

# A GOOD READ

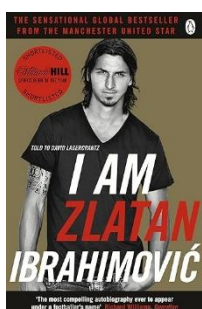
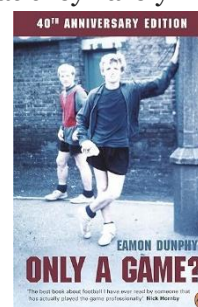
## Football in literature, cinema and the theatre

We have already looked at how the art world has depicted football, but how has it been covered by the other arts? (I will preface this piece by saying that, for obvious linguistic reasons, I shall be referring only to works in the English language. So I apologise now if I overlook a brilliant football book or film in the Romanian language).

When it comes to books there are three types involving football. First – and largest in number – are autobiographies and biographies of players and managers. Almost without exception these are awful and, in the case of ‘autobiographies’ ghost-written by sports journalists: a phenomenon best summed up by the remark that “sir” David Beckham has written more books than he has read!! He certainly didn’t get his knighthood for services to literature! Peter Crouch has ‘written five books (!) and Sir Alex Ferguson is credited with having written eight books – which sounds like seven too many.

The chief reason footballers and managers books generally are awful is that they rarely have anything interesting to say – especially when the books are written midway through their career.

A rare exception is “**Only a Game**” by Eamonn Dunphy. Still in print after 40 years, what makes the book stand out is that Dunphy had only an average footballing career (mostly with Millwall) and so it is not a ‘rags to riches’ tale. He subsequently went on to have a career as a sports journalist and he knows how to write a good turn of phrase.



And worthy of mention is the (undoubtedly ghostwritten) book by Zlatan Ibrahimovic “**I am Zlatan**” simply because the guy was so bonkers that the book is an amusing read.

But by far the best football autobiography – at least as far as the critics are concerned – is not by a footballer at all. Confused? “**Fever Pitch**” by Nick Hornby tells of his life growing up in the 1970s as a fan of Arsenal and how the football club becomes an integral part of his life. “Fever Pitch” is not really a football book at all: rather it is a book about life that has a football theme.

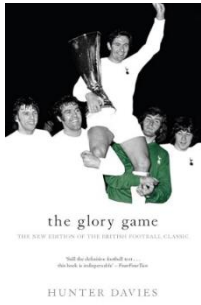


Whilst it is well-written – and Hornby has gone on to have a stellar career as a writer after this book - I have to confess that I did not find “Fever Pitch” as good as the critics. I suspect that a lot of the hype was that this was published in 1992 which was around the same time that the “reading classes” were discovering football and so it was chic to read a football book written by someone who was a member of that same class. But since my introduction to football was very different to Hornby’s I may be jaundiced. Read it – it is certainly well written.

The second type of footballing book is the factual history book – it might be about a team, or a tournament or even the history of football in a country. Probably the premier football writer at present is Simon Kuper. His most acclaimed book ‘**Football Against the Enemy**’ is a collection of interesting essays about how football and politics or nationalism intermingle – the extreme example being the brief war between El Salvador and Guatemala in 1969 that was triggered when El Salvador beat Guatemala in a crucial World Cup qualifying game.

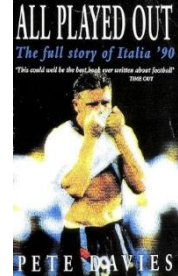
However, I found his book “**Ajax – the Dutch, the War**” even more interesting. Kuper started with the aim of writing a history of Ajax Amsterdam but when he found a gap in the club’s archives for the wartime years the story switches to what the Dutch did during the Second World War – and discovers a story that is different to the image of the “plucky Dutch” that is portrayed today. A fascinating read.



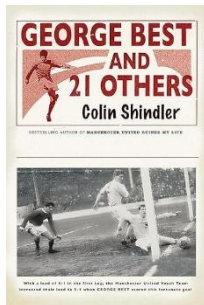


Following a team throughout a season is a now common trope (and has extended to TV – please Netflix, no more series of “Welcome to Wrexham”). The benchmark for this is Hunter Davies’s book “**The Glory Game**”. An accomplished writer (he produced the only authorised biography of the Beatles) Davies spent a season with Tottenham Hotspur in the 1970s and was perhaps the first book to give an insight into how a football club actually works. Given the demise of the current Tottenham team perhaps the current owners need to read it!!

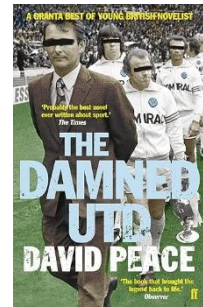
Books about the World Cup are plentiful (Simon Kuper has a new one out now). Generally regarded as the best is “**All played out**” by Pete Davies which tells the story of England at Italia 90.



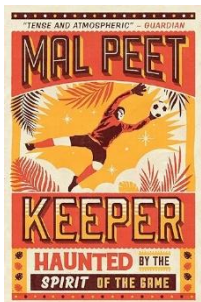
A final factual book on football that I wanted to mention is “**George Best and 21 Others**” by Colin Shindler. In 1964 the youth teams of Manchester City and Manchester United played each other. One of the 22 players was George Best who went on to become famous. But Shindler examined what happened to the 21 other boys. The story he reveals, largely of shattered dreams, is a very interesting one. (Shindler also wrote a very amusing autobiography entitled “**Manchester United Ruined my Life**”, about the pain of growing up as a Manchester City fan!).



