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Title:

Not just another ball game:

Young adult and adult football fictions are different.

Abstract

Current media attention on the crossover novel highlights the increasing permeability of the boundaries between young adult and adult fiction. This paper will focus upon some of the difficulties around definitions of young adult fiction before considering the fiction of football, or soccer as it is more commonly known in Australia. The football genre exhibits a number of discrete and identifiable differences between young adult and adult readerships including, for example, the role of the protagonist, and the narrative's distance from the game. This paper will unpack characteristic differences in the narratological and stylistic techniques employed across adult and young adult texts. The adult football fiction *Striker* (1992) by Hunter Davies and young adult football fiction *Lucy Zeezou's Goal* (2008) by Liz Deep-Jones' are presented as comparative case studies to further illustrate the range of tensions and divergences as they are reflected between readerships.

In Australia, football, or soccer as it is more commonly known here, is pervasive in terms of participation. It has a long history, particularly in Victoria and New South Wales, and is currently experiencing a burgeoning sense of identity domestically and on the international stage. At the same time it is openly regarded as a minority interest, is underrepresented in the media and remains marginalised in terms of creative representation.

This paper is interested in the polarised nature of the market that exists for football narratives in Australia. This polarity is comprised of young adult readers and adult readers. Part of the curiosity of this division is that the readership reflects the broader social trend around the playing of the game itself – diffuse and popular up until age fourteen or so, but declining in popularity among older players. This may be the result of a number of converging social factors; young readers are more likely to be participants in the game while adult readers are less so.

The social-versus-fictional positioning within the readerships appears to have an impact on the employment of narrative techniques used in the management of barriers between the reader and the world of the text in a field where there are arguably very few significant differences between young adult fiction and adult fiction as a whole.

Many critics and theorists, including Cart (2010), Nodelman (2004) and Nimmon and Foster (1995), have debated the lack of definitive difference for fiction aimed at young adult and adult readerships and the difficulties in defining and establishing those that are evident. They agree the most significant separation is the level of concern for the reader, who the texts are addressed to, or the determination of the ‘implied reader’. In theory football fiction should reflect this notion. Young adult and adult football fiction narratives are inherently related. They are about football, the game itself, players, individual matches, and the consequences of a win, loss or draw. While they are closely tied through these factors in belonging to the body of work, there are clear and distinct divergences in the presentation of their narratives.

A close reading and comparative analysis of the adult football fiction *Striker* (1992) by Hunter Davies and young adult football fiction *Lucy Zeezou's Goal* (2008) by Liz Deep-Jones will underline the range of tensions and divergences as they are reflected across the young adult and adult readerships. The texts, while published a number of years apart, have been selected for their striking similarities in form and content; both protagonists being kidnapped for ransom for example.

Football fiction, defined by McGowan as a fictive work, which relies on football, or soccer, as a substantive element, including but not restricted to narrative, voice, structure, setting and/or character development (2011), has seen many forms: poetry; comic books; fanzines, short stories and, of course, the novel.

The line of demarcation between young adult and adult fiction has become “increasingly porous” (Rabb 2008). The person the work is aimed at, the messages contained (Cart 2009b, 75), and the level of pleasure derived from it (Nodelman 2004, 241) amount to the only significant differences between young adult and adult fiction. Mark Haddon argues that “there is no real difference” between the novels written for these readerships and adds that “books for children are as complex as their adult counterparts and should be accorded the same respect,” (2004). He contends the difference (note it is singular) does not lie “between one book and another, or between one reader and another. It’s a difference between ways of writing and ways of reading,” (2004). The notion speaks to a level of concern for the reader, or at least, ‘the implied reader’ (Iser, in Keen 2003, 33). Ordinarily Haddon and Cart et al would be correct, but football fiction is demonstrably different. The following quotes appear to represent the divide in the approach to football fiction:

When I handed in ‘Gracie’ my editor said it’s great, we love it, we’ll take it, but a book about soccer should probably have some soccer in it.

(Crowley 2008)

Good writing about sport avoids action on the field of play as much as possible.

