



BOOKS

The “greatest sports book ever written” is a mystery to Americans, for reasons all too revealing of national character.

Bowling Alone

BY JOSEPH O’NEILL

To all but a tiny fraction of Americans, cricket is among the most mysterious and unimportant of sizeable human activities. The combination of triviality and obscurity is what’s significant. Thus the game of curling—in which a smooth, heavy, orbicular rock is launched across ice and escorted to its target by a pair of furiously sweeping ushers—may be cricket’s equal in its apparent inconsequentiality, but at least it is very quickly understandable and, thanks to its appearance in the Winter Olympics, briefly commands our sniggering attention once every four years. Cricket, on the other hand, is never on mainstream television—not even during the sport’s own quadrennial festival, the Cricket World Cup—and is never,



even when watched for some while, anything other than baffling: Cricketers on a field are to your typical American onlooker as arcane as M’ikmaq hieroglyphs scratched on birch bark.

I know this for a fact because for years I have played cricket here, in the United States. From time to time, as I have stood at my fielder’s station on the boundary of the playing field, a passerby has asked me what is going on, and I have attempted to explain; and each time, the conversation has ended with my interlocutor giving a humorous shake of the head and professing—not without a certain pride, I have sensed—his enduring confusion. The oddity, of course, is that cricket is the biggest bat-and-ball game in the world. It is played or followed by fathomless

millions. Kids—even American kids—have no problem picking up the basics of the pastime in the course of a single sunny afternoon. This summer, I asked my two oldest sons—gum-chewing, DC-wearing Manhattanites aged 7 and 6—if they wanted to play some cricket; they agreed, and chattered about it to their classroom buddies. Before long, a group of seven or eight kids from PS 3 were batting and bowling once a week at the cement playground at Hudson and Horatio. You might still be able to see traces of the wicket they chalked onto the wall.

The general American mystification with cricket, then, is not merely anomalous but a tad perverse—you might even say it’s the stuff of a national blind spot (“a region of understanding in which

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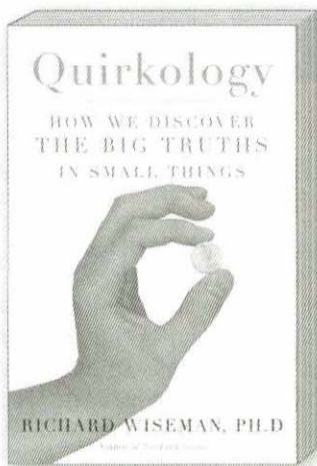
How can you tell someone is lying?

Why do incompetent politicians win elections?

How does your last name influence your personality?

What is the funniest joke in the world?

What is the best pick-up line?



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BASIC BOOKS
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one's intuition and judgment always fail," according to my dictionary). Well, what of it? Why *not* turn a blind eye to a complicated, time-consuming, weird-looking sport? And don't we have our own game involving sticks and balls and hot summer days?

A possibly eccentric but, I would suggest, far-reaching response to this line of argument would be as follows: To be deprived of knowledge of cricket is to be deprived, at the very least, of a full appreciation of C. L. R. James's strange and wonderful *Beyond a Boundary*, the American publication of which occurred almost a quarter century ago. The original, British publication came in 1963, and ever since, the book has gone down pretty well with the critics. "To say 'the best cricket book ever written' is piffingly inadequate praise," blurbs the most current U.K. paperback edition, which quotes this further encomium:

Great claims have been made for [*Beyond a Boundary*]: that it is the greatest sports book ever written; that it brings the outsider a privileged insight into West Indian culture; that it is a severe examination of the colonial condition. All are true.

Such praise cannot be dismissed as self-serving hyperbole: Derek Walcott has written of "a noble book," and V. S. Naipaul, in the days before his glorious unpleasantness had fully manifested itself (needless to say, he eventually turned on James), rejoiced at "one of the finest and most finished books to come out of the West Indies."

In this country, however, *Beyond a Boundary* is barely read. Although there now exists a veritable academic industry devoted to the study and celebration of James's brilliant and idiosyncratic political-historical-literary oeuvre, very little attention is paid to the meditative, cricket-saturated memoir—if that's what it is—for which he is most widely known. The reason is that its contents are largely incomprehensible. An anonymous prefatory "Note on Cricket" in the American edition states that the

themes of this book reach, as its title suggests, far beyond the boundaries of the cricket field, and no detailed knowledge of the game is needed to appreciate their implications.

That's a good one. The truth is that unless you know cricket, you haven't got a snowball's chance in Port of Spain of knowing what C. L. R. James—whose triply initialed name belongs in a cricket scorebook—means to say. For example, in the book's opening section, he describes for two rhapsodic pages a Trinidadian master of cutting named Arthur Jones. I know exactly what he's on about because I know cricket; indeed, from the age of 10 (in Europe, then in the U.S.A.), I have hit countless cut shots through the segment between point and third man. *You*, on the other hand, almost certainly wouldn't know a cut from a shaving nick, or a third man from Harry Lime.

Of course, it's quite possible to enjoy a piece of writing while remaining at a loss about much of what it means: Think of the murky pleasure to be derived from leafing through, say, the poems of Neruda with nothing but a smattering of Mediterraneanese (that quasi-language comprising remembered bits of French, Italian, and Spanish) to draw on.

The foreignness of *Beyond a Boundary* is not this extreme. For one thing, it is written in English—and grippingly so, for James writes with a philosopher's love of exactness. For another thing, it contains passages that make familiar sense. When, for example, the author recalls the agonizing matter of his choosing which cricket club to join—this is colonial Trinidad in the '20s, and the membership of each club accords with a particular shade of skin color—we recognize the casual self-excoriation involved in the statement "I became one of those dark men whose surest sign of ... having arrived is the fact that he keeps company with people lighter in complexion than himself." And when he discusses race and memory—a discussion that includes the aside that T. S. Eliot "is of special value

BEYOND A BOUNDARY

by C. L. R. James
Duke

to me in that in him I find more often than elsewhere, and beautifully and precisely stated, things to which I am completely opposed"—or, say, his obsession with *Vanity Fair* (the satirical Thackeray novel, not the self-satirizing magazine), or tells the story of how his grandfather saved the day at the sugarcane factory, we know where we are.

But such moments are no more than clearings in a forest: If James expands his cultural references, it is only in order that he can return us, with uncompromising specificity, still deeper into the thickets of cricket. For instance:

This modern theory that the leg-gance does not pay is a fetish, first because you can place the ball, and secondly if you can hook then the life of long-leg is one long frustration.

He kept the ball well up, swinging in late from outside the off-stump to middle-and-off or thereabouts.

To the length ball he gets back and forces Grimmett away between mid-wicket and mid-on or between mid-wicket and square-leg.

At no point, it should be stated, is James engaging in gratuitous sports talk; these technicalities are integral to human portraits of certain cricketers, who themselves shed light on politics and aesthetics, which in turn are illuminants of ... cricket. For it is James's elaborately articulated claim that cricket *simpliciter* is a worthy end of inquiry—indeed, is an art on a par with theater, ballet, opera, and dance. "What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?" is the central, famous question asked by the book; and it's a question that by its very terms argues for an expansion, and elevation, of our understanding of this sport.

It would be easy, indeed boringly so, to poke fun at such an enterprise (can there be a more old-fashioned theoretical quest than the true definition of art?). Much more interesting is the question of what underlies James's unusual and passionate attempt to upset established cultural hierarchies and categories. An answer, as James makes delightfully clear in the first chapter of *Beyond a Boundary*, begins in 1907 with a window

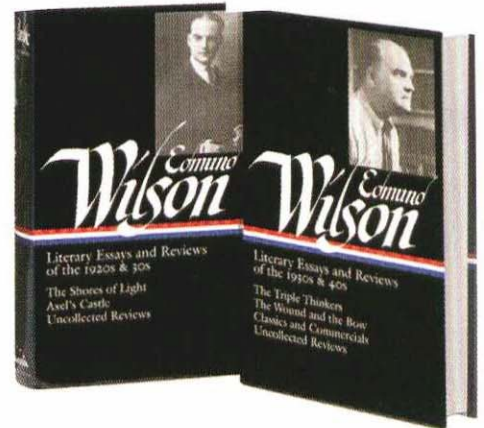
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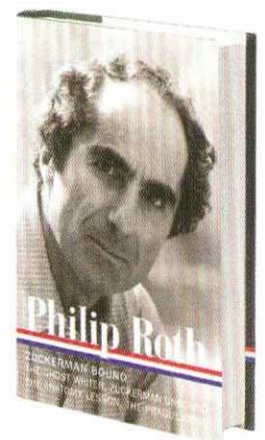
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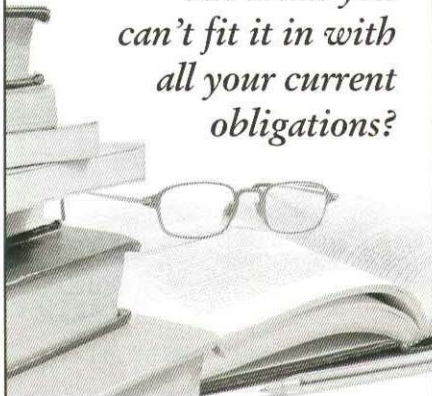


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in Tunapuna, a small town in provincial Trinidad.

The window in question belonged to the James family, in a house “superbly situated, exactly behind the wicket” of the recreation ground on which local men played cricket. By standing on a chair, a 6-year-old boy could for hours watch black men dressed in white repetitively organizing themselves into mysterious patterns on a green sunlit space, and could hear the sounds that not long before had enchanted a school-boy named Stephen Dedalus:

and from here and from there through the quiet air the sound of the cricket bats: pick, pack, pock, puck: like drops of water in a fountain falling softly in the brimming bowl.

It was at his window that James also received some of his “strongest early impressions of personality in society,”

of the monasteries, particularly in the small towns.

The window, then, gave onto cricket, which in due course gave onto wider, more complex prospects in which the athletic and the beautiful and the political were fused. The fusion was reinforced at school: James was the youngest boy to win an exhibition to Queen’s Royal College, in Port of Spain, a colonial institution at which the future Marxist radical, Pan-Africanist, and “declared enemy of British imperialism and all its ways and works” acquired a lifelong veneration of Thomas Arnold, the headmaster of Rugby School and principal creator of the Victorian public-school ethos. This Puritan ethos, in James’s admiring (if not downright starry-eyed) view, ensured, among other good things, that “cricket and football provided a meeting place for the moral outlook of the dissenting middle classes and the athletic instincts

There is an irony here, namely that cricket was, as it happens, the first modern American team sport.

noticing in particular how his neighbor, a terrifying no-good character named Matthew Bondman, found respite from his “pitiable existence as an individual” because he could bat. The Jameses were above the likes of Bondman. True, their Cousin Nancy remembered her days as a slave before the 1834 abolition, but C.L.R. was the son of a teacher, and the teacher was the son of a man who rose from “the mass of poverty, dirt, ignorance and vice” to become a pan boiler on a sugar estate (usually a white man’s job) and a wearer of top hats and frock coats to church. The experience of growing up in an atmosphere of ever-threatened respectability led James to observe—a typically erudite sweep across time and space, this—

I believe I understand pretty much how the average sixteenth-century Puritan in England felt amidst the decay which followed the dissolution

of the aristocracy.” He read and cherished Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, and on the college cricket field, he learned never to question the umpire’s decision, never to cheat, never to complain or make excuses: “This code became the moral framework of my existence. It has never left me.”

This quaint indisposition to self-pity stood James in good stead in later years. It also, along with his ideological inclination to analyze society in economic terms, underpinned an instinctive distaste for racial partisanship. The racism he saw in Trinidad cricket, he coolly recalled, “was in its time and place a natural response to local social conditions, did very little harm and sharpened up the game.”

Stiff upper lip notwithstanding, the young James neglected his studies and, much to his retrospective relief, did not (unlike Naipaul) leave Trinidad on an



THE GREAT Trinidadian cricketer Learie Constantine (left) was C. L. R. James's sporting and intellectual mentor, and a key figure in *Beyond a Boundary*.

Oxbridge scholarship. For about 10 years, he taught school and wrote journalism; autodidactically deepened his passion for literature and history; and immersed himself in the ragtag but highly charged world of Trinidad cricket, an amusement offering modes of self-realization that were simply unavailable elsewhere in the culture:

Social and political passions, denied normal outlets, expressed themselves so fiercely in cricket (and other games) precisely because they were games.

He was a handy batsman and bowler, which brought him into contact with the superior class of local players. One of these, Learie Constantine, who became a renowned club professional in Lancashire, inspired James to think politically and, as James put it, cracked his shell of 19th-century intellectualism.

GETTY IMAGES

Most consequentially, Constantine (later Lord Constantine, eminent also as a British public servant) advised him to go to England. The year was 1932, and C. L. R. James was a 31-year-old nobody. In England, this was to change dramatically.

James's career took off on an amazing, even berserk trajectory. Constantine, a much-loved figure in Lancashire, was in great demand for public speaking, and he asked the new arrival to share the load. In this way, James quickly developed a reputation for cleverness and exotic charm. Very soon he published (with Constantine's money) his first book, *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, also known as *The Case for West Indian Self-Government*; landed a job as a cricket correspondent for *The Guardian*; published a novel, *Minty Alley*, that he'd written in the West Indies (it was, he claimed, the first novel by a black West

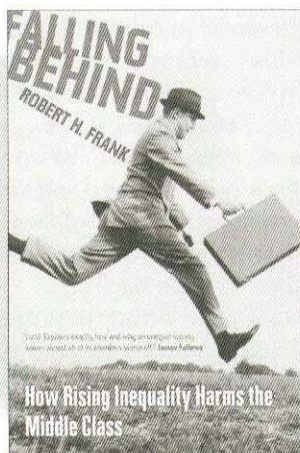
Indian to appear in England); wrote a play about Toussaint L'Ouverture that was staged in the West End with none other than Paul Robeson playing the lead; published a study of the Haitian slave uprising, *The Black Jacobins*, which half a century later was described by Edward Said as a "brilliantly written and stirring masterpiece of historical writing—surely among the great books of 20th-century scholarship"; and, concurrently to all these literary endeavors, became fatefully embroiled in political theory and activism. He joined the Marxist Group—a Trotskyist organization—and wrote *World Revolution*, a history of the Communist International that attracted the admiration of Trotsky himself.

It bears mentioning that James loathed Stalin and his Soviet Union, suggesting in 1937, in the teeth of much comradely opinion, that the dictator's "corrupt and limited personality" ideally equipped him to act as a "second or successor to a Hitler or a Mussolini." Mussolini was a particular target of disdain for James, who on top of everything else was the chair of the International African Friends of Abyssinia, and duly became active in the International African Service Bureau.

Beyond a Boundary, however, barely refers to any of this. The chapters devoted to James's English period (1932–38) are in effect a study of his mentor Constantine's development as a league cricketer and as a human being. Rather than dwell on the next dramatic lurch in his life—his move to America—James veers into a detailed, statistic-heavy, and sparkingly personal assessment of George Headley, the great Jamaican batsman. (James's portraits of cricketers have the urgency of submissions confronting a deep injustice.) Then, having mentioned as an aside that in 1941 he began to question the premises of Trotskyism, he articulates a theory about the conjunction of the popular demands for sports and for democracy, from ancient Greece to the overthrow of Napoleon III. And after that, he embarks on a very lengthy and nostalgic study of W. G. Grace, the legendary Victorian cricketer whose stature and effect can be

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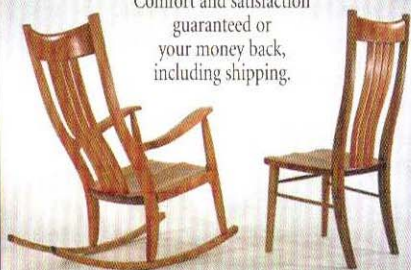
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understood only if one were to imagine a golfing colossus in whom the charismatic and sporting qualities of Arnold Palmer, Seve Ballesteros, and Tiger Woods have been compounded. It's fascinating stuff, yes, terrific social history as well as biography, but it's hardly accessible or, on the face of it, of terrible relevance to the American reader.