There are dry, factual history books and there are exciting, dramatized ones. The undoubted master of dramatized football history is writer David Peace. He’s written about Liverpool (“**Red or Dead**”), Manchester United (“**Munichs**”) but his masterpiece is “**The Damned United**” – the tale of Leeds United during the 44 days that Brian Clough was its manager in 1974. The fact that one of the Leeds players successfully sued Peace over inaccuracies in the book only emphasises what a drama he wrote!



Finally, we come to fiction. And it is perhaps surprising but there is little in the way of stories about football. (Admittedly football came along a little after Shakespeare, though one could say that Dickens predicted the PSG v Arsenal CL final with his “A Tale of Two Cities” – all about Paris and London with it’s opening line “it was the best of games, it was the worst of games”).



Indeed, the only football fiction I can recommend is Mal Peet. He wrote a trilogy of books entitled “**keeper**”, “**the penalty**” and “**exposure**” which tell the tale of a Brazilian football prodigy. A very good read for football-mad children aged 10+.

This review of footballing books would be incomplete if I did not mention a work written by two sweepstakers. “**Toon Toon, Black ‘n’ White Europe**” tells the adventures of Peter Cain and Barry Robertson as they have followed Newcastle United around Europe. Their writing skills are infinitely better than their sweepstaking abilities and I found the book particularly good as it demonstrated to my wife that I was not the most insane football fan working for the European Commission!! (Their e-mails are available upon request if anyone wishes to buy a signed copy).



But what if you are not a book person? What films about football are there? (a tip: don’t type “football movies” into google as you’ll get bombarded with recommendations for lousy US films about gridiron football, such as “Jerry Maguire” and “The Blind Side”).

To start with, both “Fever Pitch” and “the Damned United” have been made into films and are watchable (I preferred “Fever Pitch” the film to the book).

However, in general films about sport – any sport – are usually bad. This is because actors are not sportsmen and vice versa, so the film’s producer has two choices: either have a lot of actors

trying to recreate a sport but obviously not doing it well enough to impress a true sports fan or, even worse, have real sportsmen playing alongside the filmstar but letting him look good – which is even worse to watch.

One football film managed to combine both of these awful traits to become a cult classic – the 1981 **“Escape to Victory”**. Improbably directed by Oscar-winner John Huston it tells the tale of Allied prisoners of war who play a football match against the German national team in Paris and – spoiler alert – escape during the match!! Starring Michael Caine and Sylvester Stallone (as a goalkeeper!!) it also included major ex-footballers to try to make the football scenes seem realistic. They included Pele, Bobby Moore, Paul van Himst, Ossie Ardiles, Kazu Imai and pinup (*ed: surely some mistake?*) John Wark.



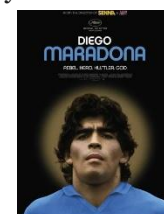
This film was so bad that it not only set back sports films by several years but it probably ended the British obsession with making adventure films set in World War 2 – so it did serve a useful purpose. I challenge you to watch the trailer without cringing:

[Escape to Victory - Official Trailer | IMDb](#)



A recent film that is not only about football, but also the World Cup, is the 2025 film **“Saipan”**. This tells the tale of Ireland’s 2002 World Cup campaign – or, more precisely, the implosion of the team when manager Mick McCarthy and star player Roy Keane had more than a ‘difference of opinions over tactics’. An entertaining watch, though it is probably unfair on McCarthy who is an engagingly honest personality in real life.

The problem of bad acting in football films was solved by Asif Kapadia as he simply made a documentary about Maradona. Simply called (unsurprisingly) **“Maradona”** it is a fascinating insight into the craziness of the Argentinian’s time as a player at Napoli. (Kapadia’s motor racing documentary “Senna” is even better).



Just as ‘Fever Pitch’ is a story that includes football the highest rated football film is also a story of teenagers that happens to have a football theme. **“Bend it Like Beckham”** tells the tale of a teenage girl who is able to break away from the cultural shackles of her Sikh family by playing football for a women’s team.

Not one for hardcore football fans, but a pleasant family watch and an early attempt to look at multicultural issues – and women’s football!

[trailer for Bend It Like Beckham](#)

And it would be remiss of us to not also include football in the theatre. A relatively easy topic to cover since, not surprisingly, sport and the stage do not go well together! (though I did see a remarkable stage adaptation of the mountaineering tale “Touching the Void”).

There was, in fact, a reasonably successful play specifically about the World Cup. **“An Evening with Gary Lineker”** was the tale of a couple, Monika and Bill, who are on holiday during the 1990 World Cup and whilst Bill wants to watch the semifinal featuring England (and Gary L) Monika wants to talk about their relationship. A tale that sounds familiar!

And there is a footballing play that has been both a critical and commercial hit. Written by James Graham **“Dear England”** follows the England men's football team under Gareth Southgate in the run-up to, and aftermath of, three tournaments: its unexpected run to the semifinals at the 2018 World Cup in Russia, its disappointing defeat in the 2020 European Championship final at Wembley Stadium, and its quarter-final exit from the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. It is currently still running in London – so it’s only a short train journey away for most of you. Treat yourself to a day at the theatre!

