

Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk

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Four years ago Ben Fountain's disturbing novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, was published to critical acclaim and an eventual National Book Award nomination. It was one of the first pieces of fiction coming out of the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In July of 2013 I wrote that Fountain's novel was an important work addressing the issue of the relationship between American sports fans and American soldiers who are commonly acclaimed as American heroes.

"The plot line is relatively simple. A small group of soldiers are involved in a fierce firefight in Iraq. It so happens that this group has a FOX News reporter and cameraman embedded with them. As a result these soldiers are seen across America in action and they are then presented as, and no doubt were, heroic figures to those who saw the news reports.

"The public reaction produces a deluge and these soldiers are acclaimed as great American heroes. Someone in the Pentagon seizes on the opportunity presented and pulls the soldiers off the front line and brings them back to the U.S. for a countrywide tour. It reaches its climax in Dallas on Thanksgiving Day at the Dallas Cowboys "traditional" football game.

"Ben Fountain uses the tour to offer a critique of the shallow and hollow nature of the public response to these heroes, and the exploitation of their deeds by the pentagon. Written in Billy Lynn's voice, it is a haunting and deeply disturbing novel that should be read and discussed by all Americans who join the public tributes to support their troops. It challenges the depth and the sincerity of that support and the motives of those who sponsor these public tributes in our sports arenas."

Now comes feature film with the same title, directed by Ang Lee, considered by many to be one of the most important directors working in film today. Lee's resume includes "Life of Pi," "Sense and Sensibility," "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," and "Brokeback Mountain." He has garnered Oscars, Oscar Nominations, and multiple Film Festival awards across the globe.

"Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk," was filmed in 3-D using experimental techniques although the film has been released in standard format in most theaters. It was the standard format that I saw this past weekend.

I have looked forward to the release of the film because I thought Ben Fountain's novel was an important addition to sport literature. Unlike many of the critics I was not disappointed in Ang Lee's film and the fine screenplay by Jean-Christophe Castelli. The basic frame of the story is retained and the characters are fully realized. Most important for me is the fact that the critique that was central to Fountain's novel remains a focal point in the film.

The relationship between the sometimes bewildered soldiers and the civilians who honor them as heroes is conveyed with sensitivity, humor, and grim precision. There is a clear and glaring disconnect between the civilian population and the reality of the war, and therefore between them and the soldiers.

Most of the film takes place at the Thanksgiving Day NFL game in Dallas. The outward signs of patriotism with overdone and hollow pageantry are now familiar rituals in which glitter overwhelms substance. The opulence of the owner's box and inflated levels of consumption are savaged by Lee's use of flashbacks to both Iraq and Billy Lynn's family.

Joe Alwyn plays Billy and captures the nineteen-year-old's combination of innocence, bewilderment, and sensitivity to the events and people around him. Billy faces death and destruction of war and is caught in a bizarre series of events in which he and his cohorts in Bravo Company, are thrown into the national spotlight. The men of Bravo Company become "heroes" in an America that wants war heroes but does not relish contemplating the costs, human and otherwise.

The scenes in Dallas at the Thanksgiving Day game are encrusted with the national symbols of patriotism along with their appropriation and exploitation by the National Football League. Steve Martin offers a strong portrait of the Dallas owner and oil millionaire who resembles Jerry Jones.

The interaction between the soldiers and Jones, the soldiers and the high rollers in owner's inner circle, and the fans, is full of verbal support for the "heroes" of the television war. For the soldiers this adulation is both baffling and troubling. This disconnect is best captured in a conversation between a Texas Oilman who is developing the fracking industry, and Sergeant David Dime, Bravo's commander.

Billy faces several pressures as his sister, played with great power by Kristin Stewart, does not want him to waste his life in a war she does not support. She begs him not to return to Iraq. A second pressure hits Billy when he is suddenly drawn to one of the cheerleaders he meets and he contemplates the possibility of running off with her. In the end Billy is drawn back to his unit and the men he has come to love, and the meaning that this love has given his life.

For me this film worked extremely well and captured the subtext of Ben Fountain's novel as Ang Lee translated its power to the big screen. Is the film as good as the novel? No, but few films ever are. Nonetheless it is a very good and powerful piece of film making that asks some important questions about the relationship between sport and war in a world in which the pentagon paid the NFL to promote the armed forces, and civilians with little price to pay "honor" the troops.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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