

All-American Short Guide

All-American by John R. Tunis

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Contents

All-American Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14



Overview

Tunis draws on his own experiences as an athlete and a sportscaster to capture the tension and exhilaration of athletic competition. His familiarity with the processes of an athlete's mind during the most demanding moments of a crucial contest enables him to present not only the particulars of the performance but the athlete's sense of his own effort— something rarely portrayed because most competitors are too involved to analyze or even understand what they have done. The accuracy of the details permits the reader to share the physical force of the athlete's activity, encouraging a strong sense of identification that makes the outcome important to the reader, who feels like another member of the team.

But Tunis's vivid dramatization of an important game is only one of the elements he employs to create a sharp psychological portrait of a teen-ager struggling with his developing sense of values. Ronald Perry, team leader and starting quarterback, decides to withdraw from an exclusive prep school when he realizes he is uncomfortable with his status-conscious, selfcentered, and rather snobbish teammates. While portraying Perry's attempts to maintain his grades, make friends, and adjust to life in a large public high school, the narrative demonstrates the destructive effects of bigotry in a democratic society and the importance of standing up for one's values. As Perry learns that the essence of athletics is to surpass the performance of your former self, he also realizes that, unless earned while adhering to the rules, victory will be hollow and destructive.



About the Author

John Roberts Tunis was born on December 7, 1889, in Boston, Massachusetts, where his father served as a Unitarian parson and his mother worked as a schoolteacher. His father died when Tunis was six, and the family moved to New York City, where his mother, Caroline, raised Tunis and his younger brother while she taught at a private academy for girls. Tunis grew up in a household that placed a very high value on all of the elements of a traditional classical education. In addition to the standard works of literature his mother recommended, Tunis and his younger brother read all of G. A. Henry's books to each other.

The family moved back to the Boston area in 1899, and in 1901 Caroline Tunis's father took the brothers to their first baseball game, insisting that the sport was a part of American heritage.

In accordance with family expectations, Tunis entered Harvard in 1907, admitted under the condition that he pass a course in English composition, which he did on his third try. Even though he spent a great deal of his time in Boston theaters and on the Harvard track training for distance races, he graduated in 1911 and went to work in a cotton mill.

In 1913 he entered Boston University Law School but was inducted into the army when his National Guard unit was activated during World War I. After serving in Europe, he was discharged in 1919 but remained on the Continent, working as a free-lance writer and tennis correspondent. In 1920 he made eightyone dollars from his writing, reinforcing his hope of becoming a professional writer, and in 1922 he convinced the Veteran's Bureau that he qualified for assistance in the form of five extension courses in writing at Columbia University.

Developing a friendship with the legendary editor Harold Ross, Tunis began to publish in the *New Yorker* while writing regularly for the *New York Evening Post* sports section from 1925 to 1932 and covering tennis matches for radio broadcast from 1934 to 1942. His adult novel *American Girl* (1930), based on his extensive experience on the tennis circuit, was made into a movie called *Hard, Fast and Beautiful* in 1951. In 1938 he submitted a novel to Alfred Harcourt, the founder of Harcourt, Brace publishing company, who suggested that it should be published for young adults. The *Iron Duke* won the *Herald Tribune* Spring Book Festival Award, and as the freelance magazine market shrank, the forty-nine-year-old Tunis began an exceptionally successful career as a writer of sports books for young adults. He continued to work in this area for the next twenty-five years, complementing his novels with astute commentaries on the sports world, including *Sport for the Fun of It* (1940; revised 1958) and *The American Way in Sport* (1958). His amiable and wise autobiography, *A Measure of Independence* (1964), expresses the enthusiasm, knowledge, and commitment to principle that characterize his sports fiction. He died on February 4, 1975, in Essex, Connecticut.

Setting

All-American takes place in a small city in New England during the early days of World War II, but it could easily be set in any region of the United States. The ethnic mix in the town parallels the multi-cultural nature of American life, and the diverse student body of the large public high school represents American middle- and working-class society. Although the climate and geography are northeastern, most of the novel's specific details are universally applicable.

The historical perspective is crucial to understanding Tunis's work. The survival of democracy itself seems threatened by the war, and Tunis describes a combative but fundamentally sound America, whose basic values are strong enough to insure survival unless corrupted by greedy or hate-filled people. Americans are still relatively innocent and regard the future with optimism. Confident that their lofty goals can be achieved, they harbor high ideals and believe in their country. This faith in America drives all of the characters, just as it inspired Tunis to author this tribute to the concept of "liberty and justice for all."



