

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

The Inner Game of Tennis

Random House recently sent me a copy of W. Timothy Gallwey's classic "The Inner Game of Tennis", so I suppose it's only fair that I say a few words.

I'm not much of a tennis player, and probably never will be. I likely won't join a club and thus worry about my placement on the club ladder. I probably won't play in tournaments. I do like hitting a tennis ball with A from time to time. All of this might make one think that I wouldn't get much out of a book about how to master the mental side of tennis, but of course, as you might predict from my paragraph and sentence structure here, that's not true. Gallwey's techniques, if you can call them that, are explicitly meant to be applicable to all kinds of sports and all areas of life. The basic take away is "stop letting your conscious take over". That is, don't think about your technique, don't think about the last shot you missed (or made), don't think about anything -- just do it.

The key reason why Gallwey advocates this method is because he believes the part of your mind that controls your body during physical activity can't be made to understand the verbal language employed by the other part of your mind. Your body doesn't really understand "bring the racket back higher" -- it understands how it feels to bring the racket back higher and can replicate that motion as long as it doesn't have some inner voice shouting at it "higher higher higher!" (Or an ultimate frisbee example: your body doesn't understand "elbow out on the flick!" -- it understands how it feels to throw with the entire arm unconstricted, away from the body, without the whole upper part of your arm locked to your ribs.)

As for how one is supposed to learn basic technique, Gallwey essentially advocates a combination of feeling it out for yourself, seeing what works, and watching other people. In the last, the key is not analyzing what they're doing and trying to translate their motion into language: don't go, "Ah ha, he brings his left foot back to that angle to prepare his forehand". Instead, just do what he did. Let your body emulate the motion.

One does occasionally get frustrated reading the book because Gallwey makes it all seem so easy. Anyone who has tried to "just relax" or meditate or any other kind of activity where you have to turn off or ignore the constant babbling of the conscious mind knows how difficult this is. Gallwey does acknowledge that it takes a lot of practice, a lifetime of practice, really, but he doesn't really give much in the way of tips on how to accomplish this centeredness he advocates. (Of course, you should probably expect that he wouldn't -- after all, Gallwey's entire system is dependent on the idea that these things can't be translated into verbal language, so of course he can't tell you how to let go of the conscious mind.)

Feel free to skip right over Pete Carroll's new foreword. It adds nothing to the book, and was presumably only written so that Random House could slap his name on the cover.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Books at 19:39

Wednesday, January 23, 2008

James Flynn & Walter Benn Michaels ...

... opposite sides of the world, same side of the debate.

That is, read Flynn's passage: Tolerance school fallacy ... Somehow my coining this term has not made it into common currency, but no doubt that is merely a matter of time. It underlines the fallacy of concluding that we should respect the good of all because nothing can be shown to be good. This fallacy puts a spurious value on ethical skepticism by assuming that it entails tolerance, while the attempt to justify your ideals is labeled suspect as a supposed source of intolerance. It surfaced in William James, was embraced by anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict, and is now propagated by postmodernists who think they invented it. James R. Flynn, *What is Intelligence?*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.150.

Compare this to Michaels' *The Trouble With Diversity*.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Books at 09:11

Intelligence blogging

[T]here is one way in which individuals can make their own luck. He or she can internalize the goal of seeking challenging cognitive environments -- seeking intellectual challenges all the way from choosing the right leisure activities to wanting to marry someone who is intellectually stimulating. The best chance of enjoying enhanced cognitive skills is to fall in love with ideas, or intelligent conversation, or intelligent books, or some intellectual pursuit. If I do that, I create within my own mind a stimulating mental environment that accompanies me wherever I go. Then I am relatively free of needing good luck to enjoy a rich cognitive environment. I have constant and instant access to a portable gymnasium that exercises the mind. Books and ideas and analyzing things are easier to transport than a basketball court. No one can keep me from using mental arithmetic so habitually that my arithmetical skills survive.

James R. Flynn, *What is Intelligence?*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007, p. 87.

So marry the smartest person you can find, read books like Flynn's, and take challenging classes in high school and college. The nice thing about the practical wisdom resulting from the Dickens/Flynn model (that is, the model of intelligence that results in the above characterization of individuals making their own luck) is that it can't hurt. Even if you don't actually gain intelligence, IQ, from taking harder classes, what do you have to lose? (Grade grubbers who only care about an impressive GPA to show the law schools need not comment.)

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Books at 07:51

Sunday, January 7, 2007

Today's playoff picks / Why I'm not going to be an agent

I have no documentation of this, but I had both the Colts and Seahawks in yesterday's games (the Colts because they're a vastly better team than the Chiefs and the Seahawks because they were playing at home). I figured the Seahawks game would be close, but obviously you can't anticipate the craziness that ensued.

I'll try to go 4-0 today as I pick Philadelphia and New England to win. Those aren't exactly controversial picks, although some people will get seduced by the Giants' offensive talent.

The Patriots-Jets game is tough because while I'm not a Patriot-hater, they're not my favorite team to root for, and I really like Chad Pennington and Eric Mangini, so I'd like to root for the Jets, but I just don't think they're ready to beat Bill Belichick in the playoffs.

