

PERFECTNESS ESCAPES ITS HIDING PLACE: NEW SQUASH BOOKS

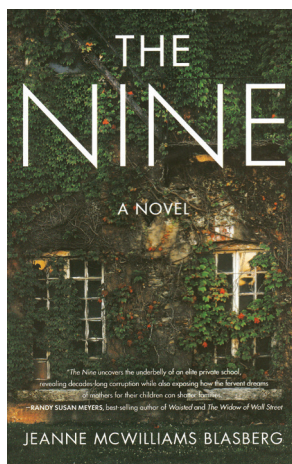
❖ BY JAMES ZUG ❖

❖ ALEXANDER TILNEY ❖
THE EXPECTATIONS
(LITTLE, BROWN, 2019)

Anyone writing fiction today about New England boarding schools labors under influence of a pair of novels: John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* (1959) and Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep* (2005). There are dozens of others, especially gems not set in New England (see: J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*) but those two bildungsromans are classics, old and new.

But the prep school, with its delicious combination of exclusivity, tradition, an absence of parents and a lot of adolescent innocence about to be lost, is a setting many writers are unable to resist. Alexander Tilney, in his incisive and confident debut novel, takes us back to St. James, a thinly-disguised St. Paul's School in New Hampshire. Ben Weeks arrives as a freshman with a reputation—he just won the BU15 draw at the National Juniors. It is the mid-1990s, just when the game was shifting from hardball to softball. Weeks packs his Action Eyes goggles (with white Croakies), his Prince Extenders and his Hi-Tec sneakers. Oh, nostalgia.

Tilney played squash at St. Paul's and then at Yale, graduating in 2001. He knows this era intimately. He describes playing hardball in a narrow court, after playing softball, is like "hitting a Super Ball in a closet." He describes the feeling you have when you are playing fluidly



❖ JEANNE MCWILLIAMS BLASBERG ❖
THE NINE
(SHE WRITES PRESS, 2019)

and positively against a much better opponent: "Ben remembered the joy of just being a little piece of steel in the gears of someone else's machine, knowing everyone else was watching some more marquee match and so feeling that he and Marcus were away playing in some elemental wilderness."

Weeks abandons squash for wrestling, but sometimes he slips over to the courts to hit alone. Tilney has a wonderful passage about this solo practice: "Now the ball was warm enough to sit up off the back wall, and for several forehands Ben just coiled up his body and let it unwind, and the ball leapt to the front wall and traveled back flush against the side wall, perfect, and up off the back wall right to where the racquet face lashed it again."

Squash, Tilney aphoristically concludes, is a game created "so that Perfectness could have a place to escape its usual hiding place."

There is no squash in Jeanne Blasberg's second novel, *The Nine*. Her story is more sinister than her first novel which was set on the Rhode Island coast. Here, Blasberg's Sam Webber—like Weeks, a first year student—stumbles into a mysterious conspiracy at the Exeter-like Dunning Academy in New Hampshire. It is a gripping story, involving secret societies, underground tunnels and a

ne'er-do-well Uncle Henry. Like Tilney, Blasberg wonderfully limns the ways young people live at boarding schools—Sam went sockless in the winter: "It was a thing at Dunning, underdressing in defiance of the season."

Interestingly, much of the story is about Sam's mother and her journey as a Dunning parent and how she falls in and out of love with the school. Maybe *The Nine* is building a new genre, the boarding-school novel from the parent's perspective?

❖ GRAHAM TEMPEST ❖
JOBURG STEELE
(BRIGHTWAY PRESS, 2019)



This is the fifth Oliver Steele thriller. We've dashed to the Caribbean, southern California, Cuba, Libya, France and of course Las Vegas. Here we go, as you can guess from the title, to South Africa. Even with the change of scenery, there is the usual murderous tempest in a teapot, with Steele combining old-fashioned shoe-leather detective skills with modern phone, accounting and computer hacking.

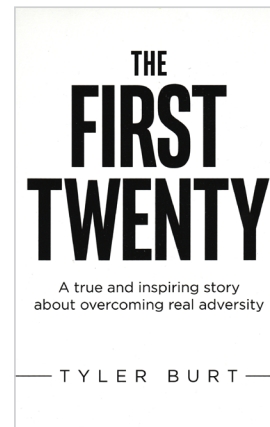
And brief mentions of squash. Joe Chapman,

the pro in the British Virgin Islands, makes a quick appearance. At Wanderers, one of the big clubs in Johannesburg, Steele plays a match with Rebekka Moran, who was No. 3 on the Trinity College Dublin team. Moran beats Steele 5-11, 11-6, 11-0, 11-3. Steele gets hammered by the altitude, but also by Moran's movement: "She hit the ball harder than most women and had an ability to step back to the middle of the court between strokes that kept her in the rallies." Ah, the T.

❖ TYLER BURT ❖
THE FIRST TWENTY: A TRUE AND INSPIRING STORY ABOUT OVERCOMING REAL ADVERSITY
(TYLER BURT, 2019)

Burt, a sophomore at Colby, has penned a short but engrossing memoir. When he was in utero he survived an ischemic stroke. Since birth it has affected the right side of his body, giving him a limp and not allowing him much use of his right hand.

Burt grew up in Philadelphia. He attended Episcopal Academy, then spent his last five years at Haverford School where he was a part of the team that won the National Middle Schools in 2014. He also trained, first at Berwyn and then at S2, the junior program at



Fairmount Athletic Club.

The First Twenty—the title is in reference to the first twenty years of his life—describes how he tried to hide his infirmities, playing football, basketball and lacrosse with what looked like a swollen ankle and a right hand that couldn't properly catch, throw or bounce a ball. He was bullied about it at Haverford by schoolmates who didn't know about the stroke.

Burt vividly runs through some squash matches in high school and college—he plays on the varsity at Colby—as he strives towards his goal of being a college athlete.

❖ SAKHI KHAN ❖
KHANSQUASH TIPS:

TIPS ON HOW TO EXCEL IN THE GAME OF SQUASH
(SAKHI KHAN, 2019)

Khan, the son of U.S. Squash Hall of Famer Mohibullah Khan, was the coach at Colby for seventeen years. His coaching manual offers advice: keep your knee low to the ground—no high-stepping; watch for blind spots where your opponent's body blocks your sight of the ball; tighten and loosen your grip on the racquet as you hit the ball; do star drills correctly by not being able to hear your feet. "In the final analysis," Khan says, "a player is only as good as his or her backhand."

