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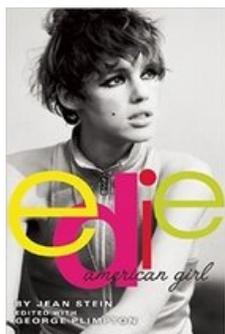
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## BOOKLISTS

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**Natasha Stagg:**  
Fame's Growing Pains



**Andrew Zornoza:**  
Machine Learning

**Atossa Araxia Abrahamian:**  
Selling Citizenship

**Margaret Eby:**  
Southern Comedy

**Richard Kraft:**  
Thought Laid Bare:  
Notebooks by Artists and  
Writers

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## Playing with Tennis

Courtney Fiske



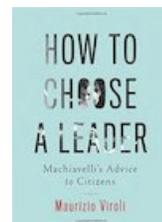
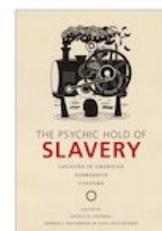
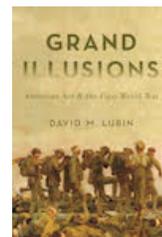
**Something is lost when tennis is televised. The blocky, overhead vantage favored by networks compresses the court and caricatures its occupants. The ball becomes a blur of fuzz and neon, often shot in histrionic slow-mo. Reduced to a series of zoom-ins and zoom-outs, the game congeals into a mass of grunts, moans, and commercials. Well-executed prose, by contrast, amplifies tennis's inherent drama, probes its psychic interior, and reveals its resonances beyond the court's 2,800-odd square feet. The following texts play with tennis in this expanded verbal field, exploiting those techniques of deceleration and dilation at which the written word remains best.**

### "Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes," "The String Theory," and "Federer as Religious Experience" by David Foster Wallace

Wallace was a polymath by aspiration and training, his writings encyclopedic in their breadth of topic, specialist jargon, and cultural citation. Among the dizzying array of topics that Wallace treated, tennis stands out as an area of particular fluency. His essays on the subject plumb the religious and the mathematical, combining an aesthete's awe at the sport's "transcendent beauty" with a scholar's fascination in its "nightmare of mechanical variables." Taking the single shot as his unit of analysis, Wallace indulges in extreme close-ups of description, from the "liquid hiss" of an airborne ball to a player's peripheral ties.

Professionals make memorable cameos: Pete Sampras ("mostly teeth and eyebrows in person"); Jakob Hlasek ("Nazi male model or a lifeguard in hell"); Thomas Enqvist (possessed of a "narrow, sort of rodentially patrician quality"); Rafael Nadal ("mesomorphic and totally martial"); and, of course, Roger Federer ("Mozart and Metallica at the same time"). In its pace, rhythm, and oblique angles, Wallace's prose captures the epic quality of tennis played live.

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## "On the Tennis Court at Night" by Galway Kinnell

Critics credit Kinnell with returning warmth and meaning to American poetry after modernism's cold cerebrality and fetishized form. In this poem from his 1980 collection, *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words*, Kinnell contrasts the court's cool Euclidean geometries with "the thousand erased trajectories / of that close-contested last set," whose "blur of volleys," "soft arcs of drop shots," and "ingrown loops of lobs with topspin" remain available only to memory. Attention to the game's physicality prompts a reimagining of the court as an "arena where every man grows old / pursuing that repertoire of perfect shots, / darkness already in his strokes." Rendered in enjambed, lilting free verse, it is a sentiment characteristic of Kinnell: frank, reverent, and marked by grace.

## "The Heat of Wimbledon," "At the Wide-Open Open," and "The Games Men Play" by Martin Amis

"For sure,' as tennis players like to say, the four Majors—the four Slams—present major challenges. At Roland Garros, in Paris, it's the clay. At Wimbledon, in London, it's the grass. At Flinders Park, in Melbourne, it's the heat. And at Flushing Meadow, in New York, it's the crowd. Or it's the New Yorkers. Or it's Flushing Meadow. Or it's just New York." Thus begins Amis's account of the 1993 U.S. Open, one of three essays penned on the Grand Slam tournaments for *The New Yorker* in the early '90s. Surveying the scene in his signature bristling and self-amused style. Amis delights in well-placed words and offbeat analogies: Wimbledon connotes "petit-bourgeois Babbitry, duff protocol, and tweedy gentility"; Ivan Lendl resembles "Franz Kafka with muscle tone"; and Goran Ivanisevic saunters around "like a seventeen-year-old ignoring his girlfriend at a picnic." Equally attentive to the mechanics and the comedy of play, Amis entertains without demanding much in return.