Also, check out this story in Variety and/or Jerry Crasnick's book License to Deal to see why I've completely abandoned the idea of becoming an agent. It's a ridiculously cutthroat business, and I'm not the type of person that would succeed there, I think.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Books, Football, Law, Magazines, Movies, Non-Fiction, Reading at 12:39

Tuesday, February 21, 2006

Freedom of Expression

I finished Kembrew McLeod's *Freedom of Expression: Overzealous Copyright Bozos and Other Enemies of Creativity*. There's a lot to recommend it, including the fact that McLeod is a UMass-Amherst grad (his PhD, anyway) and that he's generally very angry about the continued legal sanctioning of the stifling of creativity in America (and beyond).

That said, I don't know if I'd call it a good book. I sort of felt while reading it that he didn't say anything you couldn't go find out in Lawrence Lessig's *Free Culture*. That's not entirely fair, because there is lots and lots of interesting material cited as examples of what our culture could be if the muffling effects of intellectual-property law could be re-lesened. For example, McLeod writes about sampling in hip-hop, collage in subversive art, and Todd Haynes's (in?)famous *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*. Each story is compelling, but I never really felt it all come together.

Which is not to say his point isn't clear. It certainly is. But is it clear because it's obvious from the first five pages what his point is, or is it clear because he's structured his book and his anecdotes in such a way that each one makes his argument a little clearer, a little more convincing? I'd say the former.

Then again, I'm biased. I did read *Free Culture*. I'm predisposed to agree with these ideas, and I'm already more familiar with them than McLeod's intended audience might have been. Could this book, then, serve as a primer, a gateway to Lessig's books (which themselves could be gateways to more technical work by other lawyers and academics)? Maybe. If I were making a personal recommendation, though, to someone interested in finding out a little more about, say, the file sharing arguments, I'd advise skipping straight to the head of the class with Lessig's work.

I ought to note, also, that McLeod has done an interesting thing and made his work freely downloadable (as a PDF) at his website (linked above). The book is licensed under a Creative Commons license (the same license, actually, that I use on this site).

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Books at 18:15

Tuesday, January 31, 2006

Lessig's "The Future of Ideas"

I'm working my way backward through the Lawrence Lessig trilogy, having started with *Free Culture*, which I wrote about last July. I just finished *The Future of Ideas* on the train today.

The themes are, of course, very similar. Where *Free Culture* dealt with (duh) cultural things like music, art, and literature, however, this book dealt more with technological and business-oriented innovation. His concerns are essentially the same in both cases: the government is moving too quickly to entrench the Old in their positions, granting them extended copyright, liberal patent, and other protections, all to the detriment of the New. His point is not that the New should win for the sake of being new, but that general human progress is made by allowing new technology and practice to overtake the old. If we continue putting in hurdles for the New to jump, we'll significantly retard their ability to innovate, leaving us stagnant in the hands of the Old, who, for perfectly sane business reasons, have no desire to make radical changes. The Old merely want to get marginal increases on what they've already got.

The unfortunate thing about what Lessig says is that his solutions are so pie-in-the-sky. They always involve the government finally standing up to big business and saying, "Hey, you know what we're going to do? We're going to do what's best for the people." Of course, that'll never happen. It's in the nature of our big-money political system that the in-power (both business-wise and political-wise) stay in power, and even if Lessig sells three million copies of his book, that's not going to write a campaign check for any Senators.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Reading at 20:20

Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Friday, July 22, 2005

Joe Morgan vs. Moneyball

Here's an article in the San Francisco Weekly about Joe Morgan and why he hates Moneyball. It's worth a gander.

I picked up the link from Aaron Gleeman.

Posted by jason in [Baseball](#), [Magazines](#), [Reading](#) at 16:17

Wednesday, July 20, 2005

John Dvorak on Creative Commons

John Dvorak, who is, I suppose, a well-respected columnist in computer-geek circles, comes up blasting Creative Commons (CC) in his latest column. CC is, in its own words, "a nonprofit that offers a flexible copyright for creative work." Basically, you visit a website, answer three or four questions about what kind of "permissions" you want to place on your work (should it be reproducible for commercial purposes? How about non-commercial?) and they give you some code to put near the work (whatever it may be: blog, painting, video, etc.) to let everyone know what you're allowing and not allowing them to do with it.

You should know that I am a supporter of the system (as you may have gleaned from my last post about Larry Lessig), so I may not be seeing things with a clear eye when I disagree with what Dvorak has to say. Regardless, though, away we go.

Dvorak's first objectionable statement comes in his fourth paragraph: I have begged critics of the system, such as The Register's Andrew Orlowski, to explain to me how Creative Commons works or what it's supposed to do that current copyright law doesn't do. He says, "It does nothing." Uh, if you ask critics of the system to explain it, then of course they're going to give negative answers! That's like asking me to explain why George Bush's foreign policy is solid and then using my answer as evidence that it sucks.

In the next paragraph, Dvorak writes, "Creative Commons is similar to a license." Actually, it is a license. The word "license" is splattered everywhere on the Creative Commons website. I'm not sure what he means by this, anyway. Is it a bad thing that a CC license is, well, a license? Why?

In the same paragraph: This means that others have certain rights to reuse the material under a variety of provisos, mostly as long as the reuse is not for commercial purposes. Why not commercial purposes? What difference does it make, if everyone is free and easy about this? In other words, a noncommercial site could distribute a million copies of something and that's okay, but a small commercial site cannot deliver two copies if it's for commercial purposes. What is this telling me? The point is not that "everyone is free and easy about this." He mistakes people who use CC for a bunch of hippies who want everything to be public domain. Lessig in particular is a supporter of property and of intellectual property. He believes that America has gotten too protectionist about it, but he by no means believes that everything created should just sit out there for anyone to use and profit from.

