



# A Fan's Notes

*Frederick Exley*

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## A Fan's Notes Frederick Exley

This fictional memoir, the first of an autobiographical trilogy, traces a self-professed failure's nightmarish descent into the underside of American life and his resurrection to the wisdom that emerges from despair.

## A Fan's Notes Details

Date : Published September 1988 by Vintage Contemporaries (first published 1968)

ISBN : 9780679720768

Author : Frederick Exley

Format : Paperback 385 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels, Sports and Games, Sports, Literature

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## From Reader Review A Fan's Notes for online ebook

### Hannah Garden says

Holy moly you guys this is hell of bananas good. I accidentally started being in love with my neighbor and so it took me forever to finish but given more normal circumstances I'd've zipped through it like a regular greased kitten. A real roast beef hoogie of a book, slaaaam bangin.

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### AC says

This is not a book about sports. If you don't know who Frederick Exley is -- and I didn't till I found it among Thomas' books (or was it a recommendation from him...? - well, either way...) -- then don't not read it because you think it's about sports. It has nothing to do with sports, except that that is one of the author's obsessions -- but he could just as well be obsessed about anything else (and he is)... there is very little discussion about sports in it.

Frederick Exley, as his friend Jonathan Yardley said, had one brilliant book in him -- and tore himself apart to get it out of himself. Obsession, mental illness, raw honesty (ultimately), alcoholism... and what a book, it is! It is about one man's search for just a corner of authenticity in an America (of the late 50's, early 60's) that was already becoming wholly inauthentic.

I recently criticised some of these SF writers I've been reading for writing too much, too fast -- All it takes is one book to justify a life -- if it's a real book -- it's that fucking hard to pull either some honesty out of the soul, covered with accretions like Proteus, or to find that little kernel of even objective truth hidden amidst all the sophistry and bullshit. One REAL..., one good book -- and you've paid your debt. In full.

Exley, imo, is paid up.... In full.

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### Alex Kudera says

I'm past the Mr. Blue section, on about page 300. At least one critic has considered that the Mr. Blue section doesn't fit within the novel, that it could be deleted, but I think it belongs because it contrasts Exley's largely passive life with Mr. Blue's active one as an outside salesman and a guy who will do push-ups if you shout, "Mr. Blue, give me fifty." The life of the salesman is also an archetypal American life, work to provide for family, etc., and Exley means to show us how this life is opposed his own.

UPDATE: A few days ago, I finished, maybe my fourth time through cover to cover, and it was only occasionally that I felt obliged to continue even as I knew that I must be neglecting so many other good books that I'll probably never have a chance to read. . .

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## Bart says

What makes this book so marvelous - and so much better than the others in the genre it launched - is how apparently unconscious it is of itself. It tells a story with self-deprecation, eloquence and wit, without any of the snide and self-consumed irony that clutters most memoirs.

The writing is marvelous. Not till about the 300th page does Frederick Exley reuse any of his other phrases, and only then does he forgivably recycle *in all of Christendom*. Page after page, a reader approaches the end of a sentence expecting one phrase and finding another.

Here's my favorite sentence from *A Fan's Notes* (though there are at least nine others I like about as well):

*By the time of contact it was getting light, very cold, with that glacial, white world spread all about one on the lonely road; and one didn't dare look down in fear of seeing a half-dressed, broken-bra'ed, bedraggled, pimply, snot-nosed, shivery-assed creature feigning her conscience-inducing sleep, trying not to moan, as if indeed a scarcely erect, zipper-scraped, partially raw instrument could induce even tremors, not to mention ecstatic moans (in all truth it occurs to me now that if one girl had, on her parents' night at the Avon, taken me into her bedroom, taken off her clothes, and taken me into bed with her, I would have married her, got a job as a brakeman on the New York Central, raised eleven children, and lived happily ever after on pork chops and Genesee 12-Horse Ale).*

And no apology follows. Perhaps that's the most charming part of the book. Not once does the author wink at you to let you know that, well, he's really just trying to be clever and literary. Though "Ex" desperately wants to be thought of as a writer - and this is where Henry Miller seems to precede him, some - he writes like he could care less about other writers' opinions and put-on sensibilities. Contrast that with most memoirs that have followed - written by persons who pretend not to care if they're outcasts, all the while bending their prose such that they won't get bounced from the stool of their favorite Village hotspot.

