



The John McPhee Reader

By John McPhee

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The John McPhee Reader, first published in 1976, is comprised of selections from the author's first twelve books. In 1965, John McPhee published his first book, *A Sense of Where You Are*; a decade later, he had published eleven others. His fertility, his precision and grace as a stylist, his wit and uncanny brilliance in choosing subject matter, his crack storytelling skills have made him into one of our best writers: a journalist whom L.E. Sissman ranked with Liebling and Mencken, who Geoffrey Wolff said "is bringing his work to levels that have no measurable limit," who has been called "a master craftsman" so many times that it is pointless to number them.

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Editorial Review

Review

“The most versatile journalist in America.”—Edward Hoagland, *The New York Times Book Review*

“For those who are familiar with his work in its original form, this collection reaffirms just how good McPhee is at what he does. For those who aren't, it provides a solid introduction to his versatility . . . We become privy to the widening dimensions of his reportorial domain—a landscape fertile and diverse enough to accommodate hybrid flying machines as gracefully as it does oranges, one that can appreciate the skills of a gragline operator as much as those of a theoretical physicist. Plant something in this landscape and it will most assuredly thrive.”—J. N. Silverman, *The Washington Star*

“What makes a piece of John McPhee's reportage so reliably superior? . . . Most obviously, he finds interesting things to write about . . . Then there us his facility for dreaming up odd and out-of-the-way approaches to his subjects . . . Add to this his knack for illustrating with amusing anecdotes . . . And there you have an approximate John McPhee recipe, lacking only the dramatic confrontations, the interesting characters, and the unusual vantage points, which I neglected to mention.”—Christopher Lehmann, *The New York Times*

About the Author

John McPhee was born in Princeton, New Jersey, and was educated at Princeton University and Cambridge University. His writing career began at *Time* magazine and led to his long association with *The New Yorker*, where he has been a staff writer since 1965. The same year he published his first book, *A Sense of Where You Are*, with FSG, and soon followed with *The Headmaster* (1966), *Oranges* (1967), *The Pine Barrens* (1968), *A Roomful of Hovings and Other Profiles* (collection, 1969), *The Crofter and the Laird* (1969), *Levels of the Game* (1970), *Encounters with the Archdruid* (1972), *The Deltoid Pumpkin Seed* (1973), *The Curve of Binding Energy* (1974), *Pieces of the Frame* (collection, 1975), and *The Survival of the Bark Canoe* (1975). Both *Encounters with the Archdruid* and *The Curve of Binding Energy* were nominated for National Book Awards in the category of science.

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John McPhee Reader, The A Sense of Where You Are

McPhee first saw Bill Bradley on a basketball court in 1962, the winter of Bradley's freshman year at Princeton. McPhee knew a thing or two about basketball, having served on Princeton's freshman team himself, but watching Bradley play was a revelation: "Every motion developed in its simplest form. Every motion repeated itself precisely when he used it again. He was remarkably fast, but he ran easily. His passes were so good they were difficult to follow. Every so often, and not often enough, I thought, he stopped and went high into the air with the ball ... and a long jump shot would go into the net."

The same estimate can apply to McPhee's story of Bradley, which developed two years later in a simple form, first as a long "Profile" for *The New Yorker*, then as a book-length narrative for Farrar, Straus and Giroux. This sequence, repeated with seeming precision and ease ever since, established the hallmarks of McPhee's brand of writing: exact details, shrewd observation, gifted phrasing, an orderly format. Less innovative than his later works, *A Sense of Where You Are* still has passes so good they are difficult to

follow, and long jump shots that loft high in the air on their way to the net. The following extract is from McPhee's original "Profile." Other chapters in the book version record the triumphs of Bradley's senior year, when he became an Ivy League champion, N.C.A.A. semifinalist, Rhodes Scholar, and a lasting friend of his profiler.--*WLH*

Bradley is one of the few basketball players who have ever been appreciatively cheered by a disinterested away-from-home crowd while warming up. This curious event occurred last March, just before Princeton eliminated the Virginia Military Institute, the year's Southern Conference champion, from the N.C.A.A. championships. The game was played in Philadelphia and was the last of a tripleheader. The people there were worn out, because most of them were emotionally committed to either Villanova or Temple--two local teams that had just been involved in enervating battles with Providence and Connecticut, respectively, scrambling for a chance at the rest of the country. A group of Princeton boys shooting basketballs miscellaneously in preparation for still another game hardly promised to be a high point of the evening, but Bradley, whose routine in the warmup time is a gradual crescendo of activity, is more interesting to watch before a game than most players are in play. In Philadelphia that night, what he did was, for him, anything but unusual. As he does before all games, he began by shooting set shots close to the basket, gradually moving back until he was shooting long sets from twenty feet out, and nearly all of them dropped into the net with an almost mechanical rhythm of accuracy. Then he began a series of expandingly difficult jump shots, and one jumper after another went cleanly through the basket with so few exceptions that the crowd began to murmur. Then he started to perform whirling reverse moves before another cadence of almost steadily accurate jump shots, and the murmur increased. Then he began to sweep hook shots into the air. He moved in a semicircle around the court. First with his right hand, then with his left, he tried seven of these long, graceful shots--the most difficult ones in the orthodoxy of basketball--and ambidextrously made them all. The game had not even begun, but the presumably unimpressible Philadelphians were applauding like an audience at an opera.