To answer Dvorak's question in the last sentence: What we're telling you when we don't want commercial usage of our work is that we don't want someone else profiting from what we've created unless they're going to ask us (and, most likely, pay us) for said work. If, however, some other blogger wants to take some idea that I have and build upon it on his (also non-commercial) blog, then more power to him. I have decided to allow a derivation of my work to appear on his site (with the restrictions that he must credit me and must license his work under the same license as I did mine). What I don't want is ESPN to steal my brilliant idea to make thousands of dollars if they're not going to pay for that privilege.

In the next paragraph: I could always use excerpts for commercial or noncommercial purposes. It's called fair use. I can still do that, but Creative Commons seems to hint that with its license means that I cannot. Now Dvorak stops looking angry and starts looking ignorant. On the bottom of the page that explains the license I've chosen for this blog (click the CC image or the text below it) are the words (in bold!), "Your fair use and other rights are in no way affected by the above." I don't see anything being "hinted at" in that sentence. Lessig may be an idealist and an academic, but he's still a lawyer by training, and lawyers are nothing if not notorious for their attention to detail.

Dvorak is worried that, because my license does not allow commercial usage of my work, he cannot excerpt portions of my response in order to respond in kind (basically, that he cannot do with my work exactly what I am doing with his) because he writes for a commercial site. That assertion, however, is flat-out wrong. Fair use is not being eroded by CC. If he wanted to quote something I said earlier and respond to it on the PC Mag website, he would be free to just as if I had any other copyright on this text.

He next complains about the CC-Public Domain license. If I write something on my blog, for example, and decide not to cover it with the general copyright notice, I can simply say that it is in the public domain and be done with it. I do not need permission from Creative Commons, nor do I need to mention Creative Commons or anything else. His point is

that CC is only serving as a middle-man here, not adding anything useful, and in fact complicating matters, since you could just write "Public domain" on the work and be done with it. What he misses is that not everyone understands copyright. Not everyone has read Lessig's books or other resources and realizes what their rights and freedoms are and are not. A middle-man is helpful in this case, because you may not realize that you can put your work in the public domain so easily. CC, in essence, eases your mind that everything is being done legally.

Finally, Years ago, to gain a copyright, you had to fill out a form and send in the material to the Library of Congress. Now you just use the word "copyright," add your name and a date, and publish it. What could be easier? Apparently simplicity was more than some people could handle, so they invented Creative Commons to add some artificial paperwork and complexity to the mechanism. And it seems to actually weaken the copyrights you have coming to you without Creative Commons. I don't even know how to respond to this. He completely misses the point of CC in that last sentence. Of course it weakens the copyright you would have if you just put "All rights reserved" on your site! That's the point! If you're using CC, it's because you don't want to reserve all the rights you have to the work. You've decided to waive some of those rights. If my work is really popular (it's not, but whatever) and I'm ok with other bloggers reproducing it, do I really want to put "All rights reserved" on my site, then have to deal with each case of usage individually? Of course not. I want to take care of large swaths of usage in one fell swoop, and that's what CC provides me.

I honestly don't know, and maybe someone can tell me: is Dvorak usually this ignorant? Does he usually do this little research for his columns? I doubt he's stupid, but this article does not paint him in a good light.

Posted by jason in Reading at 15:28

More great stuff from Catfish Stew

Ken Arneson at Catfish Stew continues to write the best, most creative stuff of any A's blogger out there.

Scratch the qualification: of any baseball blogger out there.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's, Reading at 14:15

Saturday, July 16. 2005

Free Culture

I finished Lawrence Lessig's Free Culture last night, and I think I have a new purpose in life.

Ok, so maybe that's a little strong.

The idea of the book is that media companies today are (a) bigger and more consolidated than in the past; and (b) have deeper and longer copyright protection than ever before. The combination of these two things, Lessig claims, will vastly reduce the ability of the citizens of this country to freely produce creative work because large portions of creative work are, in fact, based upon the work of the past. With mammoth corporations zealously protecting their copyright using squads of lawyers, people will have trouble accessing, much less using, culture from the past.

Lessig's arguments are convincing and tailored to appeal to both those on the left and the right. He sometimes comes off as the ultimate free marketeer and sometimes as a big-government liberal. Whichever side he's arguing from, though, he makes his case well that big media has successfully lobbied Congress to pass laws that do not fit in America's tradition of "free culture." Many of his points revolve around the fact that the justice system in the United States vastly favors those who can pay lawyers for hours and hours of work, to the point that in many cases, justice can not be served at all. The bullying of alleged file sharers by the RIAA ("You might win if you fight us in court, but it'll cost more money in legal fees than you have, so we'll just settle for taking your entire life's savings.") is one such example.

Whether or not I end up working in intellectual property (and the book has definitely pushed me in that direction), there are implications here for any area of law. Will I be able to do what I think is right and still make a living? How often, and to what degree, will I be forced to compromise my own values because they conflict with those of my client? How can I avoid such situations? These aren't questions I have answers to, and I'm not sure anybody else does, either.

EDIT: (Cross-posted at Non Compos Mentis)

Posted by jason in Books, Non-Fiction, Personal, Reading at 15:22

Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Thursday, June 30, 2005

Neat newspaper site

Courtesy of Chris Lehmann's blog, here's a really neat site that shows the current front page of newspapers all over the world. Awesome!

Posted by jason in [Computer](#), [Education](#), [News](#), [Reading](#) at 14:37

Monday, May 30, 2005

A few non-baseball things

On Saturday, we went and saw Mad Hot Ballroom, a documentary about public schools in New York City that have ballroom dancing programs. It was a pretty straightforward film, but I couldn't help but be impressed with the footage of the actual dancing competitions the kids entered. The crowd got very into it, awwww-ing at all the appropriate moments. I don't know whether it's playing widely outside of New York, but the opportunity to see 10 year-olds doing an impressive merengue and rumba should not be passed up.

Last night, as I mentioned, we saw Crash, the Paul Haggis (the writer of Million Dollar Baby) film that grew out of his experience being carjacked in L.A. It was as bad as all the reviews said, unfortunately. A lot of good talent, including Don Cheadle, Brendan Fraser, Ryan Phillippe, Sandra Bullock, Terrence Howard, and Larenz Tate, went wasted. The theme of the movie, racism, would have been better approached in a much more subtle way. Modern incarnations of racism, after all, are more under-the-surface, more quietly insidious, than the view presented in the film, where everything, while mixed up and "not quite what it seems" (if the movie is going to traffic in so much cliché, then so will I), is quite overt: Matt Dillon is a blatantly racist cop; Sandra Bullock insists that her locks be changed again because a Latino man who she believes to be a gang-banger changed them the first time; a gun-shop owner calls an Iranian customer "Osama."

We did get two great trailers, though: Hustle & Flow, also starring Terrence Howard as a pimp trying to make it as a rapper, which was all the rage at Sundance this year; and Rize, David LaChapelle's documentary about "krumping," a new dance form coming out of inner-city Los Angeles. The cinematography looks as fantastic as you'd expect out a renowned photographer and I expect that the dance moves will be as impressive as watching any extreme sports or And 1 video.

Finally, I read the article in Sports Illustrated about online poker last night. As Wilson points out in this comment, it's really just an article saying, "College kids play poker online." It talks about people who made money, mentions a kid who's lost over \$50k, and briefly says that colleges don't have gambling addiction programs, but that's really it. There's no real exploration of the issues of legality (that's relegated to a sidebar), no exploration of the addiction, no discussion of social and familial problems that are allowed to arise when money starts being lost hand over fist. Any or all of these themes would have made excellent articles on college kids playing online poker. Instead, we got something akin to Moneyball: a piece that was supposed to be about a larger point but devolved into a series of profiles of "interesting" people (the players were made much more intriguing in Moneyball).

Posted by jason in Magazines, Movies, Reading, The Blog at 18:09

Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Saturday, May 28, 2005

Ill-begotten Fame

So over at Superchicken.org, there's this:

In this week's Sports Illustrated, there is an article about how college students play online poker.

I don't subscribe to SI to read articles about online poker. If I cared at all about online poker, I would just play online poker. Even then I wouldn't want to read an article in SI about it.in SI. Probably the best part of the article is how several times it namedrops game theory, which is probably not a direction the majority of SI readers are comfortable with going.

I guess it's cool that the article was written by a former contributor to Beaneball.org, but basically SI is just crap that I throw in the recycling bin every Thursday night.

Well, ok, neat, except no, Daniel Habib isn't a contributor to my blog, nor has he ever been. Would that he were, because I think he's a good writer and one of the few forward-thinking minds that Sports Illustrated has going for them.

I can see where the confusion comes, though, because I once wrote this, with the title "Daniel G. Habib," which could cause confusion. It turns out, of course, that said post is the seventh result returned by Google for the search "Daniel G. Habib".

I happen, by the way, to be looking forward to reading that piece. The featured site in the artwork, Pokerroom.com, is where I do my poker playing, when it happens.

Posted by jason in Corrections, Magazines, Personal, Reading, The Blog at 23:32

Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Saturday, May 14, 2005

New blog

Here's a new A's blog that I noticed in my referrers log, called The A's East Coast Advocate (which is what I swore I was already, but I guess I didn't claim the name early enough). Corey makes me feel old, so I reserve the right to dump on him a little in the future. It'll make me feel more secure about my place in the world.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's, Reading at 15:04

Monday, March 21, 2005

Benicio on Method

Thank goodness! Someone finally said it! Benicio Del Toro says in the current issue of Esquire (April 2005), "Researching a role isn't Method acting; it's common sense."

Ever since I learned what Method acting really is (which is not so long ago, I'll admit; maybe a little over a year), I've noticed the complete lack of understanding in the press and even, perhaps, among actors, of what Method acting actually entails.

When Viggo Mortensen wandered around New Zealand with a sword strapped on his hip, that wasn't Method; that was getting himself into a physical mode where he could convincingly play the character of Aragorn. When Nicole Kidman interviewed abused women for her role in *The Human Stain*, that wasn't Method; it was, as Del Toro alludes to, research that she would have been stupid not to conduct.

Russell Crowe was quoted telling a story in the March 2005 issue of GQ: Also, until I was 25, I had one tooth missing. When George Ogilvie cast me, he asked me about it, and I told him the story and that I thought it was very false of me to go and get a tooth cap. He was very nice about it, listened to it all, and said, "All right, well, let me put it this way, Russell. You're playing the lead character in my film, right? The character of Johnny has two front teeth ..." Chris Heath, the interviewer, responds, "He Methoded you into it!" No, he didn't! Method acting isn't looking the part, and that's all Ogilvie said: I want you to get your tooth capped so that you can look like the character I wrote. That's got nothing whatsoever to do with Method.