Here's an example of the latter sort of writing. It comes from David Gates' *Jernigan*, which, though it is a novel, is very much a part of Exley's genre:

*Well, at least we hadn't made him a homosexual, although of course I knew that you didn't make someone a homosexual. But thinking about Rick you wondered if Judith might have been carrying a homosexual gene or something that was in the family. I was relieved that it had stayed recessive (if it existed) although that was wrong too, to feel relieved, because homosexuality was just another way of being.*

That's what a bad, contemporary Exley impersonation looks like. For a sentence or two, the author puts away his dimwitted narrator and intrudes like crazy. If Exley were even capable of that sort of self-fascinated writing when he made *A Fan's Notes*, he certainly never let any of it sneak in.

*A Fan's Notes* is every good thing people say it is.

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## Vit Babenco says

**Frederick Exley** belongs among those champions who after ruining one's life spends years trying to climb out of shit and for this strenuous endeavour is considered to be a valiant and sagacious hero...

He was an incorrigible dreamer, romantic visionary. He believed the world couldn't wait to throw its arms around him...

"I was willfully acting in such a way as to alienate myself. But I doubt the validity of this. I had large faith—the faith of youth—in the city's capacity to absorb me, hair-do and all; and it was only after summer was gone and autumn was casting long shadows that I began to take these rejections as personal affronts. It is very wearing to be honest, no matter how naïve or misreckoned that honesty is, and continue to be spurned for it. After a time it becomes numbing, like heavy, repeated blows to the face."

To erase a borderline between dreams and reality he starts drinking, he hides behind his fantasies...

"Constantly one yearned to dispel the reality in favor of the idyllic. But then that other sound would come, that wail."

And he finds himself astray in the inimical hedonistic society, and he hates it and tries to fight back but just goes under yet deeper. He turns desperate and cynical...

"I read, or glanced at, only those articles about cinema starlets nobody has ever heard of. These pieces fascinated me for their subjects were well on their way to becoming insane... The girls were part of America's plenty and, once used, one disposed of them the way one got rid of a Cadillac and moved on to an Aston-Martin."

*A Fan's Notes* are permeated with the beat generation bravado and bitterness of deceived expectations. But **Frederick Exley** is an honest writer and his truth is full of squalor and pain.

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## **Sam says**

During the course of reading this book, I discovered that my father, one of my best friends, and my mother all thought it was one of the best books of all time. If I hadn't discovered this, I probably would have put it down after a hundred pages. But what a great first hundred pages! As long as Exley talks about being insane/the New York Giants, this book is a piece of demented genius. Exley is really sharp about American culture and how sports culture fits into it, and he puts down the details of his own mental collapse(s) in a forthright, hilarious manner. Unfortunately, Exley isn't particularly smart about his many unsuccessful relationships with women, and because these take up a good three chapters - the weakest in the book - long stretches of absolutely rancid misogyny make it hard to slog through the middle. But whatever; I still give it four stars, because there are sections of total brilliance. I will warn the casual reader, though - Exley writes in this strange, quasi-Fitzgeraldian tone that seems pretty pompous at first, until you realize it's an elaborate self-mockery.

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## **Trevor Jones says**

Another reviewer writes, "Exley is basically an east coast Bukowski with the expected enhanced neuroses and over educated self obsession." If that sentence excites you, or if it turns you off, that just about does it in a sense for this one-hit sixties wonder (his other books truly are mediocre). On a personal level however, this book was so much more, as it struck a distinct chord in my brain and sent me spiralling into a season-length depression (aided by Richard Ford's terrible-yet-somehow-similar *The Sportswriter*) in which I read nothing but newspapers for three months. And how!

And, like the protagonist, I tended to yes open the sports and arts section prior to the actual front page. It was this act that gave me some retroactive sympathy for Exley's disgusting on-page persona, although during the book his blithering and self-loathing seemed subtle enough in congruence with my own I wrote it up to an

idea that that is how all American males are. The ennui, restlessness, apathy, etc. etc. veering, in Exley's case, into full-bore alcoholic and schizoid deprivations. Like the protagonist, I later become mildly obsessed with the successes of the 2006 Mets, catastrophically dashing a bizarre odyssey of newly-found fandom for myself into panicky shards of beer-addled anxiety at the end of Beltran's immobile bat at the third strike from closer Adam Wainwright's filthy St. Louis Christian paw-- but, of course this condition of desperation and dangerously placing emotional investment in a sports franchise whilst undergoing personal existential crises and reading this book occurs today as something of the "chicken-or-egg" variety of rhetoric to me, and I prefer not to explore the issue very much anymore.

As to why a tale of an upstate New York do-nothing gradually becoming obsessed with Frank Gifford and the New York Giants should remain relevant at all to anyone living in 2006 (when I read it), the psychology of the "fan" rewrites itself here in testament to just how little such a state has to do with conformity, pop culture or even the results of blitz marketing (well, 'fandom' as it occurs in Exley's, and I suspect others, brain(s)).

