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# From stadium to page: why football deserves more fiction

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Football, with its passion, drama and larger-than-life characters, has all the elements for a good literary genre. Boris Roessler/EPA

A great football novel is like a perfectly executed bicycle-kick goal, like players such as Argentine legends Diego Maradona and Lionel Messi; they come along once in a generation.

Against the accumulated volume of non-fiction football literature (some people still call it soccer), which could fill and spill out of a World Cup Stadium, football novels are comparatively rare.

That said, football or soccer fiction is a genre with a very real and important historical longevity.

It reflects the changing culture around the game, the fans and the media, and offers a creative and imaginative space to understand and explore the sport's place in culture at a deeper level.

It captures the brilliant array of the football moment, expands and breathes life into a crowd's collective gasp or a goal ordinarily glossed over or blown out of sensible proportion by the press.

A perfectly executed bicycle-kick goal and a great football novel speak equally to 'the beautiful game'.

A good football novel brings vivid colour to the detail and lesser aspects, such as the simple pass or the taciturn defender, of a game that is all too often played out in blinding, big money technicolour.

Football fiction provides the opportunity to digest and meditate on the game's meaning; to reflect, for example, on the late Liverpool FC manager [Bill Shankly's](#) elevation of his game to socialist philosophy.

Poet, philosopher, team manager: Bill Shankly, formerly of Liverpool FC. The best football writing allows us to consider the millions of lives this sport affects (not just the lives of those driving around in sports cars); Uruguayan author, Eduardo Galeano's book, [Soccer in Sun and Shadow](#) offers wondrous and lyrical insight into such lives.

It allows us to be entertained by this sport's ability to level the mighty. Following how the unremarkable village team, the Steeple Sinderby Wanderers, fell giants on their way to winning the FA Cup in Englishman [J. L. Carr's](#) novel [How Steeple Sinderby Wanderers Won the F.A.Cup](#) captures this sense of romance.

Amid the seemingly endless consumption of fixture lists and wrangles over televised rights, football fiction offers new perspectives on a game overwhelmed by tired match reports, disparaging commentary and jaded speculation.

This article's author, QUT's Lee McGowan, argues the case for football literary fiction.

Since the 1960s, and as recently as 2009, commentators – including the late George Plimpton, editor of the [Norton Book of Sports](#), who openly dismisses football's fiction in the 1992 edition of the sports literature anthology – have dismissed football's fiction.

While some argue there is much in football that lends itself to dramatic fictional interpretation, English novelist and author of [About a Boy](#), Nick Hornby, argues that [there's enough excitement](#), in the real thing for us never to have to worry about turning to a made-up story (and he's an Arsenal fan!).

English football novelist and journalist Brian Glanville [once noted](#) the very act of writing about an essentially working-class game immediately discounted the works from literary consideration. Football, it seemed, was not a gentleman's game and did not need a literature genre. We now know this to be rubbish.

The drama and passion of football makes it ripe for fictional literature.

## Rich past

Beginning in short form in Victorian boys' journals and magazines such as the [Boys Own Paper](#) in the late 1800s, football fiction quickly gained traction as education standards rose and [comic books](#) became more prevalent.

In the early 1900s, writers such as Englishman [Arnold Bennett](#), as with the clubs of the day, began drafting professional players into their stories.

During the first world war and 1920s, fictional players such as Nell O’Newcastle and [Meg Foster](#) – both female characters in [The Football Favourite](#) – [stood up for workers and women’s rights](#).

## Surging ahead

Interest in football fiction surged alongside the rising popularity of the professional game.

As a result, between 1920 and the mid 1950s, paperback series such as the [Aldine Football Novel](#) (88 volumes) and Amalgamated Press’ Football and Sports Library (564 volumes), played to the crowd.

British novelist [Sydney Horler](#) wrote 20 football novels in the period (he knocked over 157 different novels all up). His characters include McPhee, a gruff and wily Scots manager, and Tiger Standish, a pipe-smoking international spy, and England’s best centre-forward.

From the 1950s, football fiction dispensed with romanticism and moralistic consensus. Instead, it developed emotionally charged, sophisticated, socio-political commentaries.

Scottish writer [Robin Jenkins](#)’ majestic novel, [The Thistle and The Grail](#) (1954), and [The Hollow Ball](#) (1961) by Scottish-Irish novelist Sam Hanna Bell offer gritty and profound critiques of football’s place in culture and society.

Glanville haunted us with the melancholy of [The Rise of Gerry Logan](#) (1970); Scotsman Gordon Williams’ [From Scenes like These](#) (1969), short-listed for the Booker Prize, and Jenkins’, [A Would Be Saint](#) (1978), discuss the game’s impact on working-class families.

## Enter the soccerati

In the 1990s, the sport was embraced as the must-have accessory for British middle-classes.

Nick Hornby’s celebrated [Fever Pitch](#) (1992) is often credited with making football fashionable and with it, football writing.

The decade heralded the rise of the soccerati – award-winning fiction writers such as [DJ Taylor](#), Irishman [Roddy Doyle](#), [Simon Kuper](#), [Hunter Davies](#) and [Nalinaksha Bhattacharya](#) (whose work, inspired by a real life story, was reshaped in 2002 as the film Bend it like Beckham) achieved success exploring the game’s themes and content.

In response, writers such as Filth author [Irvine Welsh](#) and UK author of The Football Factory, [John King](#), gave us a figurative fist in the mouth with complex studies of the male urban football fan.

More recently, stunning contributions in the form of British author's David Peace's 2006 novel [The Damned Utd](#) and [Heartland](#), written by novelist Anthony Cartwright in 2009, made the leap from football to literary fiction.

The Damned Utd, the story of [Brian Clough](#)'s troubled term as football manager of [Leeds United](#) in 1974, was adapted into the film The Damned United, starring Michael Sheen of Frost/Nixon fame.

Yes, football novels are comparatively rare, the really good ones even more so. But despite what you might have been told, their number and history is a wide-open field of play, and well worth a kick around.