(Plenderleith 2008)

Australian writer Cath Crowley’s young adult series *Gracie Faltrain* (2004-2008) represents a growing movement which features female footballers in central roles in young adult football narratives. English sports journalist Ian Plenderleith published a collection of short football fiction stories called *For Whom the Ball Rolls* (2003); short story collections (while not the focus of this thesis) are a common form of adult football fiction. The work of these authors is vastly different, but they are dealing with the same issue. The statements (above) raise a number of questions which speak to the divergence in the approaches of Crowley and Plenderleith and highlight one of the most significant differences, in terms of the use of literary technique and devices, between adult and young adult football fiction. If an author of adult football fiction believes that the football shouldn’t be on the page, why is the author of

young adult football fiction being asked to put more in? The narratives aimed at the readerships are inherently related through their concern for the game, but they have a number of fundamental differences. Importantly, these differences do not occur as distinctly in other genres. For example, adult football fiction does not generally have on-the-pitch match action, young adult fiction is saturated with it.

There are a great many similarities in the themes tackled in young adult and adult football novels. They are however handled in very different ways. Take football as a vehicle with the power of unification as an example. In young adult football fiction, unification tends to be key to team success (See Warren and Abela (2005), Crowley (2006), Deep-Jones (2008), Walcott (2010) and Palmer (2010)), while in adult football fiction it often has more violent associations and consequences – particularly in the writings on fan culture (See King (1996), Welsh (1995), Brimson (1998)).

Consideration of the language aspect of a story's presentation, the 'verbal' and 'organisational' techniques, what we recognise as distinctive and effective tropes of football fiction as they are woven into its fabric, have allowed determination of the distinct patterns and differences; such as the figurative distance the text is situated from the field of play, the protagonist's role and balance of gender represented in those roles and the perspectives of the narration which emerge "from the substratum of the physical territory" (Moretti 2005, 42).

There is a proportionately greater amount of 'on-the-pitch' action or 'played football' (McGowan 2008, 214) in young adult football fiction than there is in adult texts. Football fictions can be categorised in terms of their relative distance to the field of play: a) where the protagonist plays and there is played football; b) where the game from the observer's or spectator's point of view, such as third person narratives about teams or first person narratives of managers and fans, have been; and c) where the works do not feature football, including 'hoolie lit.' such as *Away Days* (Sampson 1996) and crime-related football fiction such as *Pitch Black* (Gray 2008) those furthest from the pitch, which narratively rely on the sport's existence in the text.

There are more female protagonists in young adult football fiction than in adult football fiction. There are no contemporary models, but the young adult female texts have a strong structural connection to the 'women's fiction' published in the 1920s and, in many cases improved on, the formulaic texts of their young male counterparts. Gracie Faltrain (Crowley 2004-2008), Lucy Zeezou (Deep-Jones 2008, 2010) and Krista and Charlie Brown (*Pretty Tough* Tigelaar 2007) are smart, strong and able to negotiate personal, emotional and physical challenges. More young adult texts are also beginning to feature prominent female

characters such as Tulsi, TJ's friend in the *TJ* series (Walcott 2010) and Paloma and Val in the *Megs* series (Montagnana-Wallace and Schwarzer 2007-2010) for example.

In young adult football fiction, with few exceptions, the protagonists are players. In adult football fiction the protagonist is more likely to be an observer of the game, such as a manager, former player or spectator. In *The Thistle and the Grail* (Jenkins 1954) the protagonist is the club's president, and *Pitch Black* (Gray 2010) the protagonist is a police detective. Incidences of the protagonist being a player here are relatively rare. One trend which has emerged, through works by authors such as Peter Abrahams (2006), Mal Peet (2003, 2006, 2008) and Tom Palmer (2008-2011) is the increase in investigative crime-related football fiction, an element which has traditionally been the territory of adult football fiction. An exception here is *Jamie Johnson*, protagonist of the Dan Freedman works (2007-2010) who plays football and detects.