Ok, well that is what a poorly written review looks like, and I really said nothing. There is nothing quotable in Exley's language-- I've tried isolating a few bon mots here and there, but to no avail, each dependent clause builds on the next in his mind, only remarking on its context as he shuttles from USC to NY to back home to insane asylum and so on-- and thus I can only say, just read the damn thing and maybe you'll see what I'm blabbling at, for, to or against.

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## Jon says

So what's A Fan's Notes about? It's about football, Frank Gifford, and the trials and tribulations of the tortured artist who looks around him and feels contempt and revulsion for the society he's alienated from. It's the howl of the misanthropic misfit who doesn't fit in and rages against the drones who do. Is it any good? Parts of it are. There are plenty of passages that are brilliantly written, with rich language and a spot on critique of modern society. In some ways, this book reminds me a lot of Charles Bukowski's Ham on Rye. Both writers were misanthropic alcoholics alienated from society, but there's a underlying poignancy to Bukowski's writing that's missing from this book. I could see running into Bukowski in a bar and buying him drinks while I listened to his stories, rants, and raves. If I had run into Exley, I could see myself changing bar stools after a bit, probably to the opposite end of the bar.

This is a book that's considered a "cult classic." A book that other writers raved about when it was published and strangers pressed into people's hands to read. The book is subtitled a "fictional memoir", but it's largely Exley's semi-autobiography and while it does touch on his childhood a bit, it mostly covers his 20's and early 30's. Instead of a linear narrative structure, it's mostly a jumble of vignettes that jump all over the place in time. After a few pages, Exley will say "let me tell you about the time I was committed to the mental hospital" and he'll then spend quite a bit of time describing his stay there. Then he'll talk about his childhood and a hundred pages or so later, he gets around to telling about the events that lead up to being committed.

My biggest issue with the book is that while Exley, like Bukowski, did have a troubled life filled with a lot of pain, he comes across as an asshole most of the time and that just doesn't lend itself to feeling very sympathetic towards him. He's very homophobic and makes disparaging comments about "fags" and "faggots" a lot in the book. I get that the book takes place in the relatively unenlightened 50's and early 60's and some allowance needs to be made because of that, but I also found him to be something of a misogynist. Like a few guys I've known in my life, Exley talks about women a lot, but really, when it comes down to it,

doesn't like them much:

“These were, for me at least, days of lust - days in which, for the first time since my rejection by the girl back east, my moroseness had vanished and I discovered I was not altogether unattractive to women. I sat in those saloons with them sipping highballs, and through the muted light of the place whispered outrageous falsehoods into their pink ears. My hand dropped into their laps to feel their thighs tighten and reject my fingers with the rigidity of their virtue. Continuing to whisper and sip my drink, I felt the flesh go submissive, and had to restrain myself from laughing. If I took them home – and occasionally after the thighs went loose as sand and the challenge no longer provoked me, I packed them off in cabs – they always fought, pounding, not fiercely, their tense little knuckles against my chest, to which I smilingly said, “Cut the shit.” I took them on the floor and on the couch and in the bathtub, took them greedily, perfunctorily, pointlessly, took them while they wept and said no, no, no”

More than a little creepy and for all his railing about society in the novel, the women he wants are the ones that society has told him to want: the thin, leggy blondes who grace the centerfolds and Madison Avenue advertisements that surround him.

Yet, there are passages that are well written and offer up some succinct critiques of American society. After being fired from his job and moving around the country drinking and working odd jobs, Exley comes back to live with his mom and finds himself mesmerized by the daytime Soap Operas. Lying on her couch all day, he watches them and sees them as a microcosm of the world around him.

“The world of the soap opera is the world of the Emancipated Woman, a creature whose idleness is employed to no other purpose but creating mischief. All these women had harsh crow's feet about the eyes, a certain fullness of mouth that easily and frequently distended into a childish poutiness, and a bosomless and glacial sexuality which, taken all together, brought to their faces a witchy, self-indulgent suffering that seemed compounded in equal parts of unremitting menstrual periods, chronic constipation, and acute sexual frustration....If these women seemed drawn with an alarming accuracy, in their nonexistent way the men were even more to target and were not unlike the ballless men one sees every day on Madison Avenue. All wore button-down shirts and seemed excellent providers, all deferred to the women's judgments and seemed unburdened with anything like thoughts”

Ignoring the heaping side dish of misogyny, his critique is sharp enough to draw blood, but it's impact is lessened to some degree by the fact that's it's being said by a 26 year old, unemployed alcoholic who's living in his mother's basement.

