

BY EDWARD PLATT

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Back in print - A new, occasional column reassessing neglected classics

A Fan's Notes

Frederick Exley Yellow Jersey Press, 385 pp, £8

SIGN-UP

Frederick Exley's life was ruled by one consuming obsession, what he called his "dream of undying fame". Exley planned to write the great American novel, and when he failed, he turned to drink and football - in particular, his team, the New York Giants - to alleviate the pain of his existence. "I gave myself up to the Giants utterly. The recompense I gained was the feeling of being alive," he writes at the beginning of *A Fan's Notes*, his memoir of a life of failure, disguised as an account of the author's passion for his football team. Ironically, what Exley calls the "myriad defeats" of "that long malaise, my life" had provided him with the material for the one great book he was to write. In time it earned him, too, a small portion of the fame he so passionately desired; when he died in 1992, from a drink-related illness, his reputation as a writer was founded on *A Fan's Notes*.

First published in 1968, *A Fan's Notes* has a topical theme: thanks to Nick Hornby, the idea that a man might predicate his identity on the fortunes of a football team has become commonplace, and Exley's book may, at last, find the audience it deserves. It begins in a bar in upstate New York, where Exley suffers an alcohol-induced seizure while preparing to watch the Giants on television and then tracks backwards to trace the growth of his obsessions with fame and football. From his father - who died when he was 15 - Exley inherited what he called the love of the "crowd", yet he had inherited none of the athletic ability which had earned Earl Exley the status of small-town hero. Deprived of sporting glory - and, apparently, literary talent - Exley became a drunk, "continually contemplating the world through the bubbling, cerise hue of a wine glass".

When he left university, he worked in public relations and then returned to his remarried mother's house, where he lay down on the sofa for six months; his "journey on a Davenport" ended when he was consigned to a private mental hospital. During the next three years, Exley married, divorced, fathered two children and endured another painful breakdown. His memoir reaches a climax, of sorts, when he picks a brawl in a New York street and is beaten to a standstill. This episode forces him to acknowledge the central truth of his existence: "I fought because I understood, and I could not bear to understand, that it was my destiny . . . to sit in the stands with most men and acclaim others. It was my fate, my destiny, my end, to be a fan."

Nick Hornby has contributed a generous foreword to *A Fan's Notes*, in which he acknowledges Exley's book as one of the inspirations for *Fever Pitch*, his own account of his life-long love affair with Arsenal. Yet there is nothing in *Fever Pitch* that can match the intensity of Exley's conception of what it means to be a fan: while Hornby measured out his life in football matches, drolly relishing the peculiar congruity between his depressive nature and the character of his beloved Arsenal, Exley is scarcely concerned with the game of football itself; instead, he is fascinated by the agonising servitude of being a fan and the way it enacts, and partially absolves, the "horror and the dismay, the laughter and the bitterness of that holocaust I called my life".

Hornby has been credited with partially rehabilitating football's tarnished image and with redeeming the male cult of fandom, yet no one would accuse Exley of rehabilitating anything - least of all his own bruised soul. *A Fan's Notes* is, in many ways, an ugly book: Exley is intent on proving that he was as "tough" as his father and he relishes both his own pain, and other people's. Yet his account of his unfulfilled life is an exhilarating one. He writes in a rich, fervid prose that is alive to both the aberrant nature of his tortured mind and the absurdities of life in modern America. And he is funny. Few people have the courage to write honestly about themselves; Exley makes even the boldest of confessions seem like a pallid evasion.



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