

Sport and Identity:

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: In this collaborative conversation, we are honored to feature the words of Diana Asher, Shannon Gibney, Miranda Kenneally, Kristin Lenz, and Randy Ribay, five middle grade and YA authors who explore the relationship between sport and identity in their fiction. We appreciate their willingness to engage so thoughtfully and candidly in this discussion.

As to process, we generated and sent the authors a series of questions and then compiled their initial responses into a single document. The authors revised the conversation in a shared document to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result. We hope readers enjoy the weight and levity their insightful comments offer.

Why do you think you were drawn to writing about sport in your fiction?

Diana: The sport of cross country was important for my own kids, and it helped me tell a story about overcoming the odds, finding your team, and setting goals. I love the concept of the PR, or personal record. It's not just "Do your best." It means, "Aim to do better than you've done before." It can be a better racing time, or one more step, one more minute, one more try. Cross country is often the team that welcomes the not-so-gifted athlete, the kid who feels like he or she doesn't belong anywhere. It's a sport that proves that you don't have to be the best to contribute to a "win." And it offers plenty of opportunities to make readers laugh, too.

Miranda: When I look back on my life growing up in Tennessee, playing sports is the first thing that comes to mind. I played soccer and softball, and nearly every summer day was spent swimming at the city pool. I loved roller blading in the streets near my house, and even though I was terrible at basketball, I enjoyed shooting hoops in my backyard. Sports were such a big part of my young adult life, I couldn't imagine writing books without characters participating in some sort of sport.

Randy: Like Miranda, sports were a major part of my identity growing up. I played baseball, basketball, football, and rugby. I ran track. I wrestled. A significant percentage of my days as a kid/teen was spent at practice or games or meets, and many of my closest friends were those teammates sweating it out alongside me. It was only a matter of time before that part of my life found its way into my fiction.

Kristin: As a child, I was often home sick with poorly controlled asthma. I admired my friends who played soccer and ran track and the bonds they forged with teammates. But even when I was healthier in my late teens, my self-confidence was low, and the clamor of team sports didn't appeal to my introverted nature. The protagonist of *The Art of Holding on and Letting Go* (2016) is a competitive rock climber, and it was rock climbing where I finally found my athletic confidence and camaraderie, although it was much later when I was in

my twenties. I've often wondered how my teenage years might have been different if I'd discovered climbing earlier, and how other teens who aren't drawn to competitive team sports could benefit from this more individual, "quiet" pursuit, similar to what Diana described with cross country.

As a social worker, I've witnessed the transformation when teens who are struggling with any number of issues are able to breathe through challenges and support each other on a ropes course or a climbing wall. And when it's a real rock cliff outside in nature, the benefits can be extraordinary.

Shannon: With *See No Color* (2015), I knew I wanted to write a story about race, gender, identity, adoption, and (mis)belonging. And when I started to think about possible ways to explore these themes, baseball came to mind right away. Here you have "America's national pastime," absolutely exemplifying and holding all the incredible contradictions we find at the center of American life and identity: limited to no access for women and girls, at least at the highest levels until recently, and a culture of hyper-masculinity; exclusion of blacks and non-white players from the "best" leagues for years—but also legacies of resistance to these barriers (see Hank Aaron, the Negro Leagues players, Mo'ne Davis, etc.). In many ways, baseball was the perfect vehicle to explore these topics. Also, my characters' identities are always grounded in the experience of their bodies. So, it made sense that my protagonist is an elite athlete who is super-aware of how her body fits and doesn't fit, both on and off the field in all of these various social locations.

How do your characters navigate their athletic identities? How do these identities shape their views of themselves, others, and the communities they inhabit?

Miranda: For all of my characters who play sports, being athletic and highly engaged with their sport are simply parts of their identity. I can't parse out the athletic attributes from other parts of their character: being into sports is simply who they are. That being said, some of my characters are intrinsically good at sports, while others have had to work hard to improve their athletic ability in order

to participate. For instance, in my book *Breathe, Annie, Breathe* (2014), main character Annie is not athletic and can barely run a mile, but she wants to train to run a marathon in honor of her boyfriend who has died. She builds endurance and studies how to become a better runner. Athletes and coaches aren't the only participants in the sports community; several of my books feature strong cheerleaders who support the teams, as well as parents and siblings who come out for games. I try to show that an athlete's support system is critical to success.

Diana: In *Sidetracked* (2017), Joseph starts out knowing that he's in last place . . . on the playing field, in the classroom, on the popularity ladder—just about everywhere. His ADD makes school a struggle. He doesn't pick up social cues, so friendships are hard. In athletics, his shortcomings are on display in a very physical way. It takes a teacher, a friend, a coach, and family to help him realize that he truly does have strengths and is of value.

Randy: Bunny is the all-star basketball player who transfers from his inner-city public high school to play for an elite private school in *After the Shot Drops* (2018), so sport is absolutely central to his identity. But in addition to being part of how he understands himself, Bunny views basketball ultimately as a way to help his family. Unfortunately, this goal creates tension with his friends and his community, who feel like he's abandoning them the more his star rises. For his best friend, Nasir, who's not as talented, it's more about his connection with Bunny. So, when Bunny starts playing for a different team, it makes Nasir feel like that connection has been severed.

Kristin: Cara's identity as a rock climber in *The Art of Holding on and Letting Go* is deeply intertwined with her relationship with her parents and how she was raised—her childhood has been immersed in nature. She becomes a high-level climbing competitor, but it's much more than a sport to her; it's very much who she is and how she connects to our natural world. I wanted to explore what would happen when that world is turned upside down and she's sent very far away from everything

that she knows. I knew it would be interesting to discover how much of her identity she would hold on to and how much her new environment would reshape her beliefs and affect her relationships with her parents and friends.

Shannon: For Alex, the protagonist of *See No Color* (2015), there is really no division between her identity as a ball player and her other identities as a daughter, a teenager in school, and a member of her peer group—at least at the start of the book. And that becomes a problem for her very fast, because she starts to realize that this myth that she has been raised with, that she has this powerful “white male” body that can do anything—in baseball and life—is actually not true at all. She starts to realize and really *feel* at a bodily level that she has a *mixed black young woman’s body*, that this is different from the rest of her white family, and that she is going to have to reckon with this. It becomes the central conflict of the novel: can she be a mixed black young woman *and* the daughter she has been raised to be at the same time? Can she play baseball at the same level that she always has and become this person, this adult that she is realizing is her birthright?

What other personal identities (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, class, ability, etc.) intersect with, challenge, and/or complicate your characters’ sport-related identities?

Shannon: Alex’s whole existence is complicated by the fact that she occupies all these social identities and locations that are continually misread or not read at all. She is black in a white family. She is mixed among black people. She can’t perform black culture even though she is black. She is a female ball player in a male-dominated sport. She is adopted transracially in a culture that doesn’t want to and doesn’t know how to talk about race. She is growing up in an obviously black body in a culture and family that insist on the regime of colorblindness as the preferred method of negotiating difference. It’s a lot to hold for a young person, especially one with the kind of athletic gifts and drives as Alex, and we see the toll it takes.

Randy: Race, class, and gender definitely intersect to complicate the story of Bunny, who’s black, and Nasir, who’s half-Filipino and half-black (*After the Shot Drops*). However, in my novel, these dynamics operate in the opposite context from in Shannon’s story. Bunny grew up embedded in black culture, but now finds himself in a mostly white school for reasons he views as a necessity. Sports as a way out, as an “escape,” is a prevalent narrative in low-income communities of color like Whitman, the city in which these characters live. Many people don’t see an issue with this. Someone’s good at a sport, they get a college scholarship, yay, their life is fixed. But I wanted to problematize that “solution” by focusing on the tensions, the fallout, the isolation and alienation, etc. that result from someone living that out. The troubles with intimacy and communication that males often experience as part of their friendships further complicate the situation.

Diana: You did a great job in illustrating that inability to communicate, Randy. There were so many times I wanted to shake your characters and say, “Just talk to him!” Unfortunately, many young men can’t, or won’t, and it impacts so many parts of their lives.

Miranda: In my book *Catching Jordan* (2011), Jordan is a female quarterback. She is just as talented as the guys on her team, and she wants to play in college. Her teammates support and respect her, but her father worries she will get hurt during a game and discourages her from playing. Players from other teams and college coaches discriminate against her because of her sex. On top of that, Jordan often feels like she has to act like one of the guys so they will continue to respect her as quarterback, and in doing so, she abandons her femininity. Throughout the course of the book, she learns she can still be one of the guys and also embrace her feminine side.

Diana: Heather and Joseph (*Sidetracked*) both grapple with gender expectations, and athletics play a large part in that struggle. We’ve made progress, but there’s still a huge gap in the value placed on athletic ability among boys and girls. Athletic

talent doesn't elevate girls' social standing, as it does boys'. In fact, Heather is resented for being too athletically talented, too big and strong, better than the boys. On the flip side, girls aren't doomed to ridicule for being bad athletes as boys so often are. As Heather deals with her size and strength, Joseph looks in the mirror and sees a scrawny (totally normal) pre-teen body. He compares it to the strong, muscled teens he sees in a book on physical fitness. We often discuss the media's influence on girls' body images, but I tried to imagine what it would be like to be a boy like Joseph, seeing his body as one more way he doesn't live up to society's expectations.

Kristin: Rock climbing used to be a male-dominated, fringe sport—a nonconformist way of life—but Lynn Hill blew away the guys in Yosemite in the late 1970s–1980s, and the popularity of the sport continues to surge with new gyms opening all across the country. I wanted to explore this contrast of old-school versus new-school climbing. There are also various intersecting reasons why people are drawn to climbing—mental and physical challenge, competition, novelty, risk, escape, meditation, connection with nature—and sometimes these various aspects cause conflict.

In the United States, participation in athletics often requires certain privileges and results in certain powers. How do you explore these tensions in your novels?

Kristin: Climbing is an international sport, but in America, it's a very white sport. Strides are being made to make it more available to a diverse group of participants, indoors and outdoors, in urban and wilderness areas, but affordability and accessibility are barriers. Cara (*The Art of Holding on and Letting Go*) is white because I am white, and that's my story to tell, but she becomes friends with Jake, an African American climber at the gym. I received some pushback on this from an agent who read an early draft of the novel; she thought it would look like I'd simply added a "token black character." But I thought it was important to show this disparity, and it was actually very realistic. The climbing gym in my story was based on a real climbing gym

in Pontiac, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit with a predominantly African American population. But once you entered this gym, everyone there was white. There should have been local kids climbing there, so I created one. His story is not mine to tell, and there are other authors who are better able to authentically explore this tension.

Diana: Kristin, you make an important point—that financial realities and racial inequity can often not only influence but directly limit a young person's athletic choices. Racial prejudice alone has been a factor in limiting certain populations (e.g., African Americans were kept from playing quarterback), but financial need also dictates what sport a young athlete will choose. Jake is a talented climber, but it's expensive, it won't get him a college scholarship, and it's totally foreign to his community.

I love that you included Jake in your story. That's how change happens. Maybe Jake's story will lead a climbing gym to add a financial assistance or outreach program. Maybe a young African American athlete will read your book and discover the sport. We do, of course, need to be sensitive and accurate when we include diverse characters in our books, but wouldn't it be a shame if we all decided that it's safer not to try?