Overall, I'm glad I read the book, but I really can't recommend it to anyone.

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## Vonia says

I am uber glad to have found these two books pretty close together @ the bookstore, for the name "Exley", a somewhat rare name caught in my eye and I ended up getting both. As I began to read one of them, I felt the need to scan the other and immediately saw how obvious it was that they should be read together. The hunch was one hundred percent accurate. Brock Clarke's "Exley" complimented Fredrick Exley's "Fictional Memoir" by providing a reference for crucial references to specific quotes, conversations, scenes, and "inside

meanings" in the text. Vice versa, the latter provided the ability to better appreciate the former. Brick Clarke's use of the book that supposedly changed his life in own novel was somewhat genius. At least quite experimental as far as I am aware. And a successful one at that. He wrote such an unexpectedly humorous interpretation of it that gave more meaning to Exley's obviously at least partial honest memoir.

In short Exley's memoir showed, by user of various vignettes/narrations for significant/deemed important, a quite wild and sick man. An alcoholic, a serious one, whom inevitable relapses a few times, managing in between to do some irrevocable ruin. He spends an insane amount of time laying in his davenport, doing absolutely nothing at all except occasionally contemplating deep philosophical beliefs. He meets some interesting characters at the residential hospital/treatment center named Avalon. He tells of his many excessive sexual encounters with women, almost none of which he truly loves. The only woman he was involved with whom he at least felt like he lived at the time is one Bunny Sue- whom, of course, was the only woman with whom was impotent around.

What vitiates the whole book, is that, unlike his father and his hero, Frank Gifford of the New York Giants, he was doomed "to sit in the stands with most men and acclaim others. It was my fate, my destiny, my end, to be a fan." In short, he saw himself in Gifford, to the point of actually thinking he was him. More specifically, Gifford was, to him, his alter ego - the far more successful one; the one that was living out his dreams, while he suffered, simmering in hatred and desperation with his banal and miserable life. Rather than inspire him to better himself, this depressed him to further his alcoholism, womanizing, as well as his overall dysfunctional way of life. As a slightly related side note, apparently his obsession with Frank Gifford qualified the memoir to be categorized in the sports genre. This is not something I agree with at all.

Somewhere in the last few pages, actually expresses how, he was not destined to be a teacher, as he "lacked the intelligence to simplify". I have been thinking the same exact thing during the entire novel. Mostly, I actually preferred this, as I appreciated his extensive vocabulary inability to describe things that necessitated verbosity. Unfortunately, for a fair amount, I could definitely see the pleonasm.

If I had read "A Fan's Notes" without the accompanying "Exley", I would have liked it a lot less. The depressing tone would be nothing but depressing. I would have finished it with nothing but the impression that Exley wanted to author a testament to his dire and woebegone life.

Now, calling this "The best novel written since 'The Great Gatsby'" (Newsday) is simply absurd- as is apparent in his lack of success with any other books he penned.

"Exley", first and foremost a much more humorous, lighter, and fun read, tells the story of a young boy trying to save his dying father, whom his mother insists is, in effect, non-existent. Told in part by his therapist, whom he calls Doctor Pah-nee (a play on "penis" as originally written by Frederick Exley), a central theme is how far we will go to be in denial and believe the unbelievable. For example, Doctor Pah-nee actually dresses up as Exley, reads "A Fan's Notes" in order to be "in character", so that his patient can have what they both acknowledge he needs- to bring Exley to his father laying in the hospital. Miller Le Ray is the routine of denial, using his defense mechanisms to the maximum, continuing to search for the elusive Exley even when he is faced with hard evidence that he has died. Jonathan Yardley, the real life author of a non-fiction biography for Frederick Exley, is called to his home, for a visit during which Miller insists that Exley is still alive and breathing- in fact right there (in the form of Doctor Pah-nee). They have even gone as far as to mine Exley's grave!

Anyhow, the heart-warming narrative end on a redeeming note, one in which lasts in stark contrast to that in "A Fan's Notes".



Brock Clarke's interpretation far superior to the source, I fully liked the paired reading of these two novels!

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## Joe Cleaver says

exley the narrator (though narrated in the first person by a "character" named fred exley, we learn in the foreward that this isn't entirely autobiographical) tells us early on that even in america, failure is a part of life. here, the narrator's life is nothing but a series of failures, but his trenchant accounting of them is nothing but a triumph. though despicable on multiple fronts, exley is redeemed by the extent to which he is despised by the cretinous (a word he loves) people who surround him. exley is a wildly successful practitioner of a sort of alternative alchemy - in this detailing of a wretched life, he turns not bronze, but shit into gold.

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## Nathanimal says

What's going on with me lately?

