

Rus Bradburd's***Big Time***

William Meiners

Rus Bradburd is taking a big swing at college athletics. *Big Time*, his aptly named satirical novel, is all at once purposely absurd, laugh-your-ass-off funny, and probably not that far off base from the present reality of the runaway money monster that NCAA football has become. I can tell you what I like about the book. He seems to be having a go at football, the gargantuan man on campus, while also taking the stuffing out of higher education itself.

When I spoke to Bradburd in August, he joked about being recently retired from New Mexico State University. Just in time to sink his satirical teeth into both hands that fed him over a 30-year career. Ironically, Bradburd spent nearly equal time as a Division I assistant basketball coach (14 years) and a tenure-track professor (16 years). So from bench to classroom, recruiting roads to faculty meetings, he paints these landscapes well.

Big Time begins at Coors State University, where the sponsor seized naming rights of a Colorado university, and football, undoubtedly, is the king of this beer's branding. In fact, the football coach fires the president. History department faculty are reduced to selling popcorn at games. Foods and Nutrition professors deliver training-table groceries to players. Criminal Justice folks are campus cops. And the English Department, aside from a crusty old poet and a hip new one, has been completely sidelined. Though a handful of profs keep up committee work in a largely ignored "tent city" protest in the middle of a quad.

There's nothing new about the friction between faculty and football programs. See Knute Rockne vs. the Notre Dame priests from 100 years ago. Nevertheless, it's worth a Google to find that the highest paid state employee, in all but a handful of states, is a college coach today. Players can also get paid now — above board.

And though there may be nothing fair about any of it, there's also nothing I like more than college football Saturdays on the sports and leisure front. Family, dog, and God in heaven be damned; none hold a candle to my beloved Fighting Irish. Perhaps it's the same complicitness of a P. Diddy partygoer. Should a player be concussed, or otherwise injured and thus a scholarship deficit to the school, are they simply among the fallen Irish? If I develop a conscience, I'd have to hide my shame beneath green face paint.

***Mexican history was Mooney's field,
but he had to educate himself about
popcorn's prominent past. Cortez, after
invading Mexico in 1519, found popcorn
among the native Aztecs, who used it
as ceremonial decoration and food.
Peruvians made popcorn, too.***

Big Time, Rus Bradburd

The heroes in *Big Time* have their own tragic flaws. Bradburd said he sees himself in both history professors that open the novel. Eugene Mooney, the chairperson who perhaps goes along to get along, and Peter Braverman, a 1960s-obsessed rabble rouser who may be more bark than bite, decide to take on the football program.

With his book about a dozen years in the making, Bradburd had plenty of time to see sports through the academic lens. And maybe that's where those conflicting professors emerged as characters.

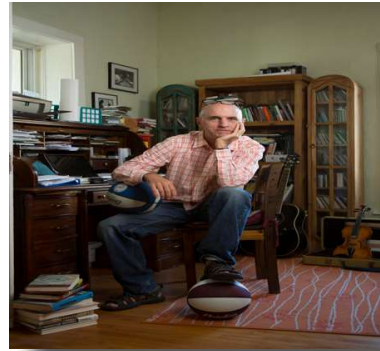
"There's a kind of an acquiescence of the faculty if they're not willing to say, 'Hold on just a second here. This can't be right,'" he said. "You're a lonely voice if you start protesting."

I confirmed with Bradburd that he was a gym rat in high school, dribbling his way to a walk-on role at North Park University in Chicago. And he took dribbling exhibitions overseas, long before anyone witnessed the impressive handles of Steph Curry. A fiddle player who's written four previous books, including three nonfiction and one fiction (all about basketball, sort of), Bradburd would also be the one English faculty member without a PhD. Yet his North Park physical education degree served him well enough to publish circles around his Aggies' colleagues.

Maybe it's poking that pious PhD attitude that resonates with me. I spent most of my professional career in the basement of higher education, propagandizing the professorial types who get good at saying the same things over and over. And over. A Purdue consumer science professor told me his repeated freshman lectures felt like Neil Young having to play "Old Man" every night in concert. That self-esteem alone could be worth a million dollars.