In young adult football fiction there tends to be a greater level of importance or value attached to the outcome of the games within the text. In adult football fiction, match results are often accompanied by dramatic consequences, but they tend to be of a different nature. In adult football fiction weightier emotional significance is placed on the event and, paradoxically, less excitement. The use of language, particularly around the football game, is different from young adult to adult football fiction narratives. Adult texts, particularly those aimed at male readers are entrenched in the cultural markers for the game. Young adult texts appear to be as concerned with encouraging the reader to play as well as read. The works by Warren and Abela (2005-2007) Montagnana-Wallace and Schwarzer (2007-2010) and *The David Beckham Football Academy* series (2009-2011) are more explicit and open in their language use around the game. Moral and instructive messages are delivered through the traditions of team and group identity (Beard 1998, 96). This tends to mark the texts as tools for socialisation. While more sophisticated young adult fictions are more likely to carry their messages with greater subtlety, there are still large numbers being published which include such didacticism. Another common difference in young adult fiction is the resolution. The characters are invariably better off by the end of the book. The complexities of plot and its length might place *Striker Boy* (Zucker 2010) at the older end of the young adult fiction age range, yet it overtly carries themes of inclusion, tolerance and the positive reinforcement of a young adult's worth and abilities. The central character, Nat, is instrumental in uncovering the corruption adults miss for example. After a difficult initiation into Rovers' Premier League side he has the strength of character to keep playing. Adult football novels tend to be less authoritarian, predictable and moralising. 'Life lessons' or messages are not as obvious,

or even evident. The religious differences which cause conflict in *Heartland* (Cartwright 2009) are a little too ingrained in some characters for them to change in the period of the book for example. That is not to say that adult football fiction does not carry some of the same rites of passage experiences. Early adult football fiction effortlessly poured romantic visions and images of football across the page. They do not do this any longer. Where there is football content in adult texts, they tend to draw on the techniques of realist fiction. While elements of the fantastical appear in a small number of adult football fictions, with the possible exception of crossover novel, *Unseen Academicals* (Pratchett 2009), young adult football fiction does not incorporate elements of fantasy. There are examples where the texts stretch levels of authenticity, such as the last minute David Beckham-esque free kick that wins the big game in *TJ and the Hat-trick* (Walcott 2010, 98), and the character Lucy Zeezou being a football-playing, clothing model with her own line of fashion wear (Deep Jones (2008-2010), but they would not be regarded as fantasy.

While the writing styles used in football fiction are as diverse and varied as the plots, and themes, the one thing that draws the above list of divergences together is how they impact or are impacted on by voice in the text. If, for example, the protagonist is a young woman who likes football such as Gracie Faltrain or Charlie Brown, (*Pretty Tough* (2007)), the text is very likely to spend time on the pitch with her as a player, include a series of overt moral lessons as it builds towards her rite of passage, contain played football and invariably be in first person. The voice will be appropriately affected by and of these events and changes.

If the protagonist is an older male football hooligan such as Billy Evans from *The Crew* (1999) and *Top Dog* (2001) then he will most likely not play, the novel is unlikely to carry any actual playing football and the moral lessons will be blurred or absent. The voice, which will largely remain unaffected, will invariably be in third person. These novels may highlight the same universal themes such as football's strength as a leveller and as a natural force in bringing diverse and disparate communities together, even if it is a gang of hooligans, but the use of voice and techniques of narration across these texts will be starkly different. The books are likely to have little other similarity beyond their reliance on football or football culture.

Other differences which emerge in the football narrative, such as the amount of football on the page, whether the works can be considered as 'rites of passage' or 'coming of age' stories, and specific uses of language are better illustrated through a contrasting and comparative close textual analysis.

The first text to be analysed is *Lucy Zeezou's Goal* (Deep-Jones 2008); a young adult football fiction aimed at female readers. The second text, *Striker* (Davies 1992) is written from the perspective of a 'professional player' and is what would be described as a mainstream adult football fiction. Despite the difference in time of publication, the novels have been selected for comparison because they have a number of noticeable similarities. They are remarkably similar in length and follow the journey of a footballer who gains a degree of celebrity. Both players have difficulties with their team mates and with settling into a team. The works contain numerous incidences of played football action and frequently name-drop real footballers as minor characters and have strong underlying themes regarding the price or impact of fame - underlined in both novels by the kidnapping for ransom of each protagonist (Deep-Jones 2008, 154, Davies 1992, 238).

Lucia Zoffi, the protagonist in *Lucy Zeezou's Goal* (2008), is a fourteen year old fashion model who dreams of playing football. The novel follows her life-changing trip from the catwalks of Milan to the backstreets of Sydney. While her parents disapprove of her love of the game, she joins a local team and hides her playing behind dance lessons. Lucia, or Lucy Zeezou to her friends, has inherited her world-famous family's footballing legacy and soon puts the talent to use in establishing herself as the team's star player. The novel's central tension, Lucy's forbidden love for the game, is brought to a head through the inevitable clash with an important family commitment. The novel's themes include positive team spirit, sportsmanship, family relationships, friendship and, through helping a homeless boy find a 'happy home', a neat, if shallow, lesson in understanding and tolerance.

Striker (1992) follows the rise and rise of the highly talented, often feckless, stereotypical professional footballer. From humble beginnings on a housing estate waste ground, it follows Joe Swift through his developmental years, the heady days of Premiership football and his appearances for his national side. It closes with the inevitable money-laden transfers and the language barriers of European super stardom in Italy. Part parody of the stereotypical footballer's autobiography, *Striker* (1992) is a satirical look at the career of the modern professional, circa late 1980s/early 1990s. Its pages are filled the 'camaraderie' of team mates, scorn for celebrity groupies and lesser players and the rapacity of managers and agents. Intended to provide a vehicle for a social commentary on the professional game, the novel's inclusion of frequent 'insider' jokes inadvertently provides entertainment for the industry it is trying to critique.

There are a number of aspects in vocal strategy and language choice which form the football's stylistic design (Beard 1998, 96) in both texts. Before briefly considering excerpts

from each novel, selected on the basis of their content similarity, scene conclusion and where they occur within the protagonist's narrative arcs, likenesses and deviations will be considered.

Lucy Zeezou is a young female protagonist. Joe Swift is an adult male. This seems obvious but underlines the lack of female adult footballers in the field. *Lucy Zeezou's Goal* (2008) has almost 45 pages of played football over fourteen separate incidences in a 266 page novel. This also includes training and a number of informal games played with friends and team-mates. In comparison *Striker* (1992) features approximately ten significant instances, including training, which amount to less than 11 pages over a 265 page novel. This reflects the stark differentiation in the amount of football in young adult novels and adult novels.

In both books 'played football' has an important role. It is used as a vehicle for the characters to develop and be developed. The protagonists demonstrate their talent and they use the game to express themselves, particularly in ways they are not be able to in other aspects of their lives. They make connections and develop relationships with other characters, friends, team-mates and adversaries through playing football. These traits are common to many football novels from a range of movements or types, but there is a significant difference here. In *Striker* (1992), despite Joe Swift being a professional player, the 'played football' has less impact on the dramas or tensions in the novel. Notably Joe's fourth appearance for England where he incurs a nasty injury is highlighted (Davies 1992, 157-159). His professional debut (1992, 115) and his winning of his first team place (1992, 126) are too. While these may be significant moments in his career and central to the make-up of an autobiography, the incidents' contribution to Joe's narrative arc is barely of consequence. In keeping with the novel's direction, he still gets famous and rich and succeeds in Italy, where "on the whole... British players have not really succeeded" (1992, 221). In contrast, played football has a central role in *Lucy Zeezou's Goal*. There is significantly more and it is where Lucy is happiest, something she declares very early in the work, "all I wanted to do was play football" (Deep-Jones 2008, 6). The climax of the novel is a football match where she has the starring role (2008, 240). Earlier in the novel a misguided and desperate effort to fit in sees Lucy dress up as a boy in order to play (2008, 53); the subsequent discovery of her gender during the game is a crucial moment in terms of her integration into the team and a reinforcement of the novel's themes of equality and equal opportunity.

The following excerpts highlight a football event being played from the point of view of the narrator, a participant, and with the narrator's ideological assumptions. The sentences are straight-forward, grammatically complete and have the standard narrative first person

present-tense. It can be determined from their frequent use of football terms, such as “cross”, “ball”, “corner flag” and “18 yard-box”, that they are on a football pitch.

This is Lucy Zeezou’s trial match for the Dunbar Lions. A scissor, or overhead, kick is a very rare and skilful way for a striker to score a goal. In footballing terms it denotes a high level of skill and ability.

Harry made a break down the right hand side and sent a spectacular cross in. I made my run among a swarm of defenders, with Max breathing down my neck, desperate to reach the ball first. The 18 yard box was a battleground; there was nudging, elbowing and fierce fighting for position as we all hustled for the ball.

The only way I could win the contest was to come up with the unexpected, Nonno Dino always taught me to act instinctively, moving like a panther ready to pounce on its prey.

Somehow I managed to break free from the pack, and with my back to the goal I leapt into the air and scissor-kicked the ball towards the goal. It catapulted past my rivals.