Usually I'm all: "Kafka this, kafka that, dalkey book, Stacey Levine, something french, kafka kafka kafka" ad nauseam. But so far this year it's been mostly cultural criticism and history, even a twinkle-dinkle of poetry (and I don't even know how to READ poetry). I could say I'm having a jolly cross-disciplinary time, but let's be honest: I'm having a literary meltdown.

Part of that meltdown is reflected in the only two works of fiction I've been able to finish lately, which have been Sheila Heti's *How Should A Person Be?* and Fred Exley's *A Fan's Notes*. These aren't books in translation nor books I'd at first consider experimental. They're near-memoirs. Real as realism gets. They're the kind of book I normally pass over for something more eccentric.

I don't know about you but when I think *realism* I think *safe*. And who want's that? I want an author who's going to drive me over the goddam cliff.

Well I have been driven over the goddam cliff, just not the cliff I'm used to, and perhaps that's the thrill. I don't really want to unpack Exley's book. I just want to say, from a guy like me, who has never watched a football game all the way through or cared to, who hasn't born the cross of alcoholism or done time on the funny farm, who has never been in an honest-to-god fist fight, who's never had much of anything to recommend his manliness, whose life is not necessarily in shambles, that *this* life, the life of Fred Exley, is one all peoples should read and recognize as their own.

That is to say, I get it. I get why Fred Exley puts himself back together long enough to get in front of a TV on Sunday and to bawl his head off for his favorite player on the New York Giants: "Oh God, he did it! Gifford did it! He caught the goddam thing!" It may sound like he's blaspheming, but he's not; he's having a god moment, a moment larger than himself, a moment which offers the possibility of salvation. It's more pertinent now than ever, the revelation Exley had, about the joys and sorrows of living in a world of vicarious spectacle, the joys and sorrows of being a fan. As an unpublished writer snooping around goodreads, I have my god moments, too.

The other thing I want to take away from this book is a caution to myself personally. The book is helped by an elevated, nigh Nabokovian style, which coming from a narrator with stains all over his sweats reads as

crooning irony. I couldn't get enough of it. However, the highest irony of all is that this tweedy side, which Exley assumes through most of the book is going to save him, is actually the main problem. It's the illusion that pins him down and that will always pin him down, because he loves it. I have a tweedy side myself, a nice and musty smirking booky tweedy side. I'm thankful to Exley for helping me pick a fight with it.

Onward with the literary meltdown!

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## **David says**

It's tough for me to find a decent place to begin. This book -- and you must know that I'm not usually prone to superlative reviews of anything -- has been hugely important to me over these last two months. And it took two full months to read simply because it is such a painfully beautiful book, passages read over and over again and all that pretentious book-nerd shit.

I re-read both *Brothers K* and *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* this year -- mostly because they are two beloved and character-forming books for me -- but this one, I hasten to say, right now, outstrips them both in its importance.

The book follows a literary drunk as he navigates post-college and his obsession with football and women and drinking and deep alien depression. I'm probably falling for the same that people who read Kerouac suffer -- and Exley is of the same imitable Beat cloth -- but I'll accept the punch-drunkenness of this book and give it a high endorsement nonetheless.

Here is a taste:

"It occurs to me now that my enthusiasms might better have been placed with God or Literature or Humanity; but in the penumbra of such upper-case pieties I have always experienced an excessive timidity rendering me tongue-tied or forcing me to emit the brutal cynicisms with which the illiterate confront things they do not understand."

"I returned east to New York, an A.B. in English in my portfolio, a longing in the heart the clue to my countenance. What did I long for? At twenty-three, I of course longed for fame. Not only did I long for it, I suffered myself the singular notion that fame was an heirloom passed on from my father."

"Unlike some men I had never drunk for boldness or charm or wit; I had used alcohol for precisely what it was, a depressant to check the mental exhilaration produced by extended sobriety."

"After that unremitting spring of beer, pasta, Tia Maria, and futility, I found my body thirty pounds overweight, my cerebrum as dopey as a eunuch's dong."

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## **Michael says**

This book is about sports like *Macbeth* is about witches. Which is to say, it's just a vehicle for the real action,

which is all internal. A gorgeous, eloquent song to despair and alcoholism and redemption.

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## Steve says

### Reasons I should have liked this book:

- » It's meant to be open, soul-searching and literary while at the same time appealing to my gender – the coarse one, that is.
- » It's a somewhat fictionalized memoir by a die-hard NY Giants fan. Though they're not my team, it was written at the time I was first gaining sports consciousness, learning that a skinny kid could somehow connect to the world of uncles if he knew how many yards Jim Brown gained against the Rams.
- » It supposedly set the stage for Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*, a book I really liked detailing lifestyles of the thirsty and laddish, supporting Arsenal football.
- » It won the 1968 William Faulkner Foundation Award for notable first novel and was a National Book Award finalist.