Randy: At the personal level, Nasir (*After the Shot Drops*) has a cousin named Wallace whose life is more impacted by poverty than Bunny's. He arguably needs help more than Bunny, but because he's not good at basketball, hardly anybody cares. Therefore, I see Wallace's presence in the story as the constant question of "Whom do we value?" At the systemic level, there's the enormous power wielded over Bunny's life by the private school and the institution of basketball overall. There are glimpses of the exploitation built into the high school athletics system that affect Bunny as well, given that at the end of the day, he's ancillary to the school's own interests.

Shannon: I think that all my writing is fundamentally about power and privilege in some way, particularly in terms of family and legacy. In *See No Color*, Alex is certainly privileged due to her proximity to whiteness, as well as the obvious class privileges

her family enjoys. As the daughter of a successful former professional baseball player, she also has access to world-class training, even if her father is something of a zealot and arguably over-trains her and her brother. She feels a sense of belonging and importance in her family, community, and peer group because of her athletic abilities, *particularly* because she is a girl in a male-dominated context. But what she starts to see is that these are personal liabilities as much as they are social assets. What parts of her, what truth, unexplored or otherwise, is she unwittingly sacrificing in order to enjoy these privileges and powers? In the end, she decides that it isn't worth it, that in order to find out who she is racially, culturally, socially, etc., she has to let go of this whole problematic story of the unquestioned dominance of the white male body and her determination to achieve the same athletic level with her own female body. She comes to understand that she must look to herself and her own mixed black woman's body.

Diana: In a broad sense, all my characters (*Side-tracked*) are privileged. They live a nice suburban life where sports offer a kind of life experience—following the rules, pushing to your limit, failure and success—that less affluent kids get by having a job or coping with the outside world. Charlie, the bully, has the greatest power and privilege at the start of the novel. He plays football, and his father is president of the golf club where Heather's father works. Being a boy, Charlie's athleticism brings him power, and his financial privilege also implicitly contributes to his tension with Heather. As a parent, I've seen how talented male athletes feel empowered from a very young age. I believe that confidence follows them through life. (Though it also makes them ripe for a fall. Read Philip Roth's [1997] *American Pastoral*.). My goal with *Side-tracked* was to shine a light on the kids who have to struggle to acquire any sense of power or confidence. Cross country gave me the tool for Joseph to do just that.

Miranda: Elite athletes are public figures that have a platform on which to promote important topics. For instance, Michael Phelps uses his fame as a swimmer to promote programs that teach young children

to swim and explain the dangers of drowning. High school varsity athletes have a similar gravitas, in that students often look up to the star of a school sports teams. Some of my characters are outgoing leaders, while others lack confidence. I try to show that even if you are great at sports, that doesn't mean you'll automatically be an extrovert that leads other people, and that's okay. We all have different strengths to bring to the table.

Do athletics shape your own author and/or personal identities?

Randy: Much less so now than when I was growing up. I don't often watch sports because I prefer to play them. I've coached girls' basketball and wrestling, and I still stay active—mostly through swimming and indoor rock climbing now—but it's not central to my life in the way it was when I was a kid or teen living for the next game or the next season. Yet, internally, I still view myself as an athlete, and many of the mental habits I learned from sports carry over into my writing and other parts of my life, such as the importance of teamwork, resilience, determination, and practice, practice, practice.

Diana: Honestly, music, nature, theater, and being a parent shape my identity as much as athletics do. Sport is one metaphor for me as an author. I'm now working on a book that centers on a middle school musical theater production. Running served me well in telling Joseph's story; I hope music and theater will serve me equally well.

Shannon: Yes, athleticism has always been a huge part of my life. It was definitely foundational to my experience as a young person, as I ran competitively in high school and also in college to a lesser extent. So many of the friendships I formed during that time in my life were about finding the strength in myself, physical and otherwise, to tackle obstacles, and in doing so, to learn something about myself. As young women, my best friend and I would go rock climbing, backpacking, and mountain biking, and we would always say, "I like what my body can *do*. I like how it feels to be strong." That was our way of subverting the always-present

cultural idea that how we looked as young women was the most important part of who we were. I have kept that with me as I've aged, as I've kept my close relationship with exercise and experiencing/enjoying the world through my physical body. And I can see the many ways it has transferred onto the page, as well.

Kristin: Yes, I love your answer, Shannon, and it's exactly what I was exploring with my character, Cara.

Miranda: My eyesight isn't the best anymore, so no more softball for me. However, I still enjoy running and lifting weights at the gym several times per week, and in the summer, you can still find me at the pool. I find that the healthier I am, the better I write and the happier I feel. Also, some of my best book ideas come to me when I'm outside running!

Kristin: Same here. There's something about walking and hiking that frees my mind to wander and create. I've heard many authors say the best cure for writer's block is leaving your desk and taking a walk.

Learning to climb as an adult brought me newfound confidence. I can grow strong muscles! I can breathe through stress and adversity! Friendships grow and deepen when you allow yourself to be vulnerable and trust that your friends have your back and you've got theirs. In climbing, your life truly depends on this; the stakes are high. I don't climb as often as I used to because of injuries and accessibility, but I've branched out to find other sports that I enjoy, such as yoga, which keeps me strong and limber (and breathing!). Climbing also showed me that being out in nature is most important to me, whether it's simply a walk around my neighborhood or a hike in the woods. My daughter has benefited from this time spent in nature, but also from more traditional team sports. This confidence building and camaraderie buffer the bombardment of conflicting messages in her social-media-saturated world, and they give her a way to be part of something that's bigger than herself. Sports can even give you voice—a way to speak up for yourself and others—whether it's on the field or in a story to be shared.

Diana Harmon Asher is the mother of three sons, all of whom were high school cross country and track and field athletes. Her son Bobby is now a marathoner, race director, and running coach. Her husband Henry runs every single morning. Diana runs much less frequently, and very slowly, but is proud to have completed the Invest in Yourself 5k in Omaha and the Flats Mile in the Bronx's Van Cortlandt Park last spring. Diana graduated from Yale University with a BA in English and lives with her husband and their dog and cat in Westchester, New York. Sidetracked is Diana's first novel. Her next novel will be published by Abrams in the spring of 2020.

Shannon Gibney is a writer, educator, activist, and the author of See No Color, winner of the 2016 Minnesota Book Award in Young Peoples' Literature. Gibney is a faculty member in English at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, where she teaches critical and creative writing, journalism, and African Diasporic topics. A Bush Artist and McKnight Writing Fellow, her critically-acclaimed novel, Dream Country, is about more than five generations of an African descended family crisscrossing the Atlantic, both voluntarily and involuntarily (Dutton, 2018).

Growing up in Tennessee, Miranda Kenneally dreamed of becoming an Atlanta Brave, a country singer (cliché!), or a UN interpreter. Instead, she writes and works for the State Department in Washington, DC, where George W. Bush once used her shoulder as an armrest. Miranda loves Twitter, Star Trek, and her husband.

Kristin Bartley Lenz is a writer and social worker from metro-Detroit who fell in love with the mountains when she moved to Georgia and California. Now she's back in Detroit where she plots wilderness escapes and manages the Michigan Chapter blog for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). Her fiction, essays, and articles have been published by Hunger Mountain, Great Lakes Review, and Writer's Digest. Her debut young adult novel, The Art of Holding on and Letting Go, was the 2016 Helen Sheehan YA Book Prize winner and a 2016 Junior Library Guild Selection; it was also chosen for the 2017–2018 Great Lakes Great Books statewide literature program. Learn more at www.kristinbartleylenz.com.

Randy Ribay is the author of An Infinite Number of Parallel Universes and After the Shot Drops. He was born in the Philippines and raised in the Midwest. A graduate of the University of Colorado, Boulder, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education, he is a high school English

teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area where he lives with his wife and two dog-children.

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