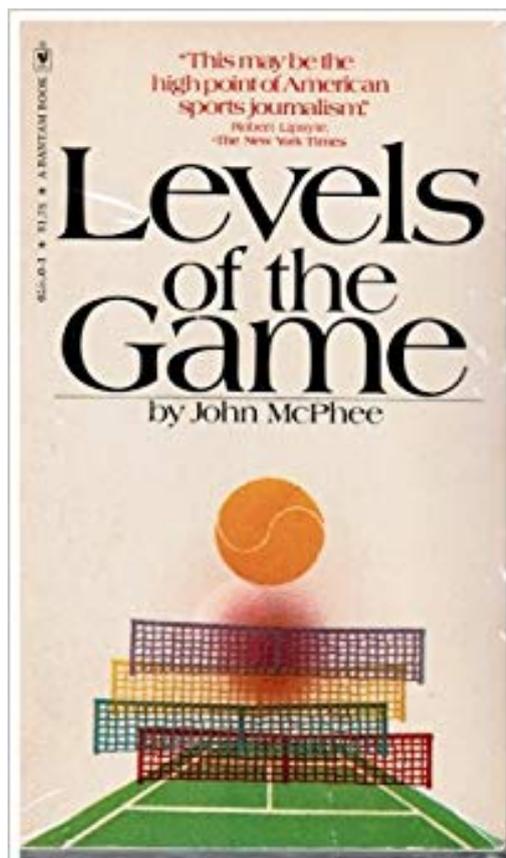


## Levels of the Game *by* John McPhee



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## Reviews of the *Levels of the Game* *by* John McPhee

Kikora

I've loved John McPhee's writing for years but had no idea he had written about tennis until stumbling across this title, which is a stroke-by-stroke account of a men's semi-final match at the first (1968) US Open, between Clark Graebner and Arthur Ashe, the eventual champion. But it's so much more, with biographical info on both players, background on the history of tennis, the important changes that were occurring in 1968 (not just in the tennis world), and much more. It's even more interesting as an historical document, as the world of tennis has hugely changed in the last 50 years. I can unreservedly recommend it!

And incidentally, I also recommend another early McPhee title: "Oranges" about the growing and processing of oranges in central Florida in the 1960s -- which I found especially fascinating since my family moved there at that time, and the book treats areas of Florida that I know well!

catterpillar

a great book if you're a tennis fan. mcphee is so good a writer he was able to get me to read 200 pages, 2/3 of a book, on the geology of california. in this book he spends time with arthur ashe and clark graebner and watches a film of their forest hills final with each of them, revealing what they

were each thinking from moment to moment. he weaves in biography and other material. in all, a fascinating and fun read.

Yozshujinn

A masterclass in writing. If you want to read a well written book, look no further. Learned a lot about the legend Arthur Ashe. But learned more about how a world class author can make a boring subject matter ridiculously entertaining.

Beydar

This book was assigned reading in my journalism course. I like tennis but it's not a sport that I am crazy about. I also was none to happy about reading an entire book dedicated to a single match. To my surprise, this was an interesting read that kept me turning the pages. As the title implies, there are levels to the game and that is the same approach the author took in writing this book. It is biographical and insightful. McPhee explores how each of these mens lives inform their game.

Mori

This is a terrific book that takes you inside the minds and games of two great players. I've just re-read this book to research a book I'm working (I'm the author of *The Courts of Babylon*, and a tennis writer by trade) on and what really touched and impressed me is how freely and openly Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner discussed issues like race and personal politics. Made me realize who recriminatory, filtered, and coded our conversations about such issues are today. This book was declared a classic for a reason, and it has had the legs to endure.

Agarus

This book was written nearly 50 years ago but the writing is ageless. Even though you may know the ending in advance, you will read every word.

TheFresh

Written for the *New Yorker* magazine in 1969, this 150 page sports 'classic' has all the punch-and-jab terseness that makes John McPhee's writing both immediate and immediately recognizable. It's fun to read, no question. And it has a way of implying that more is at stake than the ostensible subject of investigation, although McPhee is often artfully cagey about declaring what that "more" might be.

"Levels of the Game" is constructed around a point-by-point account of a single tennis match played in 1968 by Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner, an African-American and a German-American who were the soul of the championship American Davis Cup team, playing both as singles and as doubles partners. Ashe and Graebner were as much friends as fiercely competitive rivals can ever be, despite their markedly different personalities and world-views. Graebner, the 'spoiled' scion of a conservative Christian dentist, plays stiff and predictable power tennis, "Republican tennis" as it were. Ashe, also a 'privileged child' despite his color and father's illiteracy, is "bold, loose, liberal, flat-out Democratic." Several critics have made McPhee's point more explicitly than McPhee would ever do: "You are the way you play."

Like the volleys of an exciting match, the profiles of Ashe and Graebner - their childhoods, their fathers, their training in life and tennis, their quirks and virtues - are lobbed back and forth between the points of the game, from Ashe's first serve to Ashe's last winning stroke. McPhee is crafty; he depicts both men with implicit admiration and maintains as judicious an air of impartiality as an nominee for the Supreme Court under hostile questioning. But there's little doubt about whom he assumes HIS readers will root for, and his tone shows it. Ashe's victory - Ashe's whole career - was a triumph of Civil Rights in America over the forces of stand-pat hold-on-to-your own conservatism. Anyone who doesn't cheer when Ashe scores a point in this match has totally missed the point.

When McPhee wrote this book, in 1969, it must have seemed that the societal match which it symbolized was almost over, almost won. Racism had 'charged the net' in the South of Wallace and Faubus, and the ball had been lobbed out of reach. Watching the ads on TV today, couple-watching

on the streets of American cities, noting the approval ratings of the First Couple in the White House, one could indeed say that Ashe's victory was prophetic of America's racial Redemption. "Game, set, match to Lieutenant Ashe," McPhee wrote; "When the stroke is finished, he is standing on his toes, his arms flung open, wide, and high."

However, if we take this historic match as an analogy for the cultural match-up between conservatism and liberalism, McPhee's success as an oracle is less clear. In 1969 perhaps, the egalitarian ideals of the New Deal and the Great Society might have seemed pervasive and permanent. The 'loose' liberalism expressed in Ashe's tennis was the preferred style of American youth, and the tight hind-end game played by Graebner didn't stand a chance.

Ahh, that was before the Culture Wars, before the 'Southern Strategy', before Reaganism and Ollie North, before egalitarian idealism got lost in the Bushes. What McPhee didn't foresee was that Clark Graebner's 'Republican tennis' could claw and scratch, rage and pout, and make a comeback. After all, they play how they are.

Wow .. Another McPhee masterpiece!.. always a pleasant read ,( McPhee )

this one details the lives of two tennis greats and the US game itself comes into focus.

????

McPhee must be the greatest of American writers!

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