

the leisure manager's library

An occasional series offering a guide to leisure-related literature

No 21: Beyond a Boundary by CLR James

What's it about?

This is ostensibly a book about cricket but only in the same way Hamlet is a play about a ghost or À la Recherche du Temps Perdu is about a biscuit. Beyond a Boundary is wholly about cricket but it is also a book in which cricket is also wholly tangential to an exploration of life, society, class, politics, history, philosophy and quite a bit more. Here CLR James tells the story of how cricket has shaped lives, communities and nations.

What's it got to do with leisure?

The book takes cricket as a starting point to explore and explain the author's journey from boyhood in Trinidad to adulthood and a celebrated career as a journalist, political activist and cultural critic in London. Born in Port of Spain in 1901, James came to the UK in 1932 to help Learie Constantine, one of the greats of West Indian cricket then and now, to write his autobiography. James then became the cricket correspondent for the Manchester Guardian and the Glasgow Herald, and played a significant role in the development of the Pan-African movement before returning to Trinidad in 1958 to help with preparations for independence. If your understanding of leisure extends to encompass sport and culture this book is for you.

Why should I read it?

Routinely described as the most finely crafted book on cricket ever written and the best book ever written about sport, Beyond a Boundary is also among the best books ever written about colonialism, West Indian society or socialism. But do not let that put you off. This is a great example of why great books become great books: because they are hugely engaging, massively engrossing and beautifully written works that may also have something significant to say alongside the story that keeps you turning the pages.

The preface James supplied to Beyond a Boundary is as elegant and simple a summary of a book's purpose as you will find but it also manages to hint at the depth and breadth of the learning and intellect with which the reader is about to engage:

"This book is neither cricket reminiscences nor autobiography. It poses the question What do they know of cricket who only cricket know? To answer involves ideas as well as facts. The autobiographical framework shows the ideas more or less in the sequence that they developed in relation to the events, the facts and the personalities which prompted them. If the ideas originated in the West Indies it was only in England and in English life and history that I was able to track them down and test them. To establish his own identity, Caliban, after three centuries, must himself pioneer into regions Caesar never knew."

So skilful and so beautiful is the writing that almost every sentence reads like an epigraph ready to be carved into the stonework of a new building dedicated to the pursuit of sport and learning (the two, as James explains, are effectively indivisible) but this does nothing to make the prose anything other than highly readable.

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This is the story of a remarkable man but also of a remarkable game. In the opening pages James explains his growing interest in cricket and how it fitted into his expanding horizons: "The years passed. I was in my teens at school, playing cricket, reading cricket, idolizing Thackeray, Burke and Shelley...". This is no ordinary intellect but James realised that the people who played cricket on the ground beyond the fence at the end of his family's garden were no ordinary people.

Referring to a bad boy who could bat and a restless man who could play the cut shot like no one else, he explains how these two early heroes, Matthew Bondman and Arthur Jones respectively, helped shape his consciousness: "They only appear as starting points. In reality they were the end, the last stones put into place, of a pyramid whose base constantly widened, until it embraced those aspects of social relations, politics and art laid bare when the veil of the temple has been rent in twain as ours has been." He quotes Hegel and then explains the whole book and indeed his whole life: "Here briefly are some of the experiences of a lifetime which have placed Matthew Bondman and Arthur Jones within a frame of reference that stretches east and west into the receding distance, back into the past and into the future."

If you have a sports biography on your book shelves, *Beyond a Boundary* will be of interest to you. However, once you start be prepared to wonder at the time you have spent on the ghost-written rememberings and score-settling of retired or soon-to-be-retired sports people when you could have been reading CLR James, who in turn tells you that you could have been reading Shakespeare or Hegel, or Neville Cardus or CB Fry, or Aeschylus or Homer, or Burke or Plato; and that you could have been reading them because they belong to you. But don't worry too much because James also tells you that any book on sport is of value because sport is art worthy of the highest aesthetic accolades.

Put all those books back on the shelf but put this one in pride of place.

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