From the website of the Stella Adler Studio of Acting comes this excerpt from the mini-bio of Konstantin Stanislavski, the creator of Method acting: To reach this "believable truth," after years of research with actors of the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavski began employing new and original methods, such as "emotional memory." He felt at that time that to work on a particular emotion in a role that involved fear, the actor might remember something that frightened him from his own life.

Stanislavski believed that an actor needed to take his or her own personality onto the stage when he or she began to play a character. This innovation was a clear break from previous modes of acting that held that the actor's job was to become the character and leave his or her own emotions behind. Later, Stanislavski concerned himself with the creation of physical entries into these emotional states, believing that the repetition of certain acts and exercises could bridge the gap between life on and off the stage.

Certainly, the people who've taken Stanislavski's Method and taught it, including Adler and those who followed her, have added their own twists, changed things, and otherwise put their own stamp on the original idea. Indeed, Lee Siegel wrote in *Slate* in March, 2004, that there were two antagonistic versions of the Method: Strasberg's emphasis on how actors should draw from their own experience to inhabit a character; and Stella Adler's insistence that actors must pay closer attention to the play's circumstances than to their own memories and emotions.

I recently had a discussion with a "mainstream media" journalist (editor) whose main criticism of the blogosphere (with emphasis on political blogs) is that far too many bloggers are lazy and uninterested in doing the groundwork necessary to have a relevant and believable opinion. He's right, of course, but I might haul out this seeming industry-wide lack of understanding of an easily-researched issue as evidence that mainstream journalists aren't much better these days (or were they ever?).

Posted by jason in Movies, Reading at 17:46

Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Monday, March 14, 2005

A link-up

I found Concerned (but Powerless) in my referer logs today and cruised over to take a look. Happily, I found this essay about ESPN that describes exactly how I feel about the site (ESPN, not the blog). We are in definite agreement about Scoop Jackson especially.

Posted by jason in Reading, The Blog at 18:49

Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Tuesday, March 8, 2005

Scoop Jackson

Scoop Jackson introduces himself to the masses on ESPN's Page 2 with a list of things he "believes." Unfortunately for his credibility, he says I believe Pete Rose should be in the HOF. (It isn't like he was the only one gambling – he just was the one who got caught). So what if he's the one who got caught? If you get caught, you're out. I can't believe "everyone else was doing it" is actually seen as a justification for being allowed the game's highest honor despite doing one of its greatest mis-deeds. If it came out conclusively that Babe Ruth bet on games, I'd want him out of the Hall, too.

I still look forward to Jackson's work on ESPN, especially with the sudden and recent passings of Ralph Wiley and Hunter Thompson, but there's a line between saying incendiary things and making statements that don't hold up under any type of logical scrutiny.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Reading at 15:08

Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Wednesday, February 2, 2005

Rolling Stone: 2/10/05

Feeling a bit like I haven't written anything in a while, I'm going to take a page from Entertainment Weekly Review and let you know whether or not you ought to buy the latest issue of Rolling Stone.

Though I wonder, first, whether anybody still buys the venerable music magazine. Is it still relevant? Does anybody care? Of my six readers, are any of you subscribers? Regular newsstand buyers? Occasional buyers? Or am I being too generous about the size of my readership?

With an Erik Hedegaard cover story on Johnny Depp, there's an immediate pull, though the story turns out to be a bit boring. There's just not much that hasn't already been said about Depp, and it's hard to plumb new depths because he hasn't been particularly closed-off about his past before. It's not like getting the first truly candid interview with (insert star here), and, Hedegaard not being a critic but a professional profiler, we don't really get interesting insights or observations about Depp's role in modern America. On the other hand, I shouldn't fault Hedegaard for not being Tom Carson or somebody, because that's unfair. As we say in baseball analysis, look for what the player (here, story) does, not what it doesn't do. And in this case, the piece is well-written and engaging in a way that escapes the majority of RS's writers.

Gavin Edwards on Dominic Monaghan (of Lord of the Rings and, now, Lost fame) is sort of the opposite. The piece is straightforward and can basically only be applauded for staying out of the way of the subject, but that subject is interesting and fresh, at least in the sense that I hadn't read anything before on Monaghan.

The National Affairs desk produced a piece on the likelihood of a return to the draft. This being RS and not Fox News, you can guess that it's not an article full of happy reassurances that it'll never happen. The only really interesting bit of information is the note that a memo was uncovered in which two minor members of the Bush administration discuss how a draft might proceed. It's noted that the memo was made public with a Freedom of Information Act appeal, but it's unclear who asked for it. The story's author, Tom Dickinson? Some other (unnamed) writer? Regardless, it doesn't seem like it took a Hersh-ian level of sleuthery to pick up this tidbit, and it's not all that revealing anyway. Sure, it puts lie to the administration's claims that a draft hasn't even been discussed, but who cares, really? They've lied before, and they'll do it again. We know they're evil, and there doesn't really appear to be much to be done about it at this stage in the game. On a more substantive level, I'm glad these people are having these discussions. As the piece points out, if the administration keeps going as it's going and invades Iran or something, we're going to need some new soldiers. It's pure numbers. Thus, the fact that some new ideas are being bounced around for how to draft is good news, because I'd rather see them lying about it than have to have a draft with only a month to prepare.