Some of the boys started clapping as I landed on my backside with a thud. I wasn’t sure if they were celebrating a goal or my fall. (152 words)

(Deep-Jones 2008, 53)

When she lands, Lucy’s wig falls off and reveals her ‘boy’ disguise. The match resumes with Lucy’s gender revealed. Lucy scores a second goal to cement her place in the team. Some players are excited about her abilities and others distrust her attempt to deceive them. The played football in the scene amounts to almost eight pages.

With ten minutes remaining in a nil-nil draw, Joe Swift is brought on as a substitute. It is the first time he has played for the club’s first team. Surprised at having been put in an attacking position, Joe finds himself with the ball at his feet for the first time.

It was seven minutes before I got the ball in any space, and it came from a bad clearance, not a pass. I made towards the corner flag, stopped and put a foot on the ball, while the fullback stood off, waiting for me to commit myself. I knew I should put in a quick cross, as instructed, but that was what their defence expected. Out of the corner of my eye I could see them all lined up, waiting. I pretended to cross, but instead I curled my foot round the ball and dashed past the full back, with the ball rolling towards the byeline, about to go harmlessly for a goal kick. I got it just on the line, and with my left foot I sent it high into the goalmouth. I ended on my arse, sliding against the advertising boards. It was a hopeful ball not meant for anyone in particular, but it landed just under the bar. (158 words)

(Davies 1992, 116)

The ball finally ricochets off an opponent player and is marked as an ‘own goal’, but the reader notes Joe’s contribution and credits him with the goal. His “standing on the ball” at a moment of pressure is a sign of great confidence, even cockiness, which alludes to the player’s level of skill and affirms his ability as a player in much the same way as Lucy’s scissor-kick. There is around one whole page of on-the-pitch action in this scene. Note the authors’ use of goal scoring as a device to underline their protagonists’ level of skill; this is a very common trope in football fiction.

Davies’ work is narrated to a football audience. Take the expression “the full back stood off, waiting for me to commit myself”. It is possible a reader with no knowledge of football will not understand that the defender, “the full back”, is giving the protagonist room, “stood off”, to choose which direction to move, “waiting for me to commit myself”, before he decides to tackle him. In contrast Deep-Jones’ descriptions use few football-specific registers. Non-specific, non-generic positional statements such as “We all hustled for the ball” and “Somehow I managed to break free from the pack,” suggest playing football, but it is football that is accessible to a much wider reading audience. It could suggest either a low level of football-playing expertise in the author, or that the author has expectations about their anticipated reader’s level of knowledge. In my view it is about ensuring that the widest possible range of readers can access the work. The frequency of use of football-specific registers in Davies’ novel, including “defence expected”, “harmlessly for a goal kick” and “landed just under the bar”, firmly place the text in the football fans world. While these expressions suggest the protagonist’s deep knowledge of the game, they also assume the reader’s knowledge matches it. This vocal strategy for characterisation is also evident in expressed levels of excitement. Deep-Jones, through her narrator Lucy Zeezou, uses a combination of metaphor and simile to colour her overall picture. She draws on a very common ‘sport as war’ metaphor. Phrases and words such as “contest”, “battleground” and “fierce fighting” are used. The simile “like a panther ready to pounce on its prey” highlights Lucy Zeezou’s predatory nature as a striker. This is appropriate to the dramatic way in which Lucy narrates her story and meets the expectations of her audience, where knowledge of football is not a requirement. Significantly Joe Swift makes no use of metaphor. Davies’ narrator is a character with basic needs; interested in playing football, sex and money. The language used to voice his story reflects this simplistic triumvirate. It also reflects how language use can restrict the ability of the reader to access the work.

These texts may also reflect the author’s level of interest in the sport. Liz Deep-Jones is a TV commentator for Australian professional women’s soccer. At the end of her novel,

she includes personal and inspirational stories from members of the Matilda's, the Australian Women's National Soccer team. While this is a paratextual issue, it reflects the work's strongest theme, to inspire and encourage young women to play. Hunter Davies is a renowned football journalist. In spite of its satire, *Striker* (1992) is regarded as poor, non-literary football fiction (Taylor 1997, 96).

It is possible to continue to highlight differences in these texts. The sentence structure, length and rhythm and the paragraph length, for example, further highlight the authors' divergent approaches to vocal strategies and narrative decisions they've adopted. The 'goal' here is not to highlight an exhaustive list. The illustration provides useful contrast to the notion that the differences between young adult and adult texts in other types of fiction are far less distinct.