



A Sense of Where You Are: Bill Bradley at Princeton

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When John McPhee met Bill Bradley, both were at the beginning of their careers. *A Sense of Where You Are*, McPhee's first book, is about Bradley when he was the best basketball player Princeton had ever seen. McPhee delineates for the reader the training and techniques that made Bradley the extraordinary athlete he was, and this part of the book is a blueprint of superlative basketball. But athletic prowess alone would not explain Bradley's magnetism, which is in the quality of the man himself—his self-discipline, his rationality, and his sense of responsibility. Here is a portrait of Bradley as he was in college, before his time with the New York Knicks and his election to the U.S. Senate—a story that suggests the abundant beginnings of his professional careers in sport and politics.

A Sense of Where You Are: Bill Bradley at Princeton Details

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Author : John McPhee

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Brad Hayes says

Hard not to like the young Bill Bradley when viewed through the lens of John McPhee. Apart from the biographical narrative, it's also a well-written mid-century sports story.

David Quinn says

Disappointingly fawning, I half-expected to see Bill Bradley's mother and father as co-writers.

Bill Bradley's Princeton years were undoubtedly filled with supreme basketball and academic success so I wasn't expecting any type of exposé but the superlatives were heaped on too heavily for my liking.

This is better suited for YA readers.

Marilyn Stuckwisch says

I wanted to hear more about his transition from basketball to politics.

Heather Hollick says

A good primer on John McPhee. Also, basketball

After reading McPhee's excellent collection of essays, *Draft No. 4*, I wanted to read some of his oeuvre. Since I have also become hopelessly addicted to the Golden State Warriors, I started with this book about Bill Bradley and basketball.

I was not disappointed. His portrayal of Bradley is reverent and heartwarming. And his insights into the magical art of elite basketball are illuminating and inspiring. If you like great writing, stories about amazing people, and basketball, then this is a book for you.

Highly recommended.

Dylan Groves says

uncomfortably idolatrous, but a good statement about what heroism looks like for new yorker-reading society.

+1 for being so cleanly written.

Corey Thibodeaux says

Great portrait of a player through his own eyes. Bill Bradley was a unique player and man and John McPhee capturing some of those moments in action made this book relevant. I think I learned more about the game of basketball from this book than any other source.

Alex Linschoten says

I have no interest in basketball whatsoever, but this book kept me hooked. I'm trying to read all of John McPhee's books this year, and this was a wonderful start.

Lynne-marie says

This just reminded me of how much I love McPhee's style and also reminded me what it was like in the 1960's to be living in a home where Cazzie Russell was such a house-hold name that it reverberates today with great clangor still today.

This is essentially biographical sketch of a young Bill Bradley just after he left Princeton. Totally basketball, but a glimpse into the workings of the mind nevertheless. In a sense, it is a companion to a piece McPhee wrote within the last year for "The New Yorker" comparing today's senator with the young man who was "the child as father to the man."

Myles says

As a complement to Rick Telander's marvelous "Heaven is a Playground," a memoir about the summer Telander spent coaching a pick-up team of black youth in Brooklyn's projects, I turned to John McPhee's 1963 classic "A Sense of Where You Are: Bill Bradley At Princeton".

These are two basketball stories.

Bradley was a rich white kid growing up in Missouri. Telander's charges were extremely poor black kids growing up in the ghetto.

The great strength of Telander's book is how the camera is turned away from the celebrities toward the barriers minority kids face getting out of poverty and in some ways it is a far more important story in the telling.

McPhee's story impresses by the talent of the teller. It takes a lot to get me interested in this story. McPhee's great talent here is to move the camera around from the close-up of the subject, to the coaches record of what happened, to the audience, to the opposition players.

Bradley is double-teamed. Swish. Bradley's knee is swathed in bandages. Swish. Bradley is scratched and bruised by a bigger, stronger opponent. Swish.

And how brilliantly McPhee throws in the elation of the audience. The book is a peon to the sense of wonderment in athletic achievement and more as Bradley put as much effort into his academic career at Princeton, and later on as a US Senator, and in retirement as a private citizen. He is driven to serve.

Overlay on this story that of two of Bradley's contemporaries: Cazzie Russell and Oscar Robertson, possibly the most famous black athlete until Kareem Abdul Jabar. Russell came out of Chicago, Robertson was born in Charlotte, Tennessee.

Robertson grew up in a segregated housing project and was drawn to basketball because it was "a poor kid's game." His family could not afford a basketball, so Robertson learned how to shoot by tossing tennis balls bound with rags and rubber bands into a peach basket behind his home.

When his high school team won the state championships — the first black team to accomplish it — celebrations were toned down so as not to inflame racial hatred.

College recruitment in those days from the big successful teams did not include blacks. He went to the University of Cincinnati. Many of his scoring records as a collegian remain unsurpassed. He was the first of a breed of big guards that paved the way for stars such as Magic Johnson.

Robertson also let the way with a landmark court decision to open the free agency route for professional basketball players and athletes in other pro sports including football and hockey.

Later in life he also donated a kidney to his daughter who suffered lupus-related kidney failure, and has been recognized for both his philanthropic and entrepreneurial efforts.

Anastasia Karel says

I've had my dad's copy of this book for many years, but couldn't remember whether or not I'd read it all the way through. Enjoyed it quite a bit and learned a lot about basketball.

