

## BOOKS

*Is There Life After Golf?*

LIKE a religion, a game seeks to codify and lighten life. Played earnestly enough (spectatorship being merely a degenerate form of playing), a game can gather to itself awesome dimensions of subtlety and transcendental significance. Readers of these pages may recall George Steiner's hymn to the fathomless wonder of chess, or Roger Angell's startlingly intense meditations upon the time-stopping, mathematical beauty of baseball. Some sports, surely, are more religious than others; ice hockey, fervent though its devotees be, retains a dross of brutal messiness, and handball, though undoubtedly it has its fine points, has not generated many holy books. Golf, on the other hand, inspires as much verbiage as astrology. In the television era, the sport has added to its antiquity and air of privilege the aura of sudden fame and fortune earned by broad-backed boys from Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and El Paso, Texas; millions now trudge out to the dawn starting lines inwardly clutching a tip from the Saturday sports page or the driving-range pro; an esoteric cult has become a mass cult while remaining esoteric. In Palmer's disastrous lapses, in Casper's persistent slump, golf reasserts its essential enigma. It is of games the most mystical, the least earthbound, the one wherein the walls between us and the supernatural are rubbed thinnest. The exaltation of its great spaces; the eerie effortlessness of a good shot; the hellish effortfulness of a bad round; the grotesque disparity between a drive that eats up two-thirds of the fairway and the ten-yard dribble hit with an almost identical swing; the unpredictable warps and turns of fortune in the game; its tranced silences; its altering perspectives; its psychosomatic sensitivity to our interior monologue and the sway of our moods; the sullen, menacing sheen the monotonous grass can suddenly assume; the quirks of visibility; the dread of lostness; the ritual interment and resurrection of the ball at each green—such are the ingredients that make golf seem a magic mirror, an outward projection of an inner self. Even the most mechanical-minded books about golf evoke, for initiates, the game's intoxicating mysteries; Michael Murphy, in his curious and

benign "Golf in the Kingdom" (Viking), takes these mysteries as his major topic.

Mr. Murphy, a Californian, is a co-founder of the Esalen Institute, described as "a research and development center established to explore those trends in the behavioral sciences, religion, and philosophy which emphasize the potentialities and values of human existence." On the back of the jacket of his book he is grinning with perfect teeth, and but for a faraway, faintly metaphysical gleam in his eyes he might be one of the interchangeable square-jawed young pros who clutter the tournament circuit with their competence. His book appears to be as open as his visage—he talks about himself as harried executive and student truth seeker; he names friends and gives dates; he describes rounds of golf we do not doubt he has played. Yet the basic autobiographical episode, involving a Scots guru/pro named Shivas Irons, is, like the name itself, frankly fantastic. The book liltily begins:

In Scotland, between the Firth of Forth and the Firth of Tay, lies the Kingdom of Fife—known to certain lovers of that land simply as "The Kingdom." There, on the shore of the North Sea, lies a golfing links that shimmers in my memory—an innocent stretch of heather and grassy dunes that cradled the unlikely events which grew into this book. . . . There I met Shivas Irons, introduced to me simply as a golf professional, by accident one day in June 1956. I played a round of golf with him then, joined him in a gathering of friends that evening, followed him into a ravine

at midnight looking for his mysterious teacher, watched him go into ecstatic trance as the sun came up, and left for London the following afternoon—just twenty-four hours after we had met—shaken, exalted, my perception of things permanently altered.

Mr. Murphy was on his way to India, to study philosophy and practice meditation with the seer Aurobindo, and it may be that he retrospectively assigned much of what he learned there to this mythical golf instructor, who plays supernaturally well, keeps a library of the occult in his digs, and, in the dead of the night, scores a hole in one with a feather-stuffed ball and an antique shillelagh belonging to an immortal hermit named Seamus MacDuff. Yet the course, called Burningbush, is by its location and layout recognizably St. Andrews—golf's holy place. The book never totally strays from its base subject of golf, and it even contains some practical tips. Don't strain after a good score, play it as it lies, don't try too hard. "Let the nothingness into yer shots," Shivas tells Murphy—a memorable admonition to all of us who, not trusting the unconscious mechanics of the swing, smother the ball with too much hand-and-arm action. When Murphy tenses up on the first tee, Shivas makes a gesture that settles him "into a feeling of stomach and hips, making a center there for my swing." The well-worn advice "Hit from the inside" is metaphysicalized to "Ken the world from the inside." Warming to his theme of "true gravity," Shivas bids his pupil "feel yer inner



body." Murphy, evidently a natural athlete, travels, club in hand, through a number of yogalike states (he feels like an hourglass, then enormously tall), and sees turquoise "auras" expand and contract, and experiences other vivid intimations of "energy-dimensions" that might more distract than settle your average 20-handicapper. Unity and harmony are the goals of Shivas's instruction; imagine the ball and the "sweet spot" on the club as one, he says. Further, see and feel "the club and ball as one unbroken field." Further still, "sometimes a path appears in your mind's eye for the ball to follow: let it blend with your body." Murphy recalls a moment on Burningbush when all his senses joined: "For the moment... the world was a single field of music, joy, and light." Shivas has the ultimate word: "Aye ane fiedle [always one field] afore ye e'er swung."

