

### **On True North by Jack Burnham**

I have never learned how to write a radio drama. I only learned how to write True North, one evening at a time, one morning at a time. Mornings and evenings for a month led to the first draft, and a month afterwards, it was ready for a cast. The last draft, the one that will be heard on air, was produced between rehearsals, cleaning up loose sentence structures and altering the placement of punchlines. The final, final draft has yet to be written. The secret of editing is that it never ends. There is simply a point when the deadline appears on the horizon and it no longer becomes possible to tinker any longer.

True North came from a desire to write a story unlike those that had been already told. Hockey is not often a sport that translates well to the radio. There are few fictional stories about it, whether printed or presented on the screen. Football, baseball, and basketball all have their places in Hollywood. Hockey has the Mighty Ducks trilogy, *Young Blood*, *Miracle*, *Slapshot*, and the writings of Ken Dryden, all of which, while much beloved, are not nearly as numerous as the films about high school football alone. It is not as though hockey does not have the same potential or material. It is that much of the United States is not frozen eight months of the year and thus can enjoy sports that require the use of grass. Football is engrained from the beginning as a sport that defines American exceptionalism while basketball has soaring aerobatics and stