



JOHN McPHEE

Levels
of
the
Game

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This account of a tennis match played by Arthur Ashe against Clark Graebner at Forest Hills in 1968 begins with the ball rising into the air for the initial serve and ends with the final point. McPhee provides a brilliant, stroke-by-stroke description while examining the backgrounds and attitudes which have molded the players' games.

Levels of the Game Details

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From Reader Review Levels of the Game for online ebook

Greg Talbot says

On the rarefied occasion I will pick up a newspaper, I have never once read the sports section. And that blindspot has prevented me from reading about some great matchups, and celebrated cultural moments that have happened on the green fields and packed arenas. But all is not lost, great matches, provide great commentary and insights into our world.

“Levels of the Game” is absolutely a book about tennis, and in particular one fateful match between Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner. But like so many great sports stories (“Friday Night Lights”, “Moneyball”) the book is bountiful in cultural examination. Between the volleys of the ball in the advancing match of the Davis Cup, is the deep story of two men representing American supremacy.

The immediacy of the match is never lost, but the story expands beyond their physicalities and strategies. John McPhee’s narration is well-researched but artful in a way that packs metaphors such as the following:

“Graebner’s memory for lost points and adverse calls is nothing short of perfect, and months later he will still be talking about that extra serve that turned into an ace, for he can’t help thinking what an advantage he might have had if he had been able to crack Ashe open in the very first game, as he almost did anyway. Ashe, for his part, believes that it is a law of sport that everything that happens affects everything that happens thereafter..” (p.8).

The story boxes outward to include their coaches Dr. Graebner and Dr. John ““behind every tennis player is another tennis player (p.15”, the intimate unblinking eyes of Clark’s wife peering into him, the history of the racial obstacles Ashe has had to compete against white players, and all the pressures put on both men to win this match.

Sizing each other up, we get a book that books far beyond the play-by play moments. Ashe is described as “lucky”, as a backswing player who relies on big moments to seize momentum, and Graebner is described as a consistent, disciplined player, who understands the “tensile strength of the corporate ladder”; this gives an idea of just these men are built both physically and psychologically. Further we see how the 1960s cultural revolutions are affecting the two bed. Ashe’s bedroom is with scattered books on black resistance, including “The Autobiography of Malcolm X”, and the insistent civil right leaders asking him to take a more visible role in the movement, which reflect an ambition toward his future legacy. Privilege and belief in self determination define Graebner’s worldview, as well as his expectations about his opponent. With Hemingway-like proficiency, McPhee chips out these two distinct worlds, and offers readers glimpse of how they will be defined.

Living up to its title, McPhee has crafted a book that deftly deals with an immediate tennis match and the underlying social realities. At this stage of the game, every serve reflects not only the individual skill of the players, but the social conditions of America that made their rise possible. To the extent they can move beyond their humble beginnings, we can pin those promises to ourselves and our children. To win is to be immortalized, championed and the great promise for generations to come.

Aravind Nagarajan says

A beautifully written book. Charts out the entire contrast of the '60s American society keeping a single tennis match as the fulcrum.

An amazing insight into the differences between Clark Graebner and Arthur Ashe on many levels. I should read more of John McPhee.

Definitely recommend to anyone remotely interested in tennis/sports.

Sarah says

Such an exquisite little book. McPhee writes with such a graceful simplicity and effortless wit. You can really feel his fascination with these men and with the game of tennis.

I feel bad writing such a short review for a book I so thoroughly enjoyed, but there's just nothing else to say. It's short and incredibly readable and damn near to perfect.

Scott Middleton says

Impeccably detailed, this is a great book to get started with John McPhee even if (or maybe "especially if") you don't know or care much about tennis. As the title suggests, this book goes several levels deeper than the ostensibly titular match, stopping along the way to comment on race, class, athleticism, parenting, civil rights, you name it. As with other John McPhee books, there is very little glitz 'n glam in the style of Tom Wolfe or Hunter S. Thompson, but instead careful insight and well-researched detail. The humility of McPhee's writing style can make the book a bore at times, but it is worth a read nonetheless.

Sayan says

Notable sentences

If I walked in to his room and said "I have a bullet in my stomach", Arthur would have said "what else is new?"

"Tennis is a fight of character. A couple of good shots can build the spirit. It used to be impossible to get into a match with Arthur, because there was no character in his game. It was like hitting against a blackboard."

"He plays the game with the lackadaisical, haphazard mannerisms of a liberal."

as opposed to

"Republican tennis"

Abby says

If there's any doubt that I am completely in thrall to the miraculous literary powers of John McPhee, the fact that he inspired me to read a book about tennis and that I thoroughly enjoyed it should remove all doubt.

This isn't really a book about tennis as much as it is a battle of the wills between two completely different men who symbolize two very different Americas -- one rich, white and conservative (Clark Graebner) and the other striving, black and open to new ideas (Arthur Ashe). Like a skilled sportscaster, McPhee masterfully builds tension in his description of the volleys between the two men on the court. But he also provides a probing psychological portrait of each man and their complicated relationship to each other. The fact that this is accomplished in 160 pages without a single extraneous word is further proof of McPhee's literary prowess. Highly recommended.

Ted Alling says

If you are into tennis, this is a must-read. McPhee tells the backgrounds of Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner during their tennis match. It is a riveting book of how both players from very different backgrounds got to that match. It is a super quick read.

James says

Jessica says my reviews are too snooty; I assume this is because my reviews are comparative based - so many allusions to David Markson, or other books I've read.

But I challenge you to meaningfully review books in a non-comparative manner. I can talk about a book's pacing, and tone, and vocabulary, and meaning, and entertainment - but what are the scales for those? What qualitative and quantitative words would lend any meaning to my attempts to elucidate those factors for someone else? And even if my reviews were an attempt to remind myself later how I felt - I may have changed.

A comparative based review stays relative and is what can aide other people - if somebody wants to know where to start with a McPhee book, it's helpful to read a review that includes the line "It's no *Pine Barrens*" - this is how I look for review of new Board Games or if I'm purchasing new parts for my computer: what is the standard by which reviews of a certain type hold themselves too?

So with no further ado...my review of *Levels of the Game*

You know that episode of *Sports Night* where Jeremy is having trouble trimming down the video highlights of a baseball game? He wants to show the epic struggle and tension of the match?

Levels is John McPhee's journalistic interpretation of the epic struggle and tension of an Arthur Ashe tennis match.

I only ever partially understood Jeremy's feelings; now I understand completely.

Jeff says

This book has no chapters: It's a 150-page essay by John McPhee that begins with the first point and ends with the last point of a semifinals match between Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner at Forest Hills in 1968. Interspersed throughout are the two players' backstories, which are so different and yet so similar. A remarkable tour de force that can be read in less time than it took Ashe and Graebner to complete their match. Much obliged to the tennis-loving friend who referred this book to me.

Aaron Burch says

Holy shit, this book is good. It's obvious DFW loved it/McPhee. It reminded me, though I'd be hardpressed to put into words why, a bit of W.C. Heinz's *The Professional*. Mostly just because I so loved both? Heinz's book is a novel, whereas this is nonfic, but there's something about boxing and tennis that feels very similar, and both books drew me in in a way that can be tricky with sports narrative, but when it works I'm all in.

Bonus: the word "backswing" is used four times. (And "perfect" = 11x.)

Kate Ringer says

This book is an interesting look at a semi-professional tennis match that took place in the late 1960's between Clark Gable, a white, upper middle class Republican, and Arthur Ashe, the first African American in the United States to achieve major prestige in tennis. McPhee examines each players history and the impact that has on their play, as well the tiniest details of the match. Stylistically, this is an anthropological and physiological study of this match, but it reads like a story.

Jennifer Salazar says

When a fascinating topic such as this tennis matchup is taken on by the fantastic writer John McPhee, the results can be great. And that's exactly what has been produced here. Without overt sentiment, McPhee shows us the distinction between the two tennis players and he makes it all so very interesting. Highly recommended.

Jacob Mclaws says

It took me a while to get to this book because the cover and print job are kind of low quality, but with the US Open coming up I decided it would be fun to read about Arthur Ashe and the first US Open. I really loved the style of this book, splicing in biographical details about Ashe and Graebner between hits in a seamless natural way. Reading his description of the two player's styles of play and their personal mannerisms over four sets was surprisingly never boring or repetitive, just entertaining. Highly recommend this quick read.

Vaidya says

There is a The Master of Go feel to this book. Two players squaring off, their backgrounds, how that decides what they are, the political and social undercurrents of that time, etc. While Kawabata's protagonists represented different ages and the different ways of playing the game, McPhee's are of the same age but from as different backgrounds as they can be from.

A white male, born to privilege and deep pockets, an only son, and his eye right on the money and the American dream which he knows is within his grasp thanks to his 'social contacts' as he himself says. And a conservative Republican.

Pitted against a black upstart who struggles to come through the ranks, funded by other black philanthropists and a supportive father. More than just a game of tennis, it is a massive reflection of the times. The way Dr. Johnson asks his wards to not call any balls that are out by less than 6 inches (reminds one of the incident in Agassi's Open), to not swear or throw rackets on the ground and how that shapes up Ashe as he becomes the player is. And a liberal, Democrat - "It was hard to be religious growing up, could never relate to a Jesus with blond hair and white skin. You knew he wasn't your God."

At 150 pages it takes barely 2 days to finish this book. But it is a one-of-its-kind experience - similar to what Master of Go was.

Eliot Peper says

Levels of the Game by John McPhee is a masterpiece of narrative nonfiction. The book narrates a 1968 tennis semifinal point-by-point, while simultaneously profiling the two players, Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner, and exploring America's politics, history, racism, class structure, and psychology with surgical precision. In following the course of a single tennis match, McPhee illustrates an entire nation.

Evi * says

Un libro sperimentale scritto quasi 50, fa quindi ben prima delle logorroiche trattazioni di David Wallace, ben prima dell' *Open* di Agassi; l'editore, dalla vista lunga, ha astutamente saputo cogliere un filone narrativo che oggi incontra favorevolmente e in maniera trasversale lettori che giocano a tennis ma anche no.

Sperimentale anche perché scrivere di sport, e intendo non i soliti noti pezzi di cronaca sportiva che compaiono sulle varie Gazzette di tutto il mondo, ma scrivere in maniera ambiziosa, protratta e con estremo garbo scandendo i tempi che sono propri di una partita di tennis: punti, game, set e match point, non è cosa ovvia.

Ancora meno lo è quando, come nella fattispecie della semifinale dell' US Open del 1968, non esiste un supporto video che corrobora la narrazione, dandoci la certezza visiva di quel che effettivamente successe. Immaginare, per dire, una nuvola che flutta cangiante e paffuta nel cielo sopra il Campo Centrale di Wimbledon è relativamente facile; è più faticoso, richiedendo uno sforzo immaginativo non scontato (ma

che in fondo risulta lieve grazie alla nitidezza della scrittura di Mc Phee) quando ci si deve concentrare su movimenti di corpo, braccia e gambe in primis, sulla mimica facciale, componenti somatiche che rimandano alle intuizioni a volte geniali, a volte fallaci dei due giocatori, lampi di intelligenza e motore delle azioni di gioco.

In appendice un racconto delizioso sul giardiniere che con dedizione e amore quasi coniugale si occupa dei 780 mq del prato di Wimbledon, ne conosce ogni filo d'erba nome per nome.

Un libro per adepti di questo sport, no per tutti, non annoia direi mai, originale, consigliabile.

Josh says

McPhee's prose is gorgeous and his descriptions remarkable. The structure of this book really does count as a tremendous achievement in and of itself.

That being said, although McPhee is simply reflecting the biases of his time, the gender and racial offenses in this book are tough to digest for a modern reader.

Andrew says

It is difficult for a non-fiction book to earn 5-stars from me. This one was very close.

It is a great book; it just didn't have that "stay up too late reading" quality that I look for in a 5-Star book. Otherwise, it is very well written. If you are a sports fan, especially a tennis fan, then you should read this book!

I'll definitely read more from this author in the future.

Martin Jones says

This book draws a picture of two tennis players during a US Open semifinal match - Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner. They are friends because of tennis, but come from two different worlds. Between descriptions of the points of the match, the author inserts quotes from interviews with the players. It is a fascinating window onto the racial attitudes of American and American sportsmen in the late '60s.

JP says

In probably less time than the match took, you can relive the Men's Semi-final of the 1968 US Open.

Interspersed with the play-by-play account is the backstory of Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner. They grew up in very different environments but with a similar love of the game. Ashe's biography was most interesting to me. He was cerebral and curious, and yet knew how to keep himself focused when it mattered most.

McPhee's writing is masterful, such that this book seems to put a lifetime into a short story.