## Levels of the Game by John McPhee

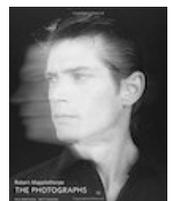
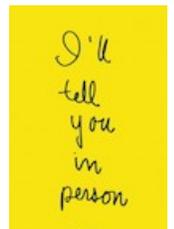
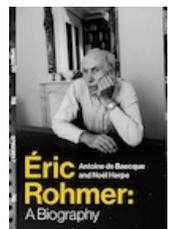
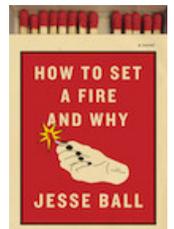
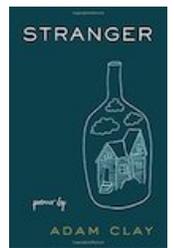
"A person's tennis game begins with his nature and background and comes out through his motor mechanisms into shot patterns and characteristics of play," argues John McPhee in this twofold portrait of Clark Graebner and Arthur Ashe, set during the semifinals of the first U.S. Open. McPhee's leading men second his determinism: here, character is not simply fate, but tennis. Graebner is a white, midwestern, and middle-class conservative, Apollonian in build and nicknamed "Herr" for his excessive efficiency on-court. Ashe is biracial, liberal in his politics, and vulpine in stature, all looseness and wrists during play. Stereotypes thus drawn, Graebner's rigid, humorless style meets Ashe's haphazard brilliance in an orgy of action verbs: "lob"s, "whip"s, "blast"s, "pound"s, "dive"s, and "detonate"s. More Ashe than Graebner, McPhee's writing is cinematic, fast-moving, and full of deliciously drawn detail: Graebner is a hypochondriac and one-time figure skater; Ashe's bookshelf houses *Black Power* next to Emily Post's *Etiquette*.

## Double Fault by Lionel Shriver

In a prefatory note, Shriver insists that her seventh novel is not about tennis, but all things peripheral: marriage, love, relationships, and the slow dissolution thereof. Ten-odd pages later, Willy Novinsky, protagonist and anti-heroine extraordinaire, belabors Shriver's point: "Tennis is about *everything*," she exclaims. A boilerplate player edging on her mid-20s and ranked in the mid-400s, Willy's totalizing view of tennis spells her demise. Unable to divorce failures of sport from failures of self, she grows numb to all emotions save spite for her racket-toting husband. Such confections of tennis with everything else prove both Willy's fault and the author's own. Likening tennis to sex, God, war, rail travel, and the African savannah, Shriver's metaphors are tired and her characters stale, too fixed in their respective flaws. Despite her insistence to the contrary, Shriver is at her best when tracing the intricacies of the game itself. Fluent descriptions of lobs, dinks, and slice-drops make palatable an otherwise bland account of being good, but not quite good enough.

## A Single Man by Christopher Isherwood

Existential concerns inform Isherwood's mid-career novel, by all accounts his most



successful. In deliberate and delicately wrought prose, Isherwood renders one day in the life of George, a British implant in the stifling suburbs of 1960s Los Angeles. For George, the descriptor "single man" spells not carefree bachelorhood but a brutal reality: his erstwhile lover, Jim, has recently died. An English professor at a no-name college, George's workaday is one of quiet deflation: he reads Ruskin on the toilet and trails incisive speeches with flatulent slogs through the campus parking lot. Numbed by the textureless banality of his world, George yearns for something raw, authentic, and riven with appetite. A tennis game glimpsed in passing offers just that: two half-naked men volleying, body to body, with a cruelty that's undeniably erotic. Yet, thirty pages later, a "fat, middle-aged faculty member" and "a girl with hair on her legs" have replaced the morning's duo: an anticlimax typical of George's life in "our Country of the Bland."

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*Courtney Fiske is a writer based in New York. Her work has been published in Open Letters Monthly, Idiom magazine, and The Daily.*

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