

## Sport and Society:

A Collaborative Conversation

**From the Editors:** In this piece, we are honored to feature a written conversation among Carl Deuker, Kelly Loy Gilbert, and Claudia Meléndez Salinas, inspirational authors who explore the relationships among sport, society, and characters as important elements of their books. We greatly appreciate the generous response of the authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage with challenging questions that focus on the role of sport and society in various contexts, particularly how perceptions and realities of sport help shape both individuals and communities.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to the authors. We compiled their initial responses into a single document and then sent the compiled version back and forth to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result. We hope our readers enjoy the important insights offered in the thoughtful responses of these authors for adolescents.

**In your books, do you see sport as a “great equalizer,” or do you think that sport perpetuates barriers among individuals and groups that already exist, in terms of class, race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, etc.?**

**Claudia:** The main character of my novel, Miguel Ángel (from *A Fighting Chance*, 2015), is the son of a Mexican immigrant field laborer. He wants to overcome his financial barriers and his circumstances through the power of his punches. He sees boxing as his way out, or the great equalizer that he so desperately seeks. But the barriers he must

overcome prove to be too high and too many and are ultimately insurmountable to him. His inability to dedicate his life entirely to his sport is a reminder that you need resources to get resources. With some family support and perhaps money, maybe he could have achieved his dream to be a prizefighter.

Literature, media, and popular culture seize the narrative that champions are self-made, but that’s seldom the case. Great champions are forged through careful grooming and the sacrifices of others. Grit and dedication are not the only elements that help athletes become champions and recognized celebrities who are able to transcend their circumstances. Not having that help—like parents who pay your rent or people willing to train you—can be a deal breaker.

**Kelly:** I think so many people love the myth of sports greats rising from the proverbial ashes because it lets us off the hook as a society; if people can succeed through hard work, then it doesn’t mean we’ve utterly failed them when, like Miguel, that doesn’t happen because of an inequitable distribution of resources.

**Carl:** The idea that sports are a great equalizer is appealing, and there is some truth to it. All levels of sports have athletes who have overcome hardships to make the team, whatever that team is. But for most kids, sports reflect the society we live in, with all its barriers.

*Golden Arm*, the book I’m working on, has as its main character a kid who is poor. He’s a born

pitcher with a great arm, but to get into professional baseball, he has to develop that gift. How does he do that? He attends a high school in a poor neighborhood that has aging facilities and no sports tradition. His teammates, also from poor families, come and go. His coach can offer nothing but encouragement. And against whom is my golden-armed pitcher competing? Kids born with talent who were also born into families with money. Kids who go to schools with excellent coaches and top-notch facilities. And when the school season ends, mom and dad pay for these kids to play on select teams and attend summer camps.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not blaming parents for giving their children a leg up—I did the same for my daughter. Golf and tennis and swimming were always rich kid sports. But today, with select teams becoming the norm, *all* sports are becoming rich kid sports. Pinball machines flash TILT and reset when the game isn't on the up-and-up, but there's no TILT in real life, no reset.

**Kelly:** My narrator in *Conviction* (2015), Braden, is definitely one of those rich kids who's been given every advantage! But for most of the book, he doesn't realize that's the case, because I think privilege is very good at convincing you you've earned it, that your hard work (which may be very real!) is the only thing separating you from a different outcome.

In my books, I think sports force characters together who might not otherwise interact (for instance, the narrator Braden is the son of a man who killed the uncle of another player) and give them an arena where they can interact while the rules of the real world are temporarily suspended, as if some preexisting power disparities might be flattened. But in books and particularly in life, I think it's impossible to separate sports from the societal barriers we've erected. And because of that, I think it's impossible to de-politicize them; we watch (and, as spectators, participate in, to some extent) biases, systemic inequalities, white supremacy, etc. play out in issues like rights for intersex athletes, concussions in football, and national anthem protests.

**In your novel(s), sport seems to function as its own character (or entity) in the communities portrayed. In your work, how might sport exist as a metaphor for the community in which your characters reside? What do you see as its role or characteristics?**

**Kelly:** Baseball is interesting to me because it's this very old, very storied, heavily traditional sport that has a million unwritten rules and an honor code that prioritizes loyalty and winning. But throughout its entire history, and still today, it has been fraught with questions of social justice; back in the day, you had controversy over integration, and today, other debates continue, such as questions about the farm system and how it affects Latin American players. There's something going on below the surface always. And whenever those issues bubble to the surface, there can be resentment from people who "just want to enjoy the game." We've seen this a lot lately in the NFL in particular. Yet of course everything is political, and has always been, and it's just a question of whose politics are dominant.