Bradburd said it took him about three or four faculty meetings to learn that most folks were practicing doublespeak. "Everyone is talking in circles, and nothing is really happening," he said.

Bradburd breathes life into a a young Black quarterback who did not rise out of poverty and a “Croatian sensation” lineman with a unique sense of the American dialect; a university president who doubles as his own executive assistant; and a host of other supporting figures under the glare of a “silver bullet” campus. Turns out there’s no silver bullet, or magic one, for all the ills of college football. Maybe that’s what happens when you dump television money on a problem.



Rus Bradburd
Photo by Kate Russell.

Still, you’ll get a kick out of Bradburd’s scenes with some high-minded academics throwing sand in the gears of the almighty football machine. The subversive and self-aggrandizing professors put themselves on par with Rosa Parks and others in the civil rights movement. Though perhaps it’s all performative.

At one point in the novel, the history buffs seemingly call their own bluffs. “I wasn’t a radical,” Braverman said. “I never marched on campus. Never carried a sign. I didn’t drop out, but I nearly flunked out of San Jose State, too. I never took LSD. I didn’t even smoke pot much until I was forty. And I didn’t realize how bad the Vietnam War was until it was over. What could I do with my life? I couldn’t protest Vietnam in 1980.”

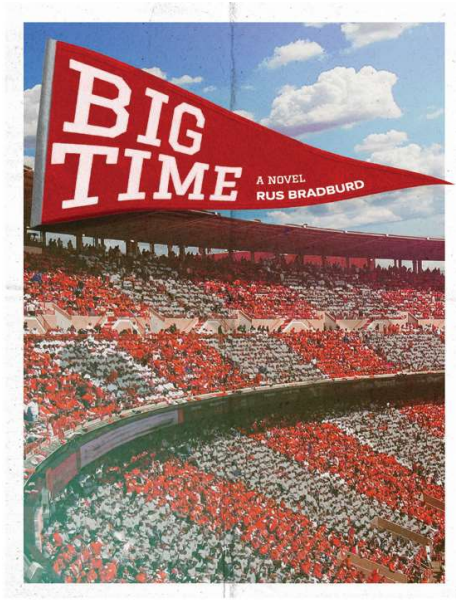
Even in the most outlandish of situations, Bradburd finds the humanity in this cast of characters. If only to tap into their collective confusion. College campuses can be strange places. It could be the time of their lives for students barreling through in four to five years. For the faculty tasked with shepherding them along, maybe it’s the same old shit on a tenured road toward retirement.

I suspect Bradburd taught like he coached, when he provided an uplifting voice in the ears of young men berated by taskmasters like Don Haskins, his boss at UTEP. He told me about a “physicality” of a writer’s game, a “willingness to work on weaknesses” before returning to the group with better work. And like the old gym rat off the dribble, Bradburd seems to outwork everyone as a writer.

Satire isn’t about solving problems; it’s a mirror to the madness all around us. Turn on the news if you don’t think these are nutty days. But switch over to football for some school-spirited insanity on Saturdays. Like a self-proclaimed football great from nearly 20 years ago who told reporters to “get your popcorn ready,” we should all be so lucky as to have something microwave ready.

And if the past is prologue, history professors everywhere could be well advised by reading *Big Time*.

William Meiners is the founding editor of *Sport Literate*.



**Available on Amazon and
wherever books are sold.**

Rus Bradburd is the author of four previous books: *All the Dreams We've Dreamed* (Chicago Review Press, 2018), an examination of gun violence in Chicago; the novel-in-stories *Make It, Take It* (Cinco Puntos Press, 2014); the controversial *Forty Minutes of Hell* (HarperCollins/Amistad Books, 2010); and the memoir *Paddy on the Hardwood: A Journey in Irish Hoops* (University of New Mexico Press, 2006).