

## REVIEW

### **Julie Myerson, *Not a Games Person***

(London: Yellow Jersey Press, 2005)

By Annemarie Jutel

*This is me, I'm six years old. It's a long time ago and I'm standing in a sack in the middle of a field and trying to remember what happens in this world. It's a long time ago but not so long that I can't remember. I remember everything. The field is green, it's hot, too hot and lines are marked on it in white – lines which you can see from far away but when you get up close they barely seem to be there. It's a puzzle for a person to work out, this map drawn on the world.*

Standing in a burlap sack in the middle of a field, wondering what she's doing there, a six year old Julie Myerson delivery in italicised flash-back serves as a poignant reminder of the surprising ways in which many of us experience games. Mortified and confused, the young Julie can make little sense of this craziness – why hop in a sack, why paint white lines on the grass, why not stop and watch the birds?

This little book of memories and of contemporary contextualisation provides a well-written and insightful look into the structure of Julie's life and the disruption (as well as the order) that games bring to her existence. As an adoring and adored child, Julie's life is governed by rules that ensure she will be safe. Rituals and routines

structure her life: like the game she plays with Mummy, delivering the milk from her pull-string lorry; and also the vicious playground rules which dictate that she can't play at the Big Pipe which is reserved for the Popular Girls, but must acquiescently join the littlies in the kindergarten.

And she is frightened – of burnt eggs, and deep water, of sharks, and germs, and people she doesn't know and of PE. Happiness is in the perfect place of peace and quiet where she and her panda bear, and her mummy and daddy are happy and content, and the order isn't challenged. At school recess, she stands and looks at the wall, pretending to be interested in the holes in the concrete, and the beetles that march in and about the crevices, providing her with a means for avoiding the chaos of contact and of games.

But throughout the story of her fears and joy is threaded the account of her field day. Confused and baffled by the concept of competition, yes, but she jumps and thuds across the paddock, both panicked at the thought that rats may have chewed the sack, and astounded that she's out-racing the other girls. Her friend Jane is behind and best friends wait for one another she thinks to herself, so she slows down. But Jane plays to different rules, hops by, happy to accept the ribbon, leaving Julie in tears.

*Not a Games Person* is not only a book with which many anguished readers can identify, it is also an important text for understanding the role of games and sport in society. While Julie was experiencing her race in phenomenological terms of joy and kinaesthetics, competition has superimposed a new set of constraints which make Julie suffer, but which are rationalised here and elsewhere as building character,

determination and courage. Games are a normalising force – one which structures the playground, but also the corporate board room with its language of playing fields, goals, targets and fair play.

The simple sack race on sports day brutally institutionalises the rules of exclusiveness that skirted around in the playground – rigid in their application, focused on the exclusive groups they foster, and void of love. Julie is at the juncture between play and games; the stakes have become higher, much higher, as approval, friendship and recognition are suddenly thrown into the arena. She will, over time, learn different things about these physical games; she swims well, and places in meets, even though she fails to understand the exhaustion of those in front of her. Maybe she should push herself harder, she thinks, but at least she has made her teacher happy. Second is alright, but she wonders what it would feel like to win.

Thirty years later, the grown Julie runs, swims, and incredulously witnesses her own children compete and win. “I was never really a games person”, she admits to her now elderly PE teacher, but she moves incessantly, and exercises – perhaps obsessively, she leads her readers to suspect.

*Not a Games Person* is a neatly written glimpse of one woman’s relationship with the dilemmas of play and social order. It will resonate with many readers, and will enlighten others.

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