Social Sensitivity

Tunis's social conscience informs all of his books. He extols the fundamental principles of individual integrity (his criterion for the sports hero), while recognizing the need for a community of purpose (the hero's team) to achieve the liberty and social justice required for these principles to survive.

All-American offered groundbreaking treatment of racism in the 1940s, revealing a festering wound in American society that most people chose to ignore.

Near the conclusion of the novel, Perry realizes that Whistleville, a black community, is not just "a part of town you avoided but someone's home." Tunis's world remains socially relevant because of his ability to address large-scale injustice in very human terms. Unfortunately, he falls back on stereotypes in his efforts to provide positive portrayals of members of various social and ethnic groups. The cast of characters includes a fiery, outspoken, pugnacious, and dependable Irish boy; a serious, strong, quiet, and philosophic Jewish teenager; a vaguely Protestant "nerd," who is brainy, scientific, and a likable pest; a somber, composed, reliable, and almost stoic black student; and the main character's warm, sensitive, supportive, and wholesome girlfriend. Similarly, Tunis stereotypes the prep school's entire student body as self-absorbed and patronizing. Nonetheless, these flaws are minor in the context of the values Tunis stresses—integrity, the ability to transcend superficial assumptions, and social justice.

Literary Qualities

Tunis explores social issues within a narrative structured around dramatic confrontations on the athletic field. A series of sensory images conveys the mood and atmosphere of a game, a locker room, a classroom, or a school auditorium. The author's compelling, dynamic style draws the reader into each contest, capturing the breathless immediacy of the action by relating the events in the present tense, cutting quickly from one player's perspective to another, and then shifting from the intensity of the field to the collective involvement of the fans. From the grandstands come bursts of cheers, exhortations, and expressions of distress and dread. Tunis also inserts the coach's comments which, by clarifying strategy and providing a broader perspective on the game, serve much the same purpose as the commentary given by today's "color men" during televised sports events. To balance the purely physical aspects of competition, the author reveals how the athlete's mind and body fuse in an effort that is both cooperative and confrontational. Amidst the tumult of the contest, the sentences parallel the rhythms of the game, and typographical devices control the narrative pace.

Tunis's adept use of dialogue further enhances the vibrant narrative. Even though the slang has changed over the past few decades, the dialogue remains reasonably authentic and psychologically accurate. Perry's concerns— games, girls, studies, friends, and his principles—are universal, and Tunis demonstrates how conflicting issues can complicate a teen-ager's attempts to choose the correct course of action. The narrative structure reflects the frequent and rapid mood shifts, from exultation to discouragement, that many high school students experience. Through both positive and negative moments, Tunis keeps the energy level high, carrying the reader past those details that might seem old-fashioned today. While never conspicuously literary, Tunis consistently selects techniques that lend power and clarity to his material.



Themes and Characters

All-American, explores the process of self-discovery and growth in a young athlete, emphasizing sports as a potential means of character development. In addition to offering a physical and strategic test, athletic contests present moral choices that challenge the fundamental integrity of the participants.

Determined to apply to the playing field the precepts of fair play that he has learned at home, Perry treats athletic contests as special, but not dominant, elements in a larger field of action. Although his emotions and ideas are not fully developed, Perry's instincts for justice, his essential decency, and his natural physical gifts suggest Thomas Jefferson's vision of the natural aristocrat. Perry leads by example and accepts the responsibility that accompanies his unusual talent.

The narrative follows Perry very closely, and he is the only fully developed character in the book. The other characters exist only in the context of their contact with Perry; Tunis portrays them by simply recording Perry's attitudes toward them or their reactions to him.

His new friends at the public high school—Jim Stacey, Meyer Goldman, Gordon Brewster, and Ned LeRoy—and his girlfriend Sandra Fuller are stereotypes. Similarly, the prep school boys are all self-centered, self-confident, and casually patronizing, with the exception of one southerner who is an obvious bigot. But the characters' personalities are distinct if predictable, and Tunis's effective use of dialogue makes their conversations with Perry plausible.