Bradley has a few unorthodox shots, too. He dislikes flamboyance, and, unlike some of basketball's greatest stars, has apparently never made a move merely to attract attention. While some players are eccentric in their shooting, his shots, with only occasional exceptions, are straightforward and unexaggerated. Nonetheless, he does make something of a spectacle of himself when he moves in rapidly parallel to the baseline, glides through the air with his back to the basket, looks for a teammate he can pass to, and, finding none, tosses the ball into the basket over one shoulder, like a pinch of salt. Only when the ball is actually dropping through the net does he look around to see what has happened, on the chance that something might have gone wrong, in which case he would have to go for the rebound. That shot has the essential characteristics of a wild accident, which is what many people stubbornly think they have witnessed until they see him do it for the third time in a row. All shots in basketball are supposed to have names--the set, the hook, the lay-up, the jump shot, and so on--and one weekend last July, while Bradley was in Princeton working on his senior thesis and putting in some time in the Princeton gymnasium to keep himself in form for the Olympics, I asked him what he called his over-the-shoulder shot. He said that he had never heard a name for it, but that he had seen Oscar Robertson, of the Cincinnati Royals, and Jerry West, of the Los Angeles Lakers, do it, and had worked it out for himself. He went on to say that it is a much simpler shot than it appears to be, and, to illustrate, he tossed a ball over his shoulder and into the basket while he was talking and looking me in the eye. I retrieved the ball and handed it back to him. "When you have played basketball for a while, you don't need to look at the basket when you are in close like this," he said, throwing it over his shoulder again and right through the hoop. "You develop a sense of where you are."

Bradley is not an innovator. Actually, basketball has had only a few innovators in its history--players like Hank Luisetti, of Stanford, whose introduction in 1936 of the running one-hander did as much to open up the game for scoring as the forward pass did for football; and Joe Fulks, of the old Philadelphia Warriors, whose twisting two-handed heaves, made while he was leaping like a salmon, were the beginnings of the jump shot,

which seems to be basketball's ultimate weapon. Most basketball players appropriate fragments of other players' styles, and thus develop their own. This is what Bradley has done, but one of the things that set him apart from nearly everyone else is that the process has been conscious rather than osmotic. His jump shot, for example, has had two principal influences. One is Jerry West, who has one of the best jumpers in basketball. At a summer basketball camp in Missouri some years ago, West told Bradley that he always gives an extra hard bounce to the last dribble before a jump shot, since this seems to catapult him to added height. Bradley has been doing that ever since. Terry Dischinger, of the Detroit Pistons, has told Bradley that he always slams his foot to the floor on the last step before a jump shot, because this stops his momentum and thus prevents drift. Drifting while aloft is the mark of a sloppy jump shot.

Bradley's graceful hook shot is a masterpiece of eclecticism. It consists of the high-lifted knee of the Los Angeles Lakers' Darrall Imhoff, the arms of Bill Russell, of the Boston Celtics, who extends his idle hand far under his shooting arm and thus magically stabilizes the shot, and the general corporeal form of Kentucky's Cotton Nash, a rookie this year with the Lakers. Bradley carries his analyses of shots further than merely identifying them with pieces of other people. "There are five parts to the hook shot," he explains to anyone who asks. As he continues, he picks up a ball and stands about eighteen feet from a basket. "Crouch," he says, crouching, and goes on to demonstrate the other moves. "Turn your head to look for the basket, step, kick, follow through with your arms." Once, as he was explaining this to me, the ball curled around the rim and failed to go in.

"What happened then?" I asked him.

"I didn't kick high enough," he said.

"Do you always know exactly why you've missed a shot?"

"Yes," he said, missing another one.

"What happened that time?"

"I was talking to you. I didn't concentrate. The secret of shooting is concentration."

His set shot is borrowed from Ed Macauley, who was a St. Louis University All-American in the late forties and was later a star member of the Boston Celtics and the St. Louis Hawks. Macauley runs the basketball camp Bradley first went to when he was fifteen. In describing the set shot, Bradley is probably quoting a Macauley lecture. "Crouch like Groucho Marx," he says. "Go off your feet a few inches. You shoot with your legs. Your arms merely guide the ball." Bradley says that he has more confidence in his set shot than in any other. However, he seldom uses it, because he seldom has to. A set shot is a long shot, usually a twenty-footer, and Bradley, with his speed and footwork, can almost always take some other kind of shot, closer to the basket. He will take set shots when they are given to him, though. Two seasons ago, Davidson lost to Princeton, using a compact zone defense that ignored the remoter areas of the court. In one brief sequence, Bradley sent up seven set shots, missing only one. The missed one happened to rebound in Bradley's direction, and he leaped up, caught it with one hand, and scored.

Even his lay-up shot has an ancestral form; he is full of admiration for "the way Cliff Hagan pops up anywhere within six feet of the basket," and he tries to do the same. Hagan is a former Kentucky star who now plays for the St. Louis Hawks. Because opposing teams always do everything they can to stop Bradley, he gets an unusual number of foul shots. When he was in high school, he used to imitate Bob Pettit, of the St. Louis Hawks, and Bill Sharman, of the Boston Celtics, but now his free throw is more or less his own. With his left foot back about eighteen inches--"wherever it feels comfortable," he says--he shoots with a deepbendingrhythm of knees and arms, one-handed, his left hand acting as a kind of gantry for the ball until the moment of release. What is most interesting, though, is that...

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