This religious bias, which would break down the opposition between game and player, between striker and thing struck, between man and landscape, comes as alien to the Occidental followers of aggressive Jahweh and tragic Jesus. This Occidental, for one, remains suspicious of a cosmic philosophy that so easily devolves into golf instruction. Murphy, drawing upon Shivas's supposed journals, has little trouble expanding the first part of his book, the golf part, into the comprehensive mysteries of the second. Because of the lightness of the golf ball (one and a half ounces), Shivas is led to conclude that the world, too, is feather-light, "an earthy nothingness." It is also "an icon of Man the Multiple Amphibian, a smaller waffled version of the crystal ball, a mirror for the inner body; it is a lodestone, an old stone to polarize your psyche with." Its whiteness suggests (hello, Melville) the terror of the hueless void; its flight serves as "reminder of our hunting history and our future powers of astral flight." The hole is another mystery, linked to nostrils and other significant bodily apertures; Jean-Paul Sartre is called in to testify (from "Being and Nothingness"): "A good part of our life is passed in plugging up holes, in filling empty places, in realizing and symbolically establishing a plenitude." Not all such symbol-spinning is vapid, but it does border on the facile and the fanciful—less mysticism than mystchief. And it reduces, in practice, all this talk about luminous bodies and manifesting planes, about *hamartia* and *darshan*, about Agni the Primal Fire and the Net of Jewels, to something like witchcraft. The victory of Jack Fleck over

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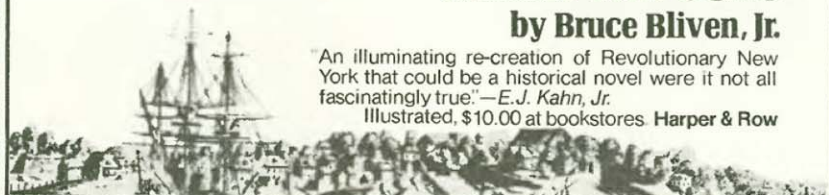
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## KNIFE & FORK INN...

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Ben Hogan in the 1955 Open, for instance, is explained to be Fleck's appropriation of Hogan's "inner body," and Murphy relates that while watching a baseball game he and his neighbors in the stands set up a "psychic fire-storm" that permanently injured the opposing pitcher's arm. Even if it works, is black magic what we need now? "'Tis a thin line," Shivas himself says, "'tween the madness of God and the madness of the Devil."

The Western spirit longs for a peaceable creed that would flatter the flesh instead of mortifying it, that would blur away the painful mind-body split and ease the agonies of egoism. But these wisdoms imported from the Orient have a disturbing way of melting into physical therapy—of a harmless, deep-breathing, sweet-swinging sort—and trivial spookiness. In regard to traditional Christian problems like the existence of evil and the paradoxes of ethical action, "Golf in the Kingdom" says little. During the raucous symposium that follows his round of golf with Shivas, Murphy claims, there was a "lively discussion of shanking and the problem of evil," but we never hear it. Murphy/Shivas does offer, for the length of a page, ethical distinctions between "Mind-at-Large" and "Higher Self;" it is good to know the latter before you drown in the former. LSD is distinguished from disciplined contemplation, moral entropy from nirvana. "Ye need a solid place to swing from," Shivas says, which is half of the truth; you also need a spot to aim at. Shivas would be a complete prophet if the world were a golf course and life a game. In a game, purposes and means are indisputably ordained; in golf, rules regulate the most minute points of etiquette and equipment. A golf wherein some players were using tennis rackets and hockey pucks, some were teeing off backward, from the green to the tee, and some thought the object of the game was to spear other players with the flagsticks—such a contest might produce a philosophy we could carry everywhere. As it is, analogies should be very tenderly extended outward from an island that, like golf, has been created as an artificial haven from real problems. Even within the analogy, Murphy is limited by his natural happiness at the game; for a description of the infernal misery possible within golf, try George Plimpton's "The Bogey Man," especially the surreal chapter wherein Plimpton practices with four golf balls on an eerie, tinselly, night-lit par-3 course in the desert, each ball demoniacally possessed of individual bad habits.

Yet there is much wit and good will in "Golf in the Kingdom." "We are spread wide as we play, then brought to a tiny place" beautifully describes both golf and life. And why *not* make the world more of a golf course, where our acts would take validity from within, and we would replace our divots in apology for each blow, and ecstasy would attach to the leisurely walking, the in-between times? There is a goodness in the experience of golf that may well be, as Mr. Murphy would have it, a *pitha*, "a place where something breaks into our workaday world and bothers us forevermore with the hints it gives."

"Golf in the Kingdom" put me in mind of another curious devotional work, William Price Fox's "Doctor Golf," published in 1963 and long out of print. Doctor Golf, a fanatic even quainter and keener than Shivas Irons, runs a thirty-nine-member golf sanctuary in Arkansas called Eagle-Ho, refers to "young Hagen," advocates caddy flogging, sells by mail order a clanking, cumbersome line of golf paraphernalia, and conducts a large correspondence. When one correspondent writes, "I am in my 65th year and I have been seized by golf like a mouse in the claws of a golden eagle," Doctor Golf congratulates him:

Only after the fetters of youth have been flung aside can golf enter. Only then can the man know the folly of his adolescent belief of the swing answering to the man and perceive the joy and the truth of the complete man answering to the swing.

And, as the years and the eagles cascade by, the even greater joy is realized when he stands in the bright sunlight of complete fulfillment and comes to realize that the *swing is the man*.

The swing is the man. The Dance of Shiva, Michael Murphy concludes, is at the heart of everything. Doctor Golf is more mystical still:

The swing by its very nature transcends the human form. The swing is there when you pass on... The swing, sir... is like the blue in the sky, immutable, eternal, indeed transcendental.

—JOHN UPDIKE

## BRIEFLY NOTED FICTION

SPRING SNOW, by Yukio Mishima, translated from the Japanese by Michael Gallagher (Knopf). This novel, the first of a tetralogy that Mishima completed before committing suicide two years ago, is set in the Japan of 1912-14. Foreign influences have long since taken hold in the nation, producing, among other things, the Western affectations of