PREFACE

American sports fiction of the latter half of twentieth century has witnessed a wide variety of narratives, both in form and conception. A mere thematic reading of the representative novels this thesis has chosen, would be insufficient for a proper understanding of the different discursive tropes and semes they present. Although the novels selected have sport as the basis of its plot, the 'playfulness' of its structure demand the use of certain modern critical theories to analyse them. The post Second World War scenario in America necessitated a reorientation on the part of the writers to grapple with the realm of uncertainty and chance. Mimetic representation of sport would not suffice to comprehend the reality. Sporting fiction, traditionally conceived of as a self-enclosed one, with no outside referentiality is a thing of the past. Baseball, football and even a non-American sport, bullfight, has emerged as vehicles for effecting this reorientation.

The thesis entitled Playful Fictions and Fictional Players takes into consideration for a detailed analysis only six representative works from American sports fiction written after 1950s: Robert Coover’s The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop. (1968) and Philip Roth’s The Great American Novel (1973) are baseball novels. Coover’s Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears? (1987), Don Delillo’s End Zone (1972) and Frederick Exley’s A Fan’s Notes: A Fictional Memoir (1968) have football as its main plot. Wright Morris’s The Field of Vision (1956) takes bullfight as its sporting theme.
The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter one, Introduction, gives a detailed overview of American sports fiction and the emergence of a new sub-genre in American literary world. The evolution of the concept of 'play' in various stages of human knowledge is traced. It further examines the dialectical swing between play and sport; game and fiction. Finally, the chapter explains the application of some of the theories used to analyse the six novels. The second chapter makes a detailed introspection of the playfulness of language (End Zone) and a play at language and literature (Universal Baseball Association). Delillo's narrative effects a coming together of football, language and apocalyptic vision. Roth's narrator-subject indulges in a paranoid fantasy through which he subverts the exploitation of language and plays a series of literary games with his readers.

The third chapter deals with the two novels of Coover: Universal Baseball Association and Gloomy Gus. Though the narrative technique is different in these two novels, the authors play the narrative game with the text and the reader. The narrative structure in the former gives a mise-en-abyme effect to the protagonist's outer and inner worlds. The last chapter of the novel is highly self-conscious and marks the vanishing of the gamewright. The novel brings into play a highly complex 'godgame.' The latter narrative technically and thematically works out the football principles of difference and collision. Two stories run parallel to one another: the present of the narrator and the protagonist, and the protagonist's past. The fourth chapter consists of two novels: Exley's A Fan's Notes and Morris's Field of Vision. Witnessing or sports spectating is as important an aspect as playing. These two narratives do not have player-participants in it. The
consciousness of the witnesses posits a success-failure antithesis. The reader/spectator bringing a certain competence from outside labours to get a reading on the game and its heroic figures and moments, constructs his own text. The dynamic character of the reading/spectating process is brought to play using the tools of the reader-response theory.

The concluding chapter analyses the findings of the research work and lays bare the major strands of 'play' elements in the novels chosen. Sports narratives make use of different discursive structures to comprehend the complexities of postmodern realities. The metaphoric and metonymic planes of sport and game converge in the creation of narratives that abound in all the play modes: "playing back to," "playing beyond" and "playing between."