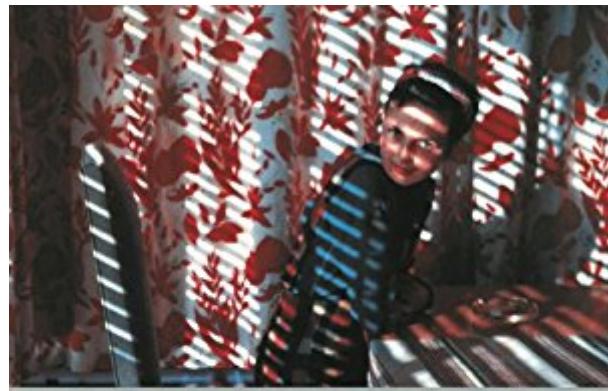


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A Sport And A Pastime



JAMES SALTER
*A Sport and
a Pastime*



Synopsis

"As nearly perfect as any American fiction I know," is how Reynolds Price (The New York Times) described this classic that has been a favorite of readers, both here and in Europe, for almost forty years. Set in provincial France in the 1960s, it is the intensely carnal story - part shocking reality, part feverish dream - of a love affair between a footloose Yale dropout and a young French girl. There is the seen and the unseen - and pages that burn with a rare intensity.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

What makes this modern classic so interesting isn't the story itself " a love affair between an aimless young American and a beautiful French woman " but Salter's interesting narrative choices. The love affair is recounted by a nameless narrator who was once acquainted with the couple, Philip and Anne-Marie. But within the first 10 pages, we're given a subtle warning: What we're reading may not be wholly true. Of course, this completely alters the reader's approach to the novel. We know that the narrator is somewhat of a timid, solitary man; although he admires many beautiful women from afar, he never finds the courage to approach them. Inevitably, he becomes somewhat infatuated with Philip, who is in many ways his opposite: confident, charming, sexually experienced. The narrator recalls the love affair between Philip and Anne-Marie with such explicit detail that the reality of it is entirely unclear. Did he simply observe the couple from afar throughout the course of their relationship and fill in all the details himself? Did Philip tell him about his and Anne-Marie's passionate private life? Or is it

possible that Philip doesn't even exist at all" that he was conjured in the narrator's imagination as a product of his deepest insecurities and fantasies? It's undoubtedly a fascinating approach, and it's always interesting to encounter an unreliable narrator who is so self-aware and forthcoming of his delusions. I can understand why this book is so critically acclaimed, with its unique narrative and crisp, simple prose. However, coming at this from a purely subjective perspective, I wasn't all that interested in the story itself, and never felt fully engaged. In stories like this, I prefer getting deep into the heads of the characters, but that's just not what Salter was going for here.

I ordered this book after seeing it listed as one of Esquire's "100 books every guy should read" or some other such hyperbole, and the plot description on that listing made it sound intriguing. I'd never heard of James Salter, to be honest. So this was a shot-in-the-dark sort of purchase, and I'm glad I made it. "A Sport and a Pastime" is about the brief romance between Philip Dean, a college drop-out, and Anne-Marie, a young French girl, in the early Sixties. It's also about the narrator, unnamed and unreliable (he imagines many things that he couldn't have seen actually play out, unless he was in the room with the young lovers). That's kind of the hook of the novel; the way in which we construct stories, based on scant information. Could be that events between Philip and Anne-Marie in no way resemble what the narrator thinks; there's an undercurrent of erotic fixation here on the narrator's part that, as Reynolds Price suggests in the introduction, could be because of either the male or female protagonist. The opening chapters set the tone (they're a little over-reliant on description in some ways, but as the novel progresses it's evident that the narrator is trying to set the scene for the events that take place). We see a relationship unfold, through the narrator's (admittedly imaginary) eyes, that is erotically charged and perhaps doomed from the start, either because Philip can't take Anne-Marie seriously or he won't. The description of some of the more intimate scenes as being like a "fever dream" is appropriate, both because we're relying on the narrator to provide them (he and his fervid imagination) and because they document a sexuality between the two lovers that doesn't rest solely on the clichés of previous fictions. It's a romance that's more about the physical intimacy than the emotional connection (and indeed, that emotional connection might be only on Anne-Marie's side, if the narrator is to be believed). I can't get away from the fact that, to me, this is as much about the stories we tell, and the art of fiction itself, as the romance it describes. I'm sure smarter people than me have pointed that out before, but this is my first time with the book. And I'm the one writing this review. So there. An evocative near-masterpiece (I can't give it the full five stars because the opening chapters take their time with descriptions that

sometimes border on dull, though I feel the contradiction when I say that later on, that sense of description has helped establish the scene in which the action unfolds), "A Sport and a Pastime" is worth seeking out if you're interested in topics like "the modern-day American novel," or if you just want a good summer read that's not banal. As an item purchased on blind faith, I will say it managed to justify that leap.

Salter writes beautiful sentences and controls the rhythm of his prose masterfully. But I'm sorry to report that I disliked *A Sport and a Pastime*. The romantic lead is a spoiled, shiftless, wealthy narcissist Yale dropout at loose in the French countryside, and the narrator (who describes/imagines his friend's affair with a young French girl) is a milktoast who fancies himself a photographer and also doesn't work. The car the romantic lead drives is more fully characterized than the object of his desire; women in this world are just there to sleep with (or marry). And Blacks in his world are there to be exoticized. Both are described in stereotypical terms--her behind like two halves of an apple, the white teeth of the African-American soldier in a French nightclub. Isn't 1965--when this book was written--too late in the game even for an old (now dead) white man to be unapologetically trotting out those images? (And I must say, Salter is far too good a stylist to rely on tired language.) The bulk of the story follows (through the narrator's imaginings) the young couple as they go from one town to another and one hotel to another and have sex... and I do mean to another and another and another. It's boring. It's predictable. Nothing happens. The sex scenes are tame. Oh, mon dieu, they have anal sex! Dis donc, alors! The descriptions of France in a certain era are quite lovely and evocative, but I found this novel to be a poor cross between Fitzgerald and Hemingway (and I confess that last time I read *The Great Gatsby*, I didn't like it, either.)

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