



HAL
open science

Sports: James A. Michener et le droit de participer

Barbara Helly

► **To cite this version:**

| Barbara Helly. Sports: James A. Michener et le droit de participer. 2003. hal-02317999v1

HAL Id: hal-02317999

<https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-02317999v1>

Preprint submitted on 17 Oct 2019 (v1), last revised 17 Oct 2019 (v2)

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

SPORTS : THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE.

University of Cape Town

February 6,7 2003

Barbara HELLY

James Albert Michener and the right to participate in sports.

Among the several interpretations of the right to participate in sports, two would seem far away from each other: the right of a single individual or a single group to participate in a particular sport and the right of sports to be acknowledged as a serious social activity which could henceforth be treated as a regular literary topic.

By choosing to talk about James A. Michener's work on sports, it is possible to show that both these aspects of the problem are closely linked. Firstly, we will discover that they were even linked in Michener's life and that sports provided Michener with a right to participate in social life and to reach a higher social status than otherwise predicted. Then, we will focus on one of his sociological essays, entitled *Sports in America*, which questions the numerous limitations of the right to participate in sports in his own country. Finally, we will address the issue of the right of sports to appear among the dignified literary matters of the novel or of literature and what it becomes in Michener's works.

I – The right to participate in social life.

In 1980, James A. Michener published *The Covenant*, a historical novel on South Africa.¹ It was a best-seller in the United States and was translated in many languages just like several others of his works during the fifty years of his successful literary career. The fact that Michener was an American citizen played a major role in the way sports would intervene in his life. Born of an unknown father, he was brought up in a generous but poor family and in this unsettled environment, sports provided him with his first socializing and educational experience. It had such a great impact on his life that all his biographical writings stress the irreplaceable role held by his first two basketball coaches: George C. Murray and Allan Gardy.²

The first one of them had served in the army. The boys called him *colonel*, and he had made up some kind of paramilitary team which was to evolve into a Boy Scout group. Michener's mother, who was a Quaker, opposed the use of firearms, and so her son was not allowed to follow this part of the training but he could benefit from everything else G. C.

¹ James A. Michener, *The Covenant*, Fawcett Crest Books, 1980.

² John P. Hayes, *James A. Michener, A Biography*, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, New York, 1984, pp. 22-24

Murray would teach: moral instruction, religious basis, education to discipline and basketball coaching. While following these lessons for six years he was getting ready for those he would receive from his high school basketball coach, Allan Gardy. Michener confessed that he had a strong tie with him and that he played the role of *surrogate father*, and of moral guide.³ Because of his mother's situation -at the same time poor and alone-, he often felt cast out from the community. But through sports and his individual -as well as collective- achievements in the basketball team, he received recognition from his schoolmates, and sports really provided him with his first feeling of belonging. He even considered that this successful socialization through sports prevented him from being sent to prison at an early age and that it enabled him to blossom in an environment which at first rejected him because of his destitution.

The first thing we may note is that sports practicing did not function as a source of pleasure nor as a physical blooming for the young Michener. The social framework it built for him really meant more and it contributed to his personal uplifting. His coaches represented the ancient alliance of the religious and military aspects in sports, and by relying on those characteristics of sports he was able to reach a better social status. In a way, if this was possible through sports, it also meant that sports stood rather at the bottom of the social ladder and that it remained something apart from formal social life.

His calling as writer followed the same progression. In his high school newspaper, a medium much more common in the United States than in France, Michener was trained to write sports news. He failed in being published by a local newspaper but from the beginning he let his voice heard on the role of sports in education, and he even worked as a baseball coach for a while. Later on he would be incessantly concerned about the proper training of the young generation: he worked as a teacher of social studies for several years before World War II and, as a passionate educator, he sought to awaken young people to culture and to all aspects of culture. He belonged to a national board whose task was to determine social studies curriculum for college students and in the nineteen thirties he wrote articles on the importance of sports in the students' education because they were going to become citizens of the country in the years to come.⁴

But Michener did not content himself with learning a lot from his sporting experience and this is where it becomes interesting to study his life in relation with the issue of the right to participate. Had he been on the verge of becoming a successful writer in France, Michener

³ *The World Is My Home*, op. cit., p. 412

⁴ James A. Michener, "Is the American Boy Quitting Baseball?", *The Literary Digest*, July 12, 1930.

would have avoided letting people know that he enjoyed sports, especially those sports with a popular reputation. He refused to hide his personal interest in sports and kept following his favorite teams like the Phillies of Philadelphia or the Miami Dolphins, and he also dared to criticize the New York Yankees, for being driven by money.