Peter Wilkinson contributed a piece on a police informant who's now in a no-man's land. The police won't use him or help him and various low-lives throughout the Western United States want him dead. It's a bit astounding, actually, because the man allowed himself to be photographed for the story and, apparently, his real name was used (there was no note about names being changed to protect the not-so-innocent). The piece itself is sort of blah, par for the RS course. If you're jonesing for a bit of police-informant-and-drug-crazed biker action, go watch Beyond the Law, with Michael Madsen (following up Reservoir Dogs and who, by the way, is in nine movies (!) slated to hit in 2005), the ever-intense Charlie Sheen, and Linda Fiorentino.

Sebastião Salgado's series of beautiful black-and-white photos of the natural world of South America continues this issue with a piece on whales. The pictures are, of course, beautiful, but I'll cop to not bothering to read the accompanying piece written by Salgado.

The music reviews are nothing to write home about, and in this case, that means both that none of the albums sound terribly exciting and that none of the reviews provide any particular pleasure in themselves. On the other hand, it's pretty much only a Rob Sheffield review that I can really look forward to reading in any given issue, and his handful in this issue are as straight-forward as he can make them. His forté really seems to be the hilarious review of the forgettable teen pop album. Maybe I'm damning with faint praise here, but what else should I do? I'm a blogger.

I saw the trailer for Bride and Prejudice this weekend, before Finding Neverland (a small ugh, by the way), and I was absolutely stunned by Aishwarya Rai. I'd read about her before, in a sort of teaser article meant to inspire all of us to get excited about her big American splash, but I didn't really buy the hype. Lots of people who are considered beautiful by

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the world-at-large aren't really my type, but for Rai, let's say that I'm on the bandwagon. Anyway, Peter Travers gave the film (wait, there's a movie involved here?) three stars (out of four), which sounds unlikely. Travers is notorious (to me) for giving star ratings that are wildly out of line with his actual reviews (of course, that his reviews are wildly out of line with reality is a separate issue which will, undoubtedly, be broached at a later date). In this case, he refers to Martin Henderson looking lost and the script falling apart when the action leaves India. Can a movie that falls apart in what I'm assuming is at least the last third really deserve 75% of the possible stars? Especially when he allows himself the luxury of half stars? I mean, if he was that in love with Rai (he is), he could give it two and a half and still be satisfied that she might acknowledge his presence at a screening or something, but he had to go overboard and hope she doesn't read.

Posted by jason in Magazines, Reading at 16:08

Friday, January 28, 2005

The Eudaemonic Pie

I finished *The Eudaemonic Pie* the day before yesterday. The book is the story of a group of, semi-euphemistically, anti-establishment academics, mostly physicists, who set out to build a portable computer that will allow them to beat roulette, a game that shouldn't be predictable. What the scientists discover is that the equations describing the path the ball will take are relatively simple. Not quadratic formula simple, but simple enough that the primitive computers of the day (this was the late '70's) could be programmed to quickly calculate what number the ball would land on to a great degree of accuracy.

It's an astounding idea, really, and a risky one, especially since they planned on storming Las Vegas, a place not known for its tolerance of people beating their systems, whether by hook or by crook. Unfortunately, the technology never really comes together for the group. They make a few successful trips and pull down a few thousand dollars, but the computers they build are so flaky as to be occasionally dangerous (one member has a hole burned in her chest by a misfiring computer). One can easily imagine groups today using the same principles, the same equations, but with new, stabler, smaller, easier-to-program technology to pull it off. In fact, BBC news had a story about two months ago about people trying to beat casinos that dropped this tidbit: "In [a] recent London case, a group of gamblers allegedly used a laser scanner linked to a computer to gauge numbers likely to come up on the roulette wheel." That's essentially what the Eudaemonic people were doing, but with humans timing the wheel and the ball rather than a more accurate but also more dangerous laser.

The book is sprinkled with the scientific happenings at the time, too, from advancements in ideas of chaos to the miniaturization of computer components, that add a lot of flavor. This spice, and the intellectualism and scientific inquisitiveness the author (a part-time member of the group, though not a scientist himself) brings to the table takes this book far beyond the boundaries established by *Bringing Down the House*, the best-selling book about a group of MIT students who take down Vegas the old-school way, by counting cards in blackjack.

Enough people have made the connection between these two stories that Amazon returns *Bringing Down the House* as a result of a search for *Eudaemonic Pie*, but it's a tenuous connection in many ways. The MIT students were motivated by money, sex, and fame, and the book, which reads like a trashy thriller, reflects these crass ideals. The students had no higher calling, though they pretended, at times, to be devoted to the idea of robbing the rich casinos, who made a living off of cheating others. The Eudaemonic group, while they intended to make piles of money, aimed to re-invest that money in a series of communes on the West Coast that would promote the scientific and political ideals they held dear. After the final aborted trip to Las Vegas, the Eudaemonic project was called off, but the group didn't admit total defeat, instead recognizing the physical and technological challenges they had overcome in their attempts to beat the roulette system.

Drawing a weak parallel to more theoretical mathematics, if the search for a proof of the Riemann Conjecture were called off today, mathematicians could still be proud of all the byproducts of that search that had advanced human knowledge of the mathematical world.

