

All in a Night's Work

*Night Work* attempts to bring the hockey icon Terry Sawchuk to life in a startlingly bold manner. While this book of poems often feels like an autobiography, its voice constantly and erratically shifts from Sawchuk, to the third person, to the book's author, Randall Maggs. While I found this approach of a pseudo-autobiography and biography combination to be unique, the validity of Maggs' interpretation of Sawchuk's thoughts is constantly in question. Maggs brings to life thoughts that were never personally expressed by this dark and introverted character, but how can he represent a man that no one truly understood? Skepticism aside, *Night Work* comes through with moments of clarity. Terry Sawchuk was the victim of crippling and untreated depression and the physical and mental role of a hockey goalie in his era. It is easy to attribute Terry's demons to personality flaws, but he was also subjected to a time in hockey unfit for the depression-prone.

Terry was no stranger to victories, though his demeanor may have reflected the opposite. Despite holding the all-time shut out record for thirty-nine years, Sawchuk could be rendered sleepless by botching a single save. Instead of getting important rest after a game, "he played the shot a thousand times on his bedroom

ceiling where the street light shown" (40). Liable to negative perceptions, he placed his full focus on criticism and completely wrote off his success. Terry's self-evaluation process would turn from inducing malaise to full on torture. "That summer they made him insane, he'd sweat through the night and jerk wide awake, pucks bouncing every which way in his darkened room." Depression would follow him from his bedroom to the rink. During the pregame while the rest of his team would be getting pumped up, Terry admits to going through the motions in order to meet expectations but never actually connecting to his teammates' enthusiasm. His thoughts are expressed, "knocks my stick for luck, I'm nodding but Mother of Christ I'm dying inside, can't keep still now everybody wants to go" (51). Terry's depression is so unique because he quietly suffers through leading the life of a professional athlete, an occupation widely coveted and perceived as glamorous.

Without a doubt Sawchuk's career amplified his battle with depression. He summarizes his feelings in the statement, "it takes a load off, knowing everybody lets you down in the end. And nobody knows this better than goalies. That's why they want to get off on their own" (133). To me this is really an encompassing insight into Terry's nature. I think it is a miraculous tragedy that someone like Terry would be a hockey goalie. This was the worst time in hockey's history for a damaged and sensitive man to be a goalie. Terry's incredible skill set as a goalie positioned him in one of the least compatible occupations for his personality type. As a serial victim of being let down, he was susceptible to experiencing losses on a more personal level than other athletes. Even though hockey is primarily a team sport, goalies hold final responsibility for allowing goals. A goalie can put trust in his

defense to keep the attack from gaining goal scoring opportunities, but what it comes down to is the goalie needing to make the save. Terry did not have the elements of trust and support in his early life so he became used to, while never adjusting to, living with burdens. He could try to put faith into a support system like his defense, but when they failed he was alone, and no one was more motivated to fight the millstone of defeat than Terry. He had been fighting it all his life with little success, but on the ice was where he could be victorious. Hockey would fight back though, delivering blows to not only his psyche but his body as well.

The 1950s were not an ideal time to be a hockey goalie. Maggs describes the 50's as defining a "leap in firepower" in hockey. Players were entering the league with more powerful slap shots than ever before seen. Pucks were bulletted at goalies in excess of 100 miles per hour, propelled by "heating up stick blades (and) bending them under the dressing room door." The sport began to evolve into an increasingly malicious game. So how do goalies adapt? Maggs answered, "all this for goalies meant a whole retooling of reflex, a new code of heart" (97). Goalies now had to maximize and fine-tune their reflexes not only for the sake of their performance, but for their safety as well. Being in goal now meant something new and slightly darker. The goalie was now the punching bag for the team. If the players skating around the ice failed to prevent the stoppage of the puck, the goalie would have to pay, armed with only his skill set and luck.

Throughout *Night Work* there are multiple explanations of the physical condition of Sawchuk's body. The elevated firepower propelling the pucks was not matched with sufficient protection for goalies. Many coaches, such as Toe Blake,

even discouraged the use of a mask, a piece of equipment presently unthinkable to play without. Sawchuk was a goalie who did not believe in half-measures and his body reflected his playing style. In one instance after a game his teammates “gaped at (his) hammered chest and belly. Easy to count the darker nine or ten from Hull. They can’t even look at the shoulder, but watch as he peels off the infamous underwear and heads without a word toward the showers.” Despite perpetually living and playing with a body ridden with welts and bruises, Terry did not attempt to seek compassion. His teammates however could not help but think empathetically, “these were guys who’d paid their dues, who’d seen it all. But this was a moment that got their attention, seeing what they’d asked of him that night” (154). Being the best was always a priority of Terry’s and an expectation of his teammates. I think that Terry believed that pain was just a part of being a goalie, whether he felt it physically or emotionally.

Terry Sawchuk was a man haunted by depression throughout his lifetime; the pain he experienced as a child set the pace for years of guilt and grief to come. Sawchuk was a hockey goalie because it was the only way for him to experience a feeling resembling vindication to counter his eternal inner fury. Yet his era in hockey also amplified his depression with its lack of safety equipment and emergence of spectacular players with revolutionary slap shots. Sawchuk lived hard and died young, passing away along with his career. I think Maggs’ work of poetry, while perhaps not being representing Sawchuk verbatim, connects with the reader enough to communicate Sawchuk’s essence. Not every poem seems relevant or is

even comprehensible, but the book as a whole creates an image of Sawchuk that goes beyond a stat sheet.