Michener's original and most outstanding characteristic was his sincere appraisal of sports and this could be one of the reasons why he has been so successful in his writing career. Although his public appearances did not ruin his reputation, he did not attend basketball, baseball or football games for the purpose of selling more books afterwards. Even in the United States, the world of celebrities is necessarily restricted, but Michener, although sensitive to honors, developed unexpected friendships for a writer. Despite and maybe because of the numerous best-sellers he wrote, Michener never received academic recognition in literature. One of the reasons was that Michener remained faithful to some of his lower-class origins and that he organized his priorities in an unusual way if one keeps in mind the image of the novelist locked up in his ivory tower. He was particularly proud of the friendship with Robin Roberts, a former baseball player who was ultimately selected to appear in the Hall of Fame.⁵ The reason why he admired Robin Roberts reflected the author's moral standards regarding sports and more generally speaking, it illustrated a part of his philosophy. According to him, Robin Roberts proved you could get older and still keep playing. He adapted his physical prowess to his declining strength, optimised his movements and always took up the gauntlet whenever the game seemed lost. Michener liked this tenacious character, whose obstinacy always hid an incredible optimistic generosity. On several occasions he insisted on the meaning of this friendship and Robin Roberts was one of the three persons to whom his book on sports was dedicated.

II - The right to participate in the sociological criticism of sports.

*A critical look at the imperial nonsense of sport as it dominates far too much of American thinking.*⁶ This is how Michener once defined his *Sports in America* volume when a journalist made a list of every one of his previous books, asking him to synthesize their topics in a short sentence. The fact that the sentence bore a critical tone was a way of showing that

⁵ *The World Is My Home*, op. cit., p. 162

⁶ Lawrence Grobel, "James A. Michener, a candid conversation about literature, goat dragging, world travel, liberalism and five pound books with the perpetually popular autor." *Playboy*, December 1981, p. 85

the sports lover, the enthusiastic spectator, could also be a social thinker and that he meant to write a comprehensive book on the issue of the place of sports in American society.

In order to better understand the literary dynamics with which his work fits in, we must remember that *Sports In America* was first published in 1976, in the middle of a rich political decade.⁷ Michener himself had once tried to get elected as a Democratic representative to the American Congress in the early sixties, but he had failed. In 1969, he wrote a book *-Presidential Lottery*-⁸ which denounced the electoral dead ends of the American political system. At the same time he would write articles about the political situation in various Asian countries and about the home affairs of the United States. *Centennial*⁹, *Chesapeake*¹⁰ and *The Covenant*, some of his historical sagas which became best-sellers and which covered hundreds or even thousands of years of human history, were written during this period of ten years. While writing his voluminous historical sagas, Michener decided to express himself on two topical subjects: the assassination by the army of students protesting against the Vietnam War on the campus of the University of Kent State¹¹, and the growing significance of sports in American society. Therefore, he did not consider this last issue as a minor one and if it was clear to him that his book would not reach the same kind of selling success as his other best-seller novels, he nevertheless wanted to participate in the necessary debate on sports.

Several reasons prompted him to publish a thorough study on sports: his personal experience, his various activities, his broad interest in contemporary issues and the longevity of his career. He was almost seventy when he wrote *Sports in America*, and he did not know it but he still had twenty more years of literary life to lead. As an old man he was conscious of how important it was to remain in good physical shape. Fifteen years earlier, he had suffered a heart attack and attributed part of his quick recovery to his daily exercises. He wanted to participate in the debate about how sports were practiced in the United States. He had to remind his readers that, as a former sportsman, as a sports fan, writer and politician, he had kept many ties with the world of sports and was therefore entitled to talk about it. His enquiry was all the more meaningful since it took place at a time when many people in the United States were questioning their country's capitalist basis and its imperial domination over the rest of the world. As a former teacher, and continuous popularizer, Michener thought that he

⁷ James A. Michener, *Sports In America*, Fawcett Crest Books, New York, 1976.