### Reasons I didn't:

- » Its subtitle is *A Fictional Memoir*, but according to Wikipedia it follows the real events of Exley's troubled, booze-sodden life pretty much to a tee. Whether the narrator was 9% Exley or 99%, it didn't matter to me; I just didn't like him. He was a bully and a butthead, his opinion of himself suffered Weimar Republic levels of inflation, and the list of his excuses for bad behavior was as lame as it was long.
- » Exley was a man's man, which is OK in and of itself, but he was just so blatant in his hatred of women. He took great pleasure in hitting one for giving a dead-drunk friend of his a hard time. A good rule of thumb says that any guy you imagine using the "Quit bustin' my balls" line is not confronting a problem, he *is* the problem.
- » There wasn't nearly as much about what makes a sports fan tick as I was expecting. Hornby's book was far better at that. All would have been forgiven, of course, had the more general self-characterization won me over. While Exley did do a decent job of identifying some of his many flaws, he was often less than sincere owning up to them – an egoist through and through.
- » It disappoints me that this book has a cult following. Somebody even opened a bar named after him. To me, that would be like the Lance Armstrong Sports Nutrition Shoppe.
- » Exley's writing talent has been praised, often by Exley himself, but I found a fair amount of it clunky and overcooked. The adverbs were the worst offenders. (E.g., anguishingly solemn, an unbridledly dear price, admonitorily advising) To veraciously tell you the truth, it made me surpassingly peevisish and dampeningly unsatisfied.

### A token attempt to be fair:

- » Some of the writing wasn't bad. The best parts tended to confess things. This line describing his short-

term, ill-fated teaching experience was one of his best: "Sadly, I lacked the intelligence to simplify, and with an utterly monolithic and formidable pedantry I thought nothing of demanding that my students feed me back my own quackery."

- » Exley's father was a locally famous athlete with a competitive streak that made me think that the defeated son came by his hang-ups honestly.
- » Alcoholism is a disease. Maybe the poor excuses, offensive behavior, and irresponsibility are just common symptoms, and a book that shows this clearly is just being true to type.
- » It's not necessary to like the narrator to like the book. For me, though, it often helps. While I can easily appreciate a memoir showing how to be, I also want to be open to one showing truthfully (and wartfully, if you can forgive my newly attained habit for bad adverbs) how certain people simply are.

### **But who ever said Goodreads ratings had to be fair?**

2.5 stars rounded down ill-naturedly to 2

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### **Lobstergirl says**

Jonathan Yardley's introduction explains that Frederick Exley had intended to publish *A Fan's Notes* as a memoir, but was asked to novelize it by Harper & Row, who feared libel actions. We have this amazing book, Yardley writes, a caustic masterpiece by a man who was essentially an alcoholic bum - he never held one job for more than a few months, he spent months or years crashing on other people's "davenport," including his parents' and various alumni of the mental hospital he had received treatment from: so where did this masterpiece come from? Exley was just a guy who had gotten interested in literature as an undergraduate at USC. Also, "no one knows for certain when and where he wrote it." This is a mystery with no witnesses!

The novel is a ruthlessly honest portrayal of an addict's narcissism and self-loathing (two traits which are inseparable). We never find out what Exley's mental illness was (apparently the hospital didn't either), but even as a confessional of someone who just can't seem to get up off the sofa it's painful enough reading, without having a precise diagnosis. Exley pinpoints the source of his malaise after a street fight he picks with two gay men, one white, one black: "I fought because I understood, and could not bear to understand, that it was my destiny - unlike that of my father, whose fate it was to hear the roar of the crowd - to sit in the stands with most men and acclaim others. It was my fate, my destiny, my end, to be a fan."

There's a relentless mid-century misogyny, an inability to see women (except one's mother) as anything other than Barbies with golden flanks, honeyed hair, and butterscotch epidermises. If women are not Barbies, they're intelligent but castrating Betty Friedans, or Amazonian harridans given battleship nicknames. Or, like Exley's fictional wife Patience, they're Bryn Mawr graduates who nonetheless need Exley's assistance writing up their reports for the divorce court judges they work for. The only sentient being Exley seems to know how to love with his whole heart is his mother's dog Christie III.