Dad says

Nice book, a junior high kid might enjoy it, written in 1965, catalogues the career of Bill Bradley.

Lisa says

I finished A Sense of Where You Are last night. It was a fantastic book and an outstanding story. Bill Bradley lived out a story that every athlete hopes upon, especially to go out on such a positive note. I finished the book and immediately watched Youtube videos of Bradley.

I enjoyed McPhee's writing style. He's straightforward, light, metered. There's an easy rhythm to his words.

I recommend it for sports fans, but also fans of creative non-fiction for the beautiful writing.

Darryl says

Bill Bradley was born in a small Missouri town, the son of the town's banker, who taught him discipline, hard work, and a love of learning, and his wife, a fiercely competitive but loving former athlete. Their son was one of the most celebrated schoolboy athletes in Missouri history, and was offered scholarships to over 70 colleges to play basketball. However, he chose to attend Princeton University, which did not provide athletic scholarships and was not known for its basketball team, as he had higher aspirations beyond sports.

He began to play with the varsity team as a sophomore, as freshmen were not allowed to participate in varsity athletics at that time, and immediately became the star player of the team. Princeton quickly became an Eastern basketball powerhouse, culminated by the 1964-65 team in Bradley's senior year, which reached the NCAA Final Four before losing in the national semifinal to Michigan. Bradley's last collegiate game was against Wichita State in the third place game, and Bradley, normally a pass first, shoot second player despite his immense talent, was given free rein by his coach to shoot and score at will. He finished the game with 58 points, which is still the record for the most points scored by an individual player in a Final Four game.

After his collegiate career he attended Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship, and then became an NBA star with the New York Knicks, helping them win two championships, in 1970 and 1973. After his retirement he entered politics, and served as the junior U.S. Senator from New Jersey for three terms. He retired from the Senate in 1997, and ran an unsuccessful campaign for the U.S. presidency in 2000, losing to Al Gore. After that defeat he left politics, but he maintains an active public life, as he has written six nonfiction books and hosts a weekly radio program.

John McPhee grew up in Princeton, as his father served as the physician for the university's athletic department. He attended Princeton, and while working as a writer in New York his father called him to come see a kid on the freshman basketball team, who his father described as possibly the best basketball player, bar none. McPhee attended a game with his father, followed Bradley over his career at Princeton, and wrote his first book about him, in 1965.

A Sense of Where You Are describes Bradley's upbringing in Missouri, and his basketball career at Princeton, including his work ethic and approach to the game, which was far beyond even the best players at his level and allowed him to surpass his modest physical abilities. McPhee also portrays Bradley as a well rounded student athlete who participated fully in campus life and maintained a sense of modesty and humbleness that seems archaic, yet refreshing. The latest edition of the book contains numerous photos of Bradley in action, along with addenda written in 1978 and 1999.

I would highly recommend A Sense of Where You Are for any sports fan, but this would be of interest for anyone who appreciates good journalism or wants to learn about an inspiring and influential man, who has been one of my heroes since I was a child.

Joshua says

I've never liked anything by John McPhee, but this one did it for me. It's very calming, pretty short, and about something I'm interested in. McPhee's overwrought descriptions of Bill Bradley playing basketball -- and of him practicing basketball -- worked for me here in a way that bored me when McPhee gave similar treatment of rock formations or whatever didn't in his other books. I wish I could have seen Bill Bradley play.

There are some strange aspects to McPhee's actual basketball analysis. He seems never to have considered that Bradley's tendency to foul out at the end of close games might actually be a shortcoming. There's also an uncomfortable dose of the old "the game's too flashy nowadays but here's a white guy who plays it right". In any case, this isn't the book to read if you want to hear even one critical syllable about Bill Bradley as a basketball player, a scholar, or a man.

Steven Peterson says

I just found my old paperback copy of this book. While in high school, I admired Bill Bradley's basketball playing at Princeton a great deal. As a result, I bought this book soon after it came about. This is a good luck at the career of Bradley at Princeton University. Literately written and a fascinating character study. . . .

Justin Gravitt says

Read this book because the author is well-known to be a writing ninja. I was duly impressed. The writing is very clean. The story always kept moving and was interesting.

KennyO says

This is where I began my strong interest in and respect for John McPhee's writing. He paints a lyrical portrait of young Bill Bradley that piqued my interest in more of his writing.

Geoff says

You can tell this is early McPhew. It has the same calm, conversational teaching voice, but it's missing some of the smoothness and gravitas of his other work. There's also a few uncomfortable passages about how "athletic" (e.g., black?) players are changing basketball for the worse, but on the whole a good read.

Ryan Holiday says

I can't exactly say how I came to hear the two of them recommend this book, but when Robert Greene and Paul Graham both say something is good, I don't need to be told a third time. The title comes from a Bill Bradley quote about his hook shot, about how after enough of them his feel for the game was so good that he didn't need to look to see where he was on the court. He just knew. I guess it's probably a bit of the selection

bias, but it's fascinating to me to read a biography of someone before they became who they ultimately became. In a way, it gives you a much more honest picture of what made them successful and a lot less opportunities to create that heroic narrative or sense of destiny. Having read most of the research behind Gladwell's *Outliers* I'm surprised I haven't seen more use of Bradley as an example since he is undoubtedly proof of the concept of deliberative, expert practice.

Terry Gallagher says

A really great story, well told, about Bill Bradley as a college basketball player, but you can see the man he will become in there.