There is an irony here, namely that cricket was, as it happens, the first modern American team sport—which is to say, a sport properly organized and monitored. Benjamin Franklin was very interested in cricket, and by 1779 at least two teams, Brooklyn and Greenwich, were turning out regularly. More teams sprang up, and in 1838, the first formally constituted club, the St. George Club of New York City, came into being. Matches for money were played: In 1844, a Toronto team won a \$1,000 purse in front of several thousand spectators in New York. Most of the players were British expats, but in Philadelphia, significant numbers of homegrown Americans took up the sport as an elite pastime and produced great cricketers and great clubs. Earlier this year, I played in Philadelphia at the Merion and Germantown and Philadelphia cricket clubs, where for a few weeks a year the tennis nets are stowed away and the gigantic, magnificently maintained lawns are restored to their original use.

My own club, Staten Island C. C., dates back to 1872, and is the oldest continuously active cricket club in the country. For almost a century and a quarter it has made its home at Walker Park, a little ground on the island's north shore. Walker Park and its cricketers once formed a hub of New York society, hosting fêtes champêtres and lawn tennis and attracting coverage in the sports and society pages.

These days, the social cachet of the club is zero. It's not that we're a particularly disreputable bunch, but that our sport overwhelmingly belongs to newly arrived immigrants from the Caribbean or South Asia. With very few exceptions (among them, years ago in Texas,

J. M. Coetzee), Englishmen and Australians and South Africans don't bother to unpack their bats and whites, on account (I'm guessing) of the small, scruffy, thickly grassed and weedy fields that we play on, most of which are situated in public parks in downscale neighborhoods and come as a shock to a newcomer used to better things. He sees a playing track made not of turf but of coconut matting stretched over clay, and he sees a rough, overgrown outfield that undermines his notion of what batting is all about: hitting the ball along the ground, over beautifully mowed grass. There's a baseball diamond in a corner of the field, indifferent cars roar nearby, and the players seem a little lost. He sees, in short, a game lacking in the orderliness and visual splendor that offer an alternative to the graceless wider world: To play cricket properly is to submit not only to complex athletic disciplines—there are scores of ways to make runs, and scores of ways to bowl the ball, and scores of ways to position the fielders—but, for the duration of a hot day, to an altered sense of time.

Although arrived from England, I have played for many seasons in and around New York, and if the experience has been only roughly and intermittently blissful, it's always been fun. The recent inflow of West Indians and, especially, Indians, Pakistanis, and Sri Lankans has made the game more popular now than at any other point in American history. There are well over a hundred clubs in the New York metropolitan area, for example, and substantial concentrations in Florida and California. Occasionally somebody dreams of capitalizing on this historic influx and schemes to set up proper facilities and proper institutions. Nothing significant has come of this yet, partly because the national administration of the sport is crippled by infighting and incompetence, and partly because cricket is still regarded as a joke by the powers that be.

Staten Island C. C.'s heyday ended when the 20th century began, on account—or so my reading of the newspaper reports from that time suggests—of a rivalrous golf club established by the

cricket club's members. The traditional and more general explanation is that cricket found itself in competition with, and lost out to, baseball—another game drenched in memory and in sensual impressions of youth, of summer, of recurrence. Various sociological theories have emerged as to why this happened, and underlying much of them is the notion, more implied than expressed, that to get to the bottom of the matter is to get to the bottom of America's mystical, exceptional identity. As Jacques Barzun famously suggested, "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball."

In any case, C. L. R. James did not see a single cricket match in the 15 years he lived in America. This isn't surprising, because he was busy. Arriving in 1938 to lecture on the Negro struggle, he stayed on as a full-time agitator. His activities included meeting Trotsky in Mexico, helping out sharecroppers on strike in Missouri (his suggested tactics

anticipated those of the civil-rights movement), and of course putting pen to paper: Installments of his *Notes on Dialectics*—an analysis of dialectical materialism that is still very readable—would be sent to Detroit autoworkers, who would read it and sit up all night discussing Hegel. James spent a lot of energy revising his revolutionary views and affiliations. He quit the Socialist Workers' Party for the Workers' Party, and set up a faction named, like a bad rock band, the Johnson-Forest Tendency, which itself then rejoined the SWP and finally gave rise to a group named, like a cool rock band, the Correspondence Publishing Committee.