⁸ James A. Michener, *Presidential Lottery, The Reckless Gamble in Our Electoral System*, Random House, 1969.

⁹ James A. Michener, *Centennial*, Random House, 1974.

¹⁰ James A. Michener, *Chesapeake*, Random House, 1978.

¹¹ James A. Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 1971.

had something to say to the young generation so that it could make better choices for the future. However, none of his topical books directly addressed the most embarrassing issues for the existing social or political powers. For example, he conducted a sort of detective enquiry on the events which took place in Kent State but he did not write an entire book questioning the American military interventions of the time. In the same way, he did not write a specific book on the economic system which was driven by profits and based on exploitation of the workforce, because as a whole he agreed with the general orientation of society. Nevertheless, in *Sports in America*, he did make statements on these topics whenever they, among other things, could have an impact on sports themselves.

Before going further into the question of the right to participate in sports for different sections of society, Michener quickly considered the different ways of participating. Consequently, the notion of participation itself appeared most important, and not the fact of having this right or not. Participation or not refers to this faculty of being associated with, of being a more or less active member of something, of sharing the efforts and emotions, of cooperating in the accomplishment of a common objective and of doing all this freely -indeed there could be no better reward than the participation itself. This was a miniature definition of social life and of what is best in the amalgamation of everybody's strengths. For this very reason it was of the utmost importance that sports did not remain dominated by financial lobbies and political interests. While scrutinizing the right to participate in sports, Michener wrote a book in a militant way, so that some changes could be brought up for some sports activities to survive or for the good health of the American to be kept.

However, the most blatant limitations on the right to participate in sports caught his attention. He vituperated against the outrageous inequality of women's sports compared to men's activities and he criticized the way in which Blacks were still kept in the minor roles whether on the teams or among coaches. He disagreed with the monopolistic tendencies of the big teams which sucked out all the best players from local communities, leaving a void in many small teams. But he also reacted against the abuses of sport when considered as a social or economic activity. What was becoming of the right of young children to participate when the parents would desperately try to have them become professionals? What was becoming of the right of Blacks and the poor to participate when their percentage of success here was even lower than anywhere else in society because of the few numbers who would reach the top? What was to become of the right to participate of all those who relied on sports scholarships for access to a better education when those scholarships failed to take care of the intellectual

and academic development of sportsmen and women? Addressing all these issues, Michener wrote a well-documented book that included numerous charts, figures and practical examples. Like for *The Covenant*, which was made possible thanks to research and writing done by Errol Uys and Philip Bateman, *Sports in America* was based on the data collected by Joseph Avenick.

We can nonetheless observe that the book forgot to talk about other limitations on the right to participate. There was no mention of the tremendous obstacles met by disabled people when they want to enjoy physical activities. There was no mention either of the social limitations on sports: the fact that some sports would be restricted to some categories of the population or the fact that having some spare time and some money to spend on sports were signs of inequalities in the right to participate.¹²

On several occasions, Michener recalled how important it was for everyone to experience a collective participation in sports. It meant that attending a real sporting event was better than listening to, or watching the media coverage of it because in the first case you could experience it as a group and in the second you would only have a private emotion. However, we can find arguments in *Sports in America* which could encourage the reader to assess the ultimate purpose of the participation in sports. What were the sportsmen or the spectators participating in? Even if Michener did not mainly focus on this point, he suggested in his book that there existed tight relationships between the belonging feeling of an athlete towards his team or the communion feeling of the spectator for this very team and the actual running of society. All kinds of states and political powers have been using those tight relationships for a long time. Roman emperors built part of their historical reputation on this ambiguous tie and the phrase *panem et circenses* is one of the Latin sentences that many people can still understand today. In the beginning of the century, when Upton Sinclair tried to write a book which would denounce the way industrial bosses were organizing games and sporting events in order to keep the workers from joining the unions or attending political meetings in big numbers, he called it *Roman Holidays*¹³. Michener did not ignore this aspect of sports.