Tunis treats adult characters with more depth. Continuing the contrast between the world of the academy and the world of the public high school, "Duke" Hetherington exemplifies the well-dressed, stylish, always calm and amiable prep school headmaster. Practically idolized by the boys, he remains above the fray but retains control over everything. The principal of the public school disappoints Perry with his ordinary appearance, his comparative lack of style, and his informal manner, but Mr. Curry's strong principles, subtle instructional methods, perceptive sense of character, and commitment to his students soon become apparent. Also part of the contrast between the two schools, the academy's coaches are primarily teachers with an amateur competence at their sport, while the high school coach played professional ball. His intense dedication to the game startles even Perry, an unabashed enthusiast himself. Perry's father appears in only a few scenes, but he proves to be the most interesting adult character. Tunis suggests dimensions to the elder Perry beyond those explicitly revealed in the narrative. A man of substance and quiet strength, he supports Perry and helps him to understand the complexity of the adult world.

Each moral test that Perry faces develops from an incident in an important game. Tunis presents the athletic contest as an analogy for life in general, thus expanding upon the old adage that sport can reveal character. Concerned with the ways that the pressures of competition corrupt both competitors and spectators, Tunis never separates victory



from the means through which victory is accomplished. His emphasis on playing by the rules carries social implications as well. While he does not underestimate the problems of racism, the effects of economic inequity, or the temptations of power, Tunis is confident that American society can overcome these problems through an adherence to the traditional American values essential to "good citizens in a democracy— tolerance, compassion, generosity, kindness, respect for the rights of others." For Tunis, the world of sport provides a means through which these qualities can be demonstrated and appreciated. As Perry discovers more about himself and the world, his life illustrates the power of these ideas.



Topics for Discussion

1. What does Ronald Perry's decision to leave the academy reveal about him?
2. What are Perry's first impressions of Abraham Lincoln High School? How do they change during the time he is there?
3. Compare the headmaster of the academy with the principal of Abraham Lincoln High School. Who is the better educator?
4. Compare Perry's teammates at the high school with his former teammates at the academy. How do their attitudes toward football differ? Which team would you rather play for?
5. Why does Perry decide not to play in the Intersectional game? What kind of pressures are placed on him to change his mind? How does his father react to his decision?
6. How would you describe Perry's relationship with his parents?
7. What kind of town does Ronald Perry live in? How big is it? What does it look like? Is it a good place to live?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Trace the transformation and growth of Ronald Perry through the key events of All-American.
2. Discuss the differences in attitudes toward education between the prep school and Abraham Lincoln High School.
3. Examine and evaluate the attitude of the people in town toward sports.
4. What is Tunis's conception of an ideal society? How close does the town come to this? What are its major weaknesses?
5. Is Perry's interest in Sandra Fuller convincing? Is their relationship realistic? Does the time period in which the book was written influence Tunis's approach to the issue of romance?
6. What does Tunis find valuable in athletic competition? What criticism does he have concerning organized athletics?

For Further Reference

Jacobs, William Jay. "John R. Tunis: A Commitment to Values." In *Authors and Illustrators of Children's Books*.

New York: Bowker, 1972. A brief but solid account of Tunis's main ideas and techniques.

Tunis, John R. *A Measure of Independence*. New York: Atheneum, 1964. An engaging autobiography that projects the essence of Tunis's agreeable demeanor and his strong convictions.

Weidman, Jerome. *Horn Book* 44 (February 1968): 68-71. Reminiscence about the author's contact with Tunis, followed by a brief review of *His Enemy, His Friend*.

Related Titles

Almost all of the books Tunis wrote about American athletes express his belief that sports can be valuable and satisfying for both participants and spectators. His first two young adult books, *The Iron Duke* and *The Duke Decides*, were based on his own experiences as a collegiate distance runner. With *All-American*, he began using his journalistic skills to conduct background research for his novels. *The Kid from Tomkinsville* and *World Series* begin a series that follows the Brooklyn Dodgers for more than a decade, continuing with *The Kid Comes Back*, *Keystone Kids*, and culminating in young *Razzle*, in which a veteran is joined by his son at the close of his brilliant career.

These books resemble "nonfiction novels" because the fictional characters are based on real people and because the fictional action takes place in real places. *Yea! Wildcats!* and *A City for Lincoln* originated from Tunis's observations of high school basketball in Indiana, and books on tennis and golf stem from Tunis's wide experience as a radio commentator and amateur competitor. All of his writing expresses the same principles and values through consistently clear and uncluttered prose.



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