In *Conviction* (2015), Braden, who's grown up in a very white, conservative, and religious community, believes that his vision of the world is a very pure, traditional one, and he has not had to honestly confront things like privilege, or queerness, or his complicity in the ways that those outside his community have been dehumanized (and how, possibly, that relates to the death of the uncle of an opponent). And baseball, for him, has always been a metaphor for the way the world should be: he likes the rules, the code, the power it affords him, the way everything is always the same as it has always been. In other words, it has been a safe space for him, where everything looks the way he believes it should. But when his father is accused of murdering a police officer, whose nephew is on an opposing team, suddenly all the ways that baseball felt safe start to crack.

**Carl:** For most kids, the high school years are a time of ups and downs, fitting in and then feeling left out. Team sports magnify that turmoil, because athletes perform on stage in full view of everyone. Unlike actors, they aren't "playing" anybody. It's

just them. There's more "reality" in a girls' JV basketball game than you'll ever find on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

A sports season is like a series of tests. Sometimes my characters flail about, both on and off the court. They flunk. Other times, everything magically comes together, and they ace everything. Pass or fail—who knows which it will be? And how will they respond next time? What are they learning about the game, themselves, the world? That's the reason to turn the page.

**Claudia:** In *A Fighting Chance* (2015), Boxing functions as Miguel Ángel's big brother, the guy who sets the example of how to do things right for him and gets on his case when he does things wrong. Like a big brother, Boxing is also an ally, a co-conspirator, the buddy who gives Miguel Ángel the excuses he needs to run to see his girlfriend and escape from his daily chores. Miguel Ángel trusts that Boxing will always work to benefit his little brother, so he abandons himself in the sport.

But Boxing, like an older brother, is also a trickster, an illusionist. Boxing promises to deliver the fame and fortune Miguel Ángel is seeking, but those promises are never going to be delivered. The reality Miguel Ángel faces, that of a working poor child of immigrants, is too crushing to overcome without a lot of help—but Big Brother Boxing either doesn't know that, or chooses to ignore it. Boxing, enamored of its own mystique, is too self-absorbed and lost in its delusion to realize it's making promises it can't deliver.

**Kelly:** I think you really hit on a heartbreaking truth here, Claudia, that the myth of sports persists because we so badly want that hope. What does it cost to choose to live in a world where you've consciously let that hope die?

*What is the interplay between the athletes described in your novels and the communities they inhabit? How do these communities, in turn, influence the athletes?*

**Carl:** The high school athlete lives in two worlds, school and home. At school, top athletes are revered—as long as they remain top athletes. But if

they fail—and they do—then the whispers fill the hallways. *I always knew he/she wasn't that good.*

And then there's home—the athletes' not so visible world.

I taught for over 30 years, and like all teachers, I learned you often don't know what's waiting for your students when they leave the classroom and head home. In my books, I have kids with wonderful parents and kids with no parenting. I have kids who are pressured to be great, and kids whose parents don't even know they're on a team. There's wealth and poverty, health and sickness. These are the lives that athletes—that all kids—lead. It's a high wire act, not for the faint of heart.

**Claudia:** Miguel Ángel inhabits a crude, chaotic world partially defined by his stepfather, the wife abuser, and greatly defined by his family's poverty. In this chaotic world, the only place where he finds order is the gym. Thus, as Miguel Ángel prepares for combat during his rigorous training, he's also preparing for the combat of everyday life, for while the end game for Miguel Ángel is to become a prizefighter, the fact remains that the everyday process inoculates him from his community and the dangers that lurk outside the gym. While he's training, Miguel Ángel is not being exposed to the "gang lifestyle"; he's not out running with his homies getting in trouble.

Unfortunately, the community seems oblivious to Miguel Ángel's need to have the gym—not just to prepare for a stronger future, but also to remain isolated from a dangerous present. Coach, Miguel Ángel's mentor, struggles to understand why city officials seem apathetic toward his plight.

**Kelly:** The characters in *Conviction* come from very different communities—demographically, culturally, and in terms of the power and privilege each wields. Braden fundamentally believes that losing (with his city's name on his uniform, his father's name on his uniform) is a repudiation of his values and what his community stands for. He also sees winning as proof of who God favors. In the right personality type and in the right kind of toxic environment—a perfect storm of outside factors—the competition between teams/communities can turn ugly and can come to stand for so much more

than just crossing home plate more times during a particular ballgame. When that happens, winning becomes about dominance, asserting power, and silencing. It can be toxic.

**What do you think individual readers can gain from reading about sports in fiction? Can these same benefits be experienced by readers who don't hold an interest in athletic pursuits?**

**Claudia:** The best writing will always offer a window into our souls, into our shared experience as humans, and it will help explain the “why” behind our motivations. An integral activity in our human experience is competition; without competition for food, for mates, for territory, there's no survival. As creatures of this earth, we have evolved through competition, and because competition is also a key element in sports, reading about sports is not just learning about soccer or boxing or baseball; it's about competition, it's about survival, it's about life.

Athletes are the ultimate competitors, the super humans willing to endure grueling workouts, muscular discomfort, and punishing diets in their efforts to excel. Whether they're pushing their capacity on the soccer field or in the boxing ring, athletes and their endeavors, challenges, triumphs, and disappointments offer fertile ground for giving readers an opportunity to understand competition—that primordial human need that has made us who we are.