The best passages from *A Fan's Notes* are on a writerly par with the best of Roth, Mailer, and Bellow. My two favorite passages come from the chapter where Exley has moved to Chicago for one of the few jobs he

will hold, this one in the public relations department of a railroad. In this first passage he perfectly captures the essence of a place; so perfectly, in fact, that the same passage could describe this neighborhood today if you replace "airline hostess" with "Groupon sales rep":

*There I lived in that section called the Near North Side, a paradise for the young men and women - airlines hostesses with airlines hostesses, rising executives with rising executives, Junior Leaguers with Junior Leaguers, voyeurs with voyeurs - who overflowed its modern town houses and converted Victorian mansions, men and women who reigned, or were, in youth's obliviousness, sure they reigned supreme there. The section had an absurd though touching notion of itself as the Greenwich Village of the Plains; but the young men I knew there seemed blatantly and refreshingly unburdened with things of the mind, and the fine, corn-bred, yellow-haired girls as succulently wholesome as cream of chicken soup. Never once in the two years I lived there was I distressed by the possibility - as perhaps I was in New York - that there were men and women in the area seeking to commit to paper or to canvas their joy, their grief, their passion. Never once did I detect in a saloon, as I had begun to detect in the Village, the dark, brooding silhouette of a man apart, a man caught up and held in awe by the singularity of his vision.*

In Chicago Exley meets and becomes obsessed with a young (yellow-haired) woman named Bunny Sue Allorgee, who takes him home to spend a weekend with her parents, who live in a scary dystopia:

*The Allorgees lived in a suburb of a suburb, their particular little suburb being Heritage Heights. [As far as I'm aware, this is a made-up name.] It was a suburb that had apparently never caught on. The streets were all there, but there was only one house, Allorgees' Acres, a great, white, one-storied, rambling ranch-type place in which everything from garage to game room to hot-water heater was found on the single story that shot out in all sorts of clapboard arms, like the spokes of a painted wagon wheel. "The Heights" was not on any height at all; this was the American Midwest at its most grotesque, treeless and cold-looking as far as the eye could see, so that it only seemed set on high ground. There was only one thing that broke the endless blue monotony of the heavens - a television aerial that rose so high that it dizzied one to look up at it, an aerial which, I was proudly informed, put the Allorgees on certain clear days in contact with all parts of the Republic. It was a touching monument to their isolation. In answer to my question about its astounding height, Chuck (or Poppy) - as the father was interchangeably designated - said only that he liked "good reception."*

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## Glenn Russell says

Fredrick Exley (1929-1992) – Photo of the writer as a vulnerable, sensitive young man. In many ways, much too vulnerable and sensitive for mid-20th century American society, a society where a man's prime virtue is being tough.

*A Fan's Notes* is the odyssey of one man's unending heartbreak and retreat into an inner world of fantasy and dreams, a retreat, by his own account and language, punctuated by alcoholism and trips to the madhouse; or, put another way, an autobiographical novel about Fredrick Exley's longtime failure in the years prior to when he finally staked his claim to fame by writing a memoir about his aching, painful life.

First off, let me say bellying up to a bar, drinking, smoking, commiserating, cheering for a sports team while

watching a game is not me, which is understatement. I recall walking into a bar when in college and found the whole scene sour and depressing. I haven't even come close to stepped into a bar once in the past nearly fifty years.

I mention since the Fred Exley in this fictional memoir is a bargoer who drinks, smokes, commiserates, and obsessively cheers for a sports team – the New York Giants. For these reasons and others, including much of the way he talks about women, I do not particularly like the main character.

However, this being said, *A Fan's Notes* is a well-written literary gush, reminding me more of Henry Miller than Charles Bukowski, a compelling, excruciatingly honest personal saga, overflowing with keen insights into human nature and caustic observations on American culture, a book I found, for a number of personal reasons, deeply moving when I first read back in 1988 published as part of the Vintage Contemporaries series.

Rereading these past few weeks, I must say I enjoying every well-turned phrase and outrageous, boldfaced, audacious twisting of fact into fiction: author's self-portrayal as a slovenly lout, alcoholic slob, misogynist pig, lowlife outsider, misfit and complete loser, not to mention misty-eyed dreamer and weaver of fantastic delusions. At the point when Freddie Ex finally pulled his life together enough to begin seriously writing, he probably had more than a few good chuckles and a few shed tears with each draft.

The first personal reason I found this novel moving back in 1988 is very personal: at the time I was having a mid-life crisis, working with a spiteful, nasty boss and unpleasant coworkers in what turned out to be, for me, the wrong career. I had to make a serious change and Exley's novel, especially those parts where he reflected on the insanity of work world USA, served as something of a literary friend through it all, right up until the time when I made a successful switch.