This merry-go-round came to a sudden stop in 1952. James was arrested by the INS and taken to Ellis Island to await deportation hearings. Surrounded by "sailors, 'isolatoes,' renegades and castaways from all parts of the world," he feverishly wrote a critical study of Herman Melville in which his fellow

detainees are likened to the crew of the *Pequod* (whose journey is that of "modern civilization seeking its destiny") and Ahab to a henchman of state capitalism. Rather curiously, and to the distaste of some of his admirers, James ended the book with a personal plea for American citizenship. He sent copies of the work to every member of Congress, hoping they'd buy into his conception of a United States that might accommodate an alien of his sort. They didn't. James was deported.

He lived in England for five years, and then went back to Trinidad, where as a campaigning journalist and editor he was instrumental in securing the captaincy of the West Indian cricket team for a black man, Frank Worrell—not because of his skin color, but because of his personal merits. The controversy is movingly documented in the last chapters of *Beyond a Boundary* and ends happily, with the West Indians, through their cricket captain Worrell, finally making "a public entry into the comity of nations."

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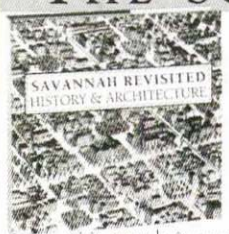
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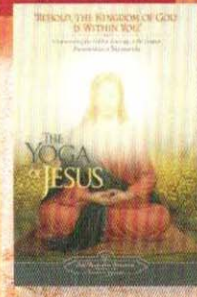
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James eventually returned to London, holing up in a flat in Brixton. As he grew into a wizened, frail old charmer, he began to acquire the iconic status he enjoys today. He died in 1989. His reputation (speaking of the *Pequod*) is an extraordinary ship in which Marxists, cricket buffs, black activists, Pan-Africanists, and lovers of belles lettres sail together, albeit fractiously.

In this country, the Jamesian focus is primarily on his U.S. years; the Melville book is particularly hot property, not least because of its spooky pre-science about the workings of the Bush administration. More interestingly, it has been seized on by academics in the world of American studies. They see in its methodology and stateless viewpoint

cricket to blur boundaries between white and black, colonized and colonizer, ancient and modern, political and social, he stages a brilliant attack on "that categorization and specialization, that division of the human personality, which is the greatest curse of our time." His concern was profound and by no means abstract. Are there more-consequential divisions of human personality than the ones currently imposed by religion and nationality?

The trouble, of course, is that Americans, even if they are Americanists, can't read *Beyond a Boundary*. They can follow the words, but with what prospect of understanding them? How could their reading not be riddled with misconceptions, guesses, gray areas? E. P. Thompson

"What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?" is the central, famous question asked by *Beyond a Boundary*.

a pioneering effort to reject the insular, exceptionalist narratives by which America explains itself. They see, that is, a way of moving beyond multiculturalism—which implicitly reinforces the notion of the United States as a place of unique value—to so-called postnationalism.

Biographically, James is a good fit for postnationalists. He drifted from one country to another, a vagrancy paralleled by his refusal to submit to the disciplinary jurisdictions in which he also wandered: Not many thinkers hold Thackeray and Marx in equal estimation, or regard games and politics as comparable vessels of ethical and social values. But the trouble with the American postnationalists, as at least one scholar, Christopher Gair, has pointed out, is that they focus on James's American output; and in doing so, they linger in the very American mythological space they are supposedly trying to lead us out of. What they should be doing instead is reading *Beyond a Boundary*.

For this book is where James offers the most complex, literary, and heartfelt synthesis of his preoccupations. Using

once remarked, "I'm afraid that American theorists will not understand this, but the clue to everything lies in [James's] proper appreciation of the game of cricket." Unfortunately, he was right.

Now, it's true that cricket is not quite as remote as it once was. It is the national sport of India, a new world power; and earlier this year *The New York Times* ran a front-page story about the murder of the Pakistan cricket coach, Bob Woolmer (who, it turned out, was not murdered at all). It's also true that to write about cricket in this country is no longer to surrender automatically to the hegemony of American culture; until quite recently, the word *cricketer*, when typed into my computer, would be underscored by a squiggly red line. But the mystery of cricket is still equivalent to the mystery of the Other.

It's a shame. It puts C. L. R. James's greatest book beyond a boundary. It also raises James's big question in another form: What do they know of America who only America know? ■

Joseph O'Neill's novel *Netherland* will be published in 2008 by Pantheon.