publication aside, it includes works of not published, non-fiction and non-football novels such as The Second Curtain (Fuller, 1953) and Foreign Bodies (Hwee Hwee, 1997).

6 Working on an Oxford University/Reuters fellowship concerned with football writing, Steve Braunias interviewed Glanville, which may have influenced his view on the field.

7 Bennet wrote The Matador of Five Towns (1912), a collection which includes football fiction.

8 Author Beatrice Fry’s husband, Captain C. B. Fry, a relative of TV celebrity Stephen Fry, was a famous cricketer and long jump world-record holder who also played football for Corinthians, Southampton and England.

9 Stories of characters such as Fred Reckless: Amateur, The Team that Shook Division 2 and Podge Parks, an 18-stone goalkeeper, became fixtures in popular magazines such as Adventure (1921) and The Champion (1922). Characters such as Roy Race, Johnny Dexter and Hot-Shot Hamish carry on the tradition today.

10 One novel, McPhee: A Football Story, was published in 1922 and then republished four more times, under three different titles between 1926 and 1945: McPhee: A Football Story (1922); The Man Who Saved the Club (1926); McPhee Prince of Trainers (1930); The Great Game (1935 and 1945).

11 Taylor (1997: 93) notes Naughton’s work The Goalkeeper’s Revenge and Other Stories (1961) and Glanville’s short-fiction collections Goalkeepers Are Crazy (1964) and Goalkeepers Are Different (1971).

12 Venables allegedly offered Williams a piece of paper with a blunt outline for a novel: ‘There’s a naked blonde on the bed. Dead. And underneath the bed a suitcase stuffed with a million nicker [pounds sterling]. All yours, Gordon’ (Buckley, 2005).
Williams and Venables also published *They Used to Play on Grass* (1971). It contained substantial football content, but its ‘near’ future setting made for an extremely limited foray into speculative football fiction.

Hill makes a strong argument for Hornby’s non-fiction memoir, like many autobiographies, being ‘deceptive’ and more akin to similar ‘subtle fictions’, particularly those which he cites as the work’s most likely influences – Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life: A Memoir* (1989) and *A Fan’s Notes: A Fictional Memoir* (1970) by Frederick Exley (2006: 130).

A situation often played out in real-life; Jimmy ‘Jinky’ Johnstone (5’1”) of Glasgow Celtic in the 1960s and 1970s, Diego Maradona (5’4”) in the 1980s and 1990s and Gianfranco Zola (5’5”) through the 1990s, 2000s) have all made a name for themselves outwitting giant defenders.

References

——(1985) *Putting the Boot In*, London: Jonathan Cape.


Fry, B. (1907) *A Mother’s Son*, London: Methuen.