¹² In an early article Michener already had forgotten to raise this issue when he warned that young boys were quitting baseball for other sports such as... golf.

In dealing with a different topic, a famous American film maker, Mickael Moore, recently ended his movie called *Bowling for Columbine* by showing images of Flint's high school sports field. This town of Michigan, capital of General Motors, did not spend the money to build a track around the football field, so the kids, although having already won 13 national titles, trained in the ditches and the mud around the field.

¹³ Upton Sinclair, *Roman Holidays*, 1931.

Our political leaders have been goading sports into performing three improper functions, and if this trend continues, sports will be hopelessly contaminated. 1) Sports are being asked to serve as propaganda in support of specific political parties. 2) They are being used to buttress military goals. 3) They are being grossly misused to create a fuzzy, shallow patriotism.¹⁴

In order to prove what he was denouncing he gave several startling examples of the sports' collusion with the army and churches.

On Monday night, September 17, 1973, during half-time ceremonies at the game between the Green Bay Packers and the New York Jets, Melvin Laird, the Secretary of Defense, appeared on the field to conduct ceremonies during which ninety young men volunteered to join the navy and were sworn in for active duty. This was loudly approved by the spectators as sports' answer to the peaceniks.¹⁵

He added another example to show that racial inequalities, paternalist attitudes and even exploitation still persisted through sports.

To George Scott, who once picked cotton for \$1.75 per 100 pounds, baseball means a gold-plated Cadillac, \$250 suits, a \$175,000 home, a World Series ring... and *more*. [...] When the National Anthem is played, I have my hand over my heart and thank the good Lord, who blessed me with a healthy body and a talent for working hard.¹⁶

But the most open criticism Michener made relied on the capitalist characteristic of the whole sports economy. He precisely underlined the steps through which big sporting businesses, mainly in baseball, football and basketball, had managed to remain officially above the anti-trust laws. They had a tendency towards monopoly, they tended to suppress competition and they all tended to lower the players' salaries. It is quite paradoxical to watch Michener argue that what remained for the athletes, if they wanted to maintain their wages, was to resort to striking, -which they did several times. Michener even added that professional players resembled regular workers in this regard. Sports provided the arena in which these workers could win the right to participate in the class struggle, not as mere instruments any more but as participants of the economic, social and political life. Even if Michener acknowledged in his autobiography entitled *The World Is My Home*, that Marx did make

¹⁴ *Sports In America*, op. cit., p. 468.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

sense when developing his ideas on historical materialism¹⁷, he was no revolutionary and no communist either. If he dared to denounce the many and most striking abuses of sporting activities in the context of American society, he did not follow his analysis to their logical political consequences. I will now give three examples of the limitations that Michener meant to impose on the right of sportsmen to participate in the political and ideological struggles which were going on at the time.

In 1968 in Mexico City, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, respectively first and third in the 200 meters startled the world when they received their Olympic medals, shared the same pair of gloves -one for the left hand and the other for the right hand- and raised their fist as a sign of anger and solidarity with the ongoing Black struggles in the United States. They did not sing the American national anthem and for these defiant gestures which had been displayed in front of the world, they were expelled from the team and were sent home immediately. The press spoke very little of all the harassment that they and their families had to bear for years, and Michener, who published his book in 1976, could have had more information had he wanted to. On the contrary, if he acknowledged their courage, he approved of the sanction taken against them¹⁸.