The second reason has to do with my friend Craig, a sensitive, vulnerable, highly artistic man who reminded me a great deal of Fred Exley. Actually, very much like Exley, Craig worked in the advertising industry, was fired because of drinking, and after marrying and having a couple kids, divorced and, like Exley, returned to live in the basement of his parent's house. Turns out, Craig was simply too sensitive to function in the "normal" world. And similar to Exley, he idolized Hemingway and tried writing the Great American Novel but, unfortunately, he was no Exley – his writing, right up to the day he dropped dead of a massive heart attack at age 55, was overly sentimental and downright awful.

I relate personal reasons since my guess is Exley's *A Fan's Notes* enjoyed an initial cult following comprised of men (and perhaps women) who, like myself, were either going through a phase of life-transition or those sensitive souls who, for a number of reasons, could never successfully function in conventional society. I also imagine many of these sensitive types, similar to my friend Craig, tried to write first-rate fiction but their efforts fell short. At least they could turn to *A Fan's Notes* for some solace.

And I wonder how many of these sensitive souls had strong fathers like Fred Exley, when he writes, "Moreover, my father's shadow was so imposing that I had scarcely ever, until that moment, had an identity of my own. At the same time I had yearned to emulate and become my father. I also yearned for his destruction."

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**Kirk says**

Exley is an interesting cult figure whose debut book, this one, is his real legacy. (The other two, PAGES FROM A COLD ISLAND and LAST NOTES FROM HOME are very flawed). A FAN'S NOTES is a very readable coming-of-age novel about hero worship. The difficulty most contemporary readers have is the object of his hero's worship: Frank Gifford. That's right--THE Frank Gifford, Mrs. Kathy Lee. For those of us too young to remember that FG was a gridiron hero---he retired the year I was born---that's a hard leap to make, but it's a necessary one. Among coming-of-age novels, its closest analogue is probably Plath's THE BELL JAR; both books are part of a 60s-era tradition that depicts electroshock therapy as a metaphor for the social pressure to conform to normality. A FAN'S NOTES is also interesting for its subtitle, "A Fictional Memoir," which was a relatively new technique in 68. How much a reader enjoys the book probably has as much to do with how familiar one is with the conventions of the coming-of-age novel; if you know THE CATCHER IN THE RYE and THE BELL JAR, it's hard to connect with this one emotionally. That said, there are many, many ardent admirers of the book, including Jonathan Yardley, who wrote an admirable biography of Exley, MISFIT, that should be read alongside this one.

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### **Tony says**

It is not fear of self-scrutiny which typically causes me to dislike books about a character's dissolution. It's the *ennui*. So, Hamsun's *Hunger* and Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night* wear me down. Don't laugh, but I prefer my nihilism more chipper.

Frederick Exley's *A Fan's Notes* transports the dissolute soul. True, there are moments where the book sags and other times where it seems that Exley is writing *what I should have said* in some confrontation. But this book is sheer brilliance. First in the author's complete ownership of the English language and how he uses it. Second in the way Exley weaves in literary allusions. And lastly, that this book is about so much more than one man's utter starvation. Like the protagonist's obsession (Frank Gifford), there is comeback. Who knew that Chuck Bednarik could actually serve as a metaphor for the decadence of American culture?

The book weaves back and forth through the protagonist's life. So, it's not one straight downhill plunge. There is humor and self-awareness enough to render the alcoholism not so much an ending but just the drug that it is, to still a mental fatigue as a man fights so hard *not* to be *Prufrock*.

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### **Eric says**

Absolutely incredible. A superhuman achievement on many levels. Exley turns an uncomfortably unflinching gaze on the abyss of depression & madness he passed thru & transforms it into the most breathtakingly beautiful art imaginable in the form of this book, a triumphant testament to one man's resilience and relentless pursuit of the writing craft. A fictionalized memoir, *A Fan's Notes* takes us from Exley's childhood in the shadow of a father who was a local hero to his misadventures in advertising, alcoholism, and his multiple trips to the madhouse in some of the most absolutely amazing prose I've ever encountered. Exley excels at setting up a scenario & methodically taking us thru it with great humor, tenderness, & a retroactive insight that is as rewarding as it is brutal. One scene in particular comes to mind involving a phone call made from a train station that is a small masterpiece in itself, but there are many such stretches to be found & savored here. Exley's frankness in confronting his shortcomings and failures would be reason enough to celebrate this book, but his absolute mastery of form and language takes it to the highest possible level.

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**Zach says**

The first 100 pages = some of the best writing in history. Or at least some of the best writing about Frank Gifford and what it's like to be a teacher in history.

The last 200 pages = what it must have been like to have to sit next to him at a bar. Exhilarating at first, depressing in the end.

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