Posted by jason in Reading at 15:17

Monday, November 22, 2004

Recent reading

As you can see from the left sidebar, I've been reading baseball books lately.

The Fiction

A Ticket for a Seamstitch was odd, to say the least. Mark Harris believes strongly (as he points out in an essay at the beginning of the book) in unflowery writing, apparently putting his faith entirely in a well-constructed story to carry a reader along. He has a point, in that too many writers do try to spice up their writing, and in particular their descriptions of dialogue, and fail miserably, making the writing weird and unnatural, rather than compelling and beautiful.

The Tell All

Ball Four was everything I'd hoped it would be and more. Jim Bouton has a way with words and is really very funny. Even thirty-plus years later, while some of the details are no longer so shocking (drunkards in baseball!), the larger points (the meddlesome, backward nature of coaches, for instance) are almost certainly still true (see Ozzie Guillen). It was really one of the most enjoyable books I've read in a while.

The History

Alan Schwarz's book was, surprisingly, informative and interesting. I figured it'd be interesting, but I didn't necessarily think I'd learn anything terribly new. My knowledge of the backgrounds and contributions of Bill James, Tom Tippett, Craig Wright, and others of that generation was already fairly complete, though the little tidbits and anecdotes that Schwarz throws in kept me interested even in that part: for example, Wright, once famous for having "sabermetrician" on his business card, now lives in the Monterey Bay area (home!) and focuses on his Christian Scientist-ness. The incomplete section of my knowledge, like for many of the readers of the book, I assume, goes back before James and the rest, to Seymour Siwoff, the Elias brothers, George Lindsay, and others, and this book filled that hole admirably.

The Textbook

Unfortunately, I didn't realize that Saving the Pitcher was so much a textbook when I picked it up. I thought it would be more of a general-interest book with all the background a fan needs to understand how pitchers are treated and how they ought to be treated. Instead, it's a book that is really necessary reading for trainers, coaches, doctors, and pitchers, but rather unnecessary for general fans. I'm not sorry I read it, but I wouldn't necessarily have bought it straight away had I taken the time to research the nature of the book beforehand. One of the more unfortunate aspects of the book was the number of errors: there were far too many simple typographical mistakes for me to take the publisher (Ivan R. Dee) too seriously. Hopefully these will be fixed for the paperback.

The Oddball

I have to comment on Liar's Poker as long as I'm talking about books. Michael Lewis (now of Moneyball fame) made his name with his account of working as a bond salesman for Saloman Brothers in the mid- to late-'80's. Paired with Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho, which was set in the cultural life of people like Lewis (though Lewis was in London, not New York), we can get something of a full picture of the comings and goings of investment banking types in that period.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Reading at 21:51

Thursday, June 24, 2004

Weaver on Strategy

I've finally managed to finish Weaver on Strategy, mainly because I decided to just sit down and finish it before I started the next magazine. The book was as good as advertised, and I can heartily recommend it to any baseball fan anywhere, anytime. You can see a lot of parallels between the things that Weaver was doing and saying at the time (the book was written in 1984) and the modern analytical movement.

I think Earl Weaver is at least as influential as Bill James in the game, at least in terms of changing the game from the inside. Who knows how long the information revolution would have taken to reach baseball had it only been the geeks on the outside who were doing the analysis. Having a Weaver show that using data inside the game could really have a strong effect has probably made a world of difference in the rapidity of acceptance of these ideas in front offices and clubhouses around the major leagues.

The book ends with a 2002 update, based on an interview done by Chris Kahl, from Baseball Prospectus (this version of the book was published by Brassey, BP's publisher up until the 2004 version of the annual), but it's fairly short and far from comprehensive. I think I'm going to end up doing a series of posts about the book, particularly its relevance to the modern game. I'll probably go chapter-by-chapter, or something that approximates that. It should be a fun little exercise.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Reading at 10:53

Tuesday, June 15. 2004

Ralph Wiley

My 200th entry in this blog is unfortunately to be a sad one: Ralph Wiley, one of the best, most interesting, most provocative, most original sportswriters around, passed on at home on Sunday.

He was just 52, and his age and sudden death are eerily similar to Doug Pappas's passing. Like Pappas, Wiley often wrote things contrary to the accepted stream of thought of the American public, and like Pappas, he did it well enough that reading his work was an aesthetic pleasure as well as an intellectual one.

I'm not familiar enough with Wiley's career body of work, but I read a number of his columns from his time at ESPN's Page 2, and they were always engaging, always creative, and always aggressive. Aggressiveness can be a distraction or an annoyance if it isn't done well, but this never seemed true of Wiley's work; rather, it was just all the more obvious that he felt true passion about his subject. Wiley's passion was not simply that of an admirer of sports and athletes, either. He wrote, more than any other sportswriter I know, about free speech, politics, and, most of all, about race. Wiley realized that the country still has a lot to work out in the field of race relations, and he never backed off from saying so loudly.

As many said when the news of Doug Pappas's death was heard, we can only hope that writers absorb the lessons Wiley was trying to teach and continue down the path he blazed.

UPDATE: Chris Lehmann has written a little something about Wiley as well. It's weird that of all the sports blogs I read, no one has really mentioned this. On the other hand, Wiley wasn't really known as a baseball writer, so I guess he was not really on the baseball blogosphere's radar.

Posted by jason in Reading at 18:39

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Wednesday, April 14, 2004

Grab a book!