The other noteworthy event of this period was the boxing contest organized in Mobutu's Zaire in 1974. Michener only pretended to talk from a sporting point of view, stressing that the fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, whose names are not even pronounced, was *not a legitimate sporting event* and that it was *rather an amusing entertainment*¹⁹. Of course this top fight which held the attention of millions of spectators was a cheap publicity start for Mobutu's dictatorship. But these were not the reasons why this contest remains the most extraordinary of all times and why Muhammad Ali became a living legend. When sports and political authorities in the United States deprived Muhammad Ali of his world title and of his right to participate in boxing competitions because he had refused to be drafted for the Vietnam War, they forced him to look for other places to fight and earn a living. Nobody in Europe agreed to give him this right either, these countries were willing to show their solidarity towards American policy in Asia. When Muhammad Ali explained that he had never been called *nigger* by a Vietcong before, the Zairian contest took up a clear defiant signification. *Ali*, the last movie dedicated to this boxing hero helps the spectator understand the symbolic and emotional meaning of this Black American going for the first

¹⁷ *The World Is My home*, op. cit., p. 234.

¹⁸ *Sports in America*, op. cit., p. 199.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 407

time to Africa. Millions of Blacks but also millions of oppressed people around the world felt they were close to this fascinating character, regardless of his personal behaviors or of his religious beliefs. At the moment of the fight millions of people who would normally not count either in worldwide sports or in the political sphere claimed their right to participate in both of them. Once again, sports could appear as a vector for mass participation for the poor, but this time Michener disagreed with it because this participation bore in itself the questioning of the very foundations of his country.

Finally, the last element which allows us to reach a conclusion on the tone Michener wanted to give his criticism, is the end of the chapter dedicated to government control of sports. In this passage, he clearly indicated that he was in favor of enhancing military sports, notably by the promotion of the best athletes, at a time when a lot of young people were turning their back from the army for fear they would be sent to Vietnam²⁰. In the last sentences of this chapter, he reminded us that above the right of spectators to watch games at all times of the year and above the right of big media businesses to participate in the huge profits of sport broadcasting, remained the right to preserve the family cell and the Christian calendar...²¹ With these philosophical statements, Michener renewed what previous leaders of the main super powers had already stated at the turn of the XXth century, that sports should participate in the strengthening of social order and that it was not to be used as a means for human emancipation, as a means of participating in a more harmonious and healthier life everywhere and for everybody.

Did the fictional works of the writer develop this philosophy?

III- Sports and literature: the right to participate.

*I started my writing career as a fourteen-year-old sportswriter for our local newspaper*²². The English language created a word which does not exist in French where one can only talk of a sports commentator or of a sporting journalist. Apparently, sports can not reach the dignity of writing in this language. The lines used by Michener to praise the sports journalists for their creativity would have been inconceivable in other countries and they may help us understand why Michener was so popular. When telling how some journalists had once commented on a game which had previously been cancelled, and how they were able

²⁰ *Sports In America*, op. cit., p. 515.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 518.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 394.

to make up for the suspense, the fouls, the best plays, the athletic prowess and the audience's reactions, Michener wanted to stress the common points between this work and that of the novelist. Furthermore, sports pages in the newspapers were avidly read: competition was fierce to please the general public and the efforts the commentators made to be credible, rigorous, entertaining and interesting required that they develop true literary qualities. Michener noted that many American writers started as sportswriters like himself²³.

How can we go from this unusual but meaningful comparison to the introduction of sports as a real subject for novels?

Actually, it is nothing but easy and Michener even confessed in his book called *Texas* that the great novel on American football still had to be written²⁴. As a proof of these difficulties, we notice that if Michener often used sporting activities in his works, this use took the shape of sociological or political commentaries. The most striking example occurs in this last mentioned novel, *Texas*, in which a group of intellectual investigators from polite society, have to determine what is special about the state of Texas... When digging deep into the sociological layers of society, they happen to discover oil, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Friday night football game²⁵. It is also the case in *Chesapeake* when the author alludes to the segregated past of American baseball²⁶. In both books, Michener makes the narrative out of thoughts and dialogues, on the topic of sports; but he does not use sports as the substance of the story being told.

In other writings, Michener establishes an intermediate situation towards fiction. In this respect, *Sports in America* provides the most striking example. On several occasions, Michener relies on fiction written by other writers such as Hemingway or B. Shaw and he comments on the literary portraits of their books' sportsmen as if they were rationale as admissible as scientific hypothesis. Early in his writing career, Michener had claimed that works of imagination should have a great ideological and philosophical significance: he made no exception for sports in literature. Since he was also highly concerned about spreading knowledge in general, he even wrote a didactic introduction to Hemingway's last book, *The Dangerous Summer*²⁷. In fifty pages of story, testimony and bullfighting dictionary, he mixes his enthusiasm for Hemingway and their common passion for bullfights. And Michener will

²³ *Sports in America*, op. cit., pp. 390-394

²⁴ James A. Michener, *Texas*, Random House, 1985.

²⁵ James A. Michener, *Texas*, Seuil, chapter 12.

²⁶ James A. Michener, *Chesapeake*, Seuil, p. 1017

²⁷ Ernest Hemingway, *The Dangerous Summer*, with introduction by J. A. Michener, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1985.

actually use this sport to step into the world of sports fiction. In *Miracle in Seville*, Michener creates a sportswriter character -with many biographical features- who has to write newspaper articles on the Holy Week bullfights in Seville, Spain²⁸. Michener gives a fictitious account for a sports magazine and he recalls the physical gestures and religious faith of the fighters. In *Mexico*, he also makes comments upon the bullfighting scenes, but this time the commentaries belong to the main body of the text; and the protagonists of the sports drama behave as individual characters. It is again the case in *The Covenant*, where we read the story of a South African cricket player who did not have the right to participate in the national team which toured England at the turn of the century because he was Coloured. The narrator provides this piece of information as a fact which increases the documentation of the book. This character, Abu Bakr Fazool -whose real name was Krom Hendricks- does not belong to fiction, and he does not meet with the other invented figures of the book but he seems to be well-known from the newspapers of the time²⁹. However, Michener did not stop with the mere facts: the momentary suspense over his participation in the international tour was a part of the story.

As far as I know, *The Covenant* and rugby is the only example of real literary blending between sports and the novelistic plot in Michener's works.³⁰ In this book, the characters belong to fiction and they meaningfully contribute to the development of the story. First, there is a young Englishman, a devoted teacher who will have to give up his seat to an Afrikaner teacher because of anti-British and nationalist animosity. On the novelistic level, he will also have to give up his seat in the heart of a young Afrikaner woman who is also his best student's sister: she will not resist her family's pressures and she will not consider any prospect of marriage with a British citizen. Although typical of the defeated hero, M. Amberson will however make a major contribution to local history in introducing rugby to the small community and he will patiently but rigorously teach his students how to play. Because he takes the blows with fervor and displays an extraordinary physical courage during the games, he wins everybody's respect. In just one page, Michener writes a literary introduction of the beginnings of rugby in this southern part of the Commonwealth³¹. In this chapter of *The Covenant*, he mixes exaggerated political feelings with a failed love story and an early

²⁸ James A. Michener, *Miracle in Seville*, Random House, New York, 1995.

²⁹ *The Covenant*, op. cit., p. 921.

³⁰ The fact that there are several examples related to sports in this novel may be paralleled with Michener's opinion on the role of sports in South Africa. In the 576 pages of *Sports in America*, the only time when South Africa is mentioned is in a chart grading sixteen countries and their relations to sports. In the column called *excessive emphasis*, he put four countries: East Germany, Russia, South Africa and Brazil.

³¹ *The Covenant*, op. cit., p. 920.

sporting passion. It is a romanticized version of the history of rugby. The fact that the reader can follow the thread of the historical beginnings of this sport two hundred and sixty pages later shows that Michener had reached the point where he could treat sports just like he would do with others of his favorite themes. Rugby was seen from the historical perspective of its evolution and Michener blended it with the fictional characters and the plot.

Here is the end of the story: the Troxel cousins are of traditional Afrikaner descent and the reader is soon aware that they are strong and impressive. Their sociological portrait is just as square: they are convinced that they have to fight against subversive actions, they are coming back from duty, having served against the black population, and they are both in love with a young lady from an honest family who hesitates between marrying one of them or an American engineer. Suspense is made thicker thanks to their being outstanding rugby players. And once again the novel is stepping on the sports field, hand-to-hand, amidst sweat and blows. The reader even follows one of the players up to the hospital because one of the cousins sagged beneath a violent knock. But in this section of the novel, sport is not only a deepening historical theme which is already a hundred years old, it is also a modern arena for politics. A boycott campaign against the participation of a South African team during an international tournament in New Zealand is ruining the cousins' hopes of being drafted on the national rugby team. Although there are many examples of the narrator intruding in the story to give his own comments on the historical events, in this case, the reader can only witness the athletes' anger and despair for loosing this opportunity of playing at this level of competition³². Apart from the novel, Michener did not hide his opposition to the boycott campaign: while in South Africa in the summer of 1980 for the release of a condensed version of his book, entitled *Keepers of the Covenant*, he let it know to the press that it was time to end the sports boycott³³. When thinking of the context of the time, it was a way of saying that above the right for people to participate in some forms of struggles against apartheid, stood the rights of sportsmen and women to participate, in any circumstances, in their favorite pastimes...

If we try to make a synthesis of the several occurrences of sports in Michener's novels, we will notice some salient characteristics. First, sports convey the moral values of society. For example, in *Mexico*, it emphasises the surpassing of oneself, courage and danger in front of death; in *The Covenant*, it promotes physical strength and resistance to pain and suffering;

³² *The Covenant*, op. cit., pp. 1175-1186.

³³ *The Star*, "Michener makes SA sport call", Capetown, July 7, 1980.

and in Hawaiï, it establishes a link between surfing and sexual liberation. Then, sports are always depicted in a political environment. Death, which is always the bullfighter's horizon, is compared to that which overcomes the soldiers' mind during combats. And it is not an abstract comparison: one of the characters fought in Korea, just like Michener did. There is a parallel and in-depth description of the American soldier's point of view when he comes back from battle.

Telling stories of marginal activities is another characteristic of sports in Michener's novels: bullfighting, surfboarding and bowling are not mass sports. The only woman who does any sporting activity can once again be found in *The Covenant*³⁴. Even before she is arrested, Mrs. Saltwood lives on the fringe of society for several reasons: she is a white woman against apartheid and she wants to let it heard; and bowling (which she does as a sport) is the favorite pastime of a small number of privileged women from the petit bourgeoisie. If rugby is a collective sports, which enhances the peculiarity of *The Covenant*, only minorities actually play it, mainly white males from higher social backgrounds than those playing other sports. On a worldwide scale today, and it was all the more true in South Africa under apartheid, soccer has proved to be one of the most popular sports. If Michener tried to popularize this sport in his country, praising the physical and collective qualities of the game, he also insisted upon the hysterical mobs attending competitions and, in doing so, he forgot to mention that soccer has proved to be the favorite sport of poor people around the world. Be it with American football, soccer, baseball or basketball, mass sports has not yet won a full right to participate in literary life. But it probably mirrors reality itself and the fact that mass sports have not yet spread all over and become available for everybody. Spare time, money and available facilities are still material conditions which prevent millions of people from enjoying physical emancipation through sports all life long.

As author of numerous best-sellers in the United States, James A. Michener raised the question of the right to participate in sports on many occasions. He addressed the issue in a book dedicated to sports in his country, in some of his novels, in newspaper articles and even in a three-part documentary made for the American TV. The videos last an hour each and they each tackle a separate chapter of *Sports in America*: the right of young children, women and Blacks to participate. Michener, who is the main speaker and makes the interviews, does not hide the ugly behaviors of the past -for example, Jesse Owens running against a horse- but

³⁴ *The Covenant*, op. cit. , p. 1170.

Michener remains conservative when talking of more recent political events in the sports world. Between the release of *Sports in America* and the broadcasting of the recordings, there was a four-year lapse and in 1980, political and sporting news focused on the boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games. It was significant that Michener started the program dedicated to sports with young children by depicting the rivalry between the USA and eastern countries. Is it in our national interest, said he, to organize a large scale program of sports for young children if we want to become as competitive as these countries are? The main question was how to raise American children's level since East Germany, who had opted for mass education in sports, was proportionally more effective in competition. Rivalry predominated, and confrontation between the two blocks marred the issue, but in a way Michener promoted a better right to participate in sports for everyone. Through sports what Michener actually did was claiming his right to participate in politics.