**Kelly:** One of the challenges of being a teenager is that so much of your life is dictated for you, and there can be such an oppression in that. No matter what happens between you and the people you go to school with, you still have to get up and sit next to them in Algebra every single day. Being in high school means you oftentimes have very few venues in which you experience any real power or agency. I think sports is one of the rare places when characters who are talented and powerful enough can actually, and realistically, exert some very real control over what happens in their lives, or at least in that particular part of their lives. I also think sports can be a huge part of the lens that characters

use to make sense of the world around them, and that can be compelling, even for readers who don't care about sports but are interested in understanding characters who might be different from themselves. And, too, sports can flatten and distill these kinds of grand epic storylines (failure, redemption, heroism) into four-quarter or nine-inning or what-have-you installations. Those emotions that are at the core of what people love about sports are often universal.

**Carl:** We say to kids: *You owe it to your classmates/community/friends/self to give your best.* And they yawn. But in team sports, that cliché comes to life. Working hard with teammates toward a common goal is required, but there are no guarantees. You can do everything you're asked and end up 0-10. Readers who love sports as participants or spectators or both want to read about that struggle because they've lived it.

The non-sports fan? Here's what I tell school groups about reading my books: “If you don't like sports, you have my permission to skim the games.” I use sports as a hook, but the heart of my stories is in the conflicts that the characters face. Drugs . . . alcohol . . . gangs . . . poverty. There's nothing “sports specific” about any of those, which is why I'd like to think that all readers can enjoy my books.

**Given the oft-held perception that athletes, by virtue of their status, are able to operate under a different set of rules or expectations in society, how do your characters navigate issues of right and wrong in their unique communities?**

**Kelly:** This is so interesting to me because I actually grew up in a community where no one cared all that much about sports and being an athlete didn't confer much social capital. I wrote about that world in my most recent book, *Picture Us in the Light* (2018), and it was interesting to explore how life is different in a world where things aren't as defined by that win-loss binary. In *Conviction*, Braden depends heavily on baseball as a sort of moral compass. When all of the other rules he has lived by have imploded around him and he is forced to

question everything he has ever believed, baseball is the one constant, the one place where the rules are the same and he understands what's being asked of him; in baseball, he still has a clear sense of what right and wrong even are. But at the end of the book, baseball forces him into a confrontation with someone he has desperately tried to avoid, and he finds that the values he has always lived by aren't holding up in this situation.

**Claudia:** Miguel Ángel uses the inspiration he found in Mohammed Ali—not just in the ring, but in his “real life.” So when the blows come, Miguel Ángel is ready for them, Ali-style; he works to remain cool in crisis, like the champ, and not let adrenaline get the best of him. In that way, he doesn't allow himself to be carried away by the moment.

But that does not mean he's perfect. Using his need to train as an excuse, he exempts himself from helping around the house with chores and babysitting, something his sister is expected to do. In this aspect, Miguel Ángel is acting not just as an athlete, but as a man, and a man in a typical Mexican household would not be expected to contribute to daily chores. It is this lack of domestic expectation that allows him to spend his time at the gym and to dedicate himself to the sport. In that sense, Miguel Ángel is very much a product of his environment, a young man who does not see anything wrong with having his younger sister stay behind and take care of their little siblings while he's out in the gym. While I believe my characters should be aspirational, they also should be believable.

**Carl:** We are drawn to beauty, and athletic skill is beautiful. So the high school athletes in my books are on a pedestal. What interests me is how they handle power. Since stories thrive on conflict, most of my characters abuse it. They exploit (*Painting the Black*, 1997); they bully (*Gutless*, 2016); they break rules (*Gym Candy*, 2007). So what happens

to them when they push the envelope? How do their coaches respond? Their teammates? Their parents and teachers? We all know that they're likely to get more chances than non-athletic kids. But what will they do with them? Will they redeem themselves? Will they self-destruct? It goes both ways in life, and it goes both ways in my books.

**Carl Deuker**, until his recent retirement, was a full-time middle school teacher for 40 years and a part-time writer. Since retiring from teaching, Carl divides his time between golf and writing. He has had ten young adult novels published, the most recent of which is *Gutless*. His books focus on sports, with a little bit more. He is presently working on *Golden Arm*, which will be published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Carl is married to Anne Mitchell, also a retired educator, and they live in Seattle. Their daughter, Marian Deuker, is a cancer researcher working in San Francisco.

**Kelly Loy Gilbert** is a native of the San Francisco Bay Area and the author of *Conviction*, a William C. Morris Award finalist, and most recently *Picture Us in the Light*.

**Claudia Meléndez Salinas** has been writing and reporting about the Latino community in California and the United States for over 20 years. *A Fighting Chance*, her first book, was published in 2015 by Arte Público Press.

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