I got this from Chris Lehmann (I'm linking him a lot lately, huh?). It's kind of neat.

Grab the nearest book.

Open the book to page 23.

Find the fifth sentence.

Post the text of the sentence along with these directions.

"The Orioles made their first impression in 1948 with the lush ballad "It's Too Soon to Know." "

--Sweet Soul Music, Peter Guralnick, 1986.

It's Austen's book, though.

Posted by jason in Reading at 19:07

Tuesday, July 29. 2003

T.C. Boyle's World's End

World's End has one of those kooky, time-hopping plots where we follows the stories of a few families in upstate New York in a number of different periods and wonder at their similarities. It isn't as hokie as it might be; in fact, I really liked it. I think I used to have some kind of prejudice against obvious devices, whether plot or structure or anything else. I've started to fight back against that prejudice, though, realizing that even if a device is obvious, if it works and the storyteller can still get his/her story and point across, then who cares?

I found myself enjoying the parts of the book focusing on Jeremias Van Brunt in the early days of America more than any other. He had some of the bitterness and anger that the more modern characters had, but his seemed somehow more justified and his reactions to the things that angered him were more satisfying.

I couldn't really tell you what the book is about. Maybe it's mostly about class struggle, since that is the fight that shows up the most, and the motivation of the protagonist is to find a father who disappeared after a Communist-party rally.

I think Boyle is, more than anything, an excellent story teller. I say the same about Stephen King sometimes, so perhaps those who don't appreciate King's work might take that as a slight toward Boyle, but it isn't meant that way. Boyle is not only an excellent story teller, but I think that's one of the things that makes his writing so compelling. There doesn't have to be a grand theme, a theory of the universe, or a message to take away. The story is so enjoyable that anything from the above list that you can glean is icing.

I've moved on to Michael Chabon's The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay and I'm enjoying it greatly thus far. I think I connect a little with Sammy Klayman (Clay) a little more than with Josef Kavalier, but I think that's the point: we all do. Kavalier is really something out of a comic book. Immensely talented, charismatic, and on a noble quest. Sammy is basically a schlub, his writing talent aside; he's even less than the usual sidekick, less than a Robin-type character, who is often heroic, talented, and on a quest himself, though less so than the protagonist. Sammy is no hero, has a questionable talent, and has as his quest to make lots of money. He's more than a regular guy, but he's not so much more that we can't see a lot of ourselves in him, and realize that we can aspire to conquer the world (and succeed!) just as he does.

Posted by jason in Reading at 11:46

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Saturday, March 22, 2003

Esquire April 2003 Issue

I'm going to end up saying it over and over again in this space, but I really like this magazine.

Tom Carson's Oscar's article was ok, though he didn't really say anything new.

There's an anonymous story by a woman whose father claims to have been a Green Beret, have 6 degrees, have been in a duel in Argentina, and so on. He later defrauds her, opening credit cards in her name and not making the payments, forcing her mother to take out loans to pay them off. Finally, she discovers that he's essentially working as a scam artist now. She mostly just tells the facts (though those facts do make a riveting story in and of themselves), but she also does offer glimpses into her feelings about the whole matter.

The Naomi Watts profile, written by Chris Jones, who writes the sports column, is ok. Nothing much terribly exciting.

The Answer Fella's column is hilarious as usual, this time rating on a one to ten scale the level of truth of various stereotypes about women. Sample: "Women crave chocolate." Degree of truth: 10. No, this isn't as pig-headed as it sounds. AF talked to a woman who wrote Why Women Need Chocolate who noted that since women store fat more efficiently than men (duh) and that their bodies crave foods higher in sugar and fat than men's do.

One of the two true highlights, though, is "The Confessions of Bob Greene," by Bill Zehme, about the fallen-from-grace syndicated Chicago newspaper columnist, who was fired (his paper claims he resigned) for having an extramarital affair. I'm not sure I like Zehme's barely veiled excuses for Greene, about why it wasn't a big deal that this affair happened, but I do agree that the paper was hasty in firing him. More to the point, Zehme does a masterful job painting a picture of who Greene is now, especially after the death of his (Greene's) wife. If you were a strict moralist, you might say he got what he deserved, but to me, the beatings he's received in the media, the piling on that Zehme mentions, are hurtful and pointless.

Finally, an interesting article by Charles Pierce about the metaphor inherent in the fact that the Constitution is being kept in some undisclosed location while being restored and recased to preserve it (the metaphor being that, in this time of further and further reduced civil liberties, the document(s) that supposedly guard those liberties are nowhere to be found). The writing is a bit showy, but it isn't showy for the sake of showiness, I think: Pierce writes the article in a sort of wandering way, here talking to the document restorers, there showing up at Montpelier, James Madison's family estate (Madison figures heavily in the article as the President at the time of the War of 1812 who had the Constitution removed to a safe, secret location so that the British wouldn't burn it along with the rest of Washington.). He wanders because the article is couched in a search for the Constitution, or, he reconsiders, perhaps a search for America.

I like the article all around, but the line that will stick with me is this: after quoting a Frank Gafney, Jr. saying, "[T]he contention that this [country] is a police state is laughable," Pierce responds,

"Maybe the Constitution being hidden is only a metaphor, and maybe the ideas are not really coming apart in tiny pieces the way the ink loses its grip on the parchment. I just don't recall ever needing to be reassured that I don't live in a police state."

Posted by jason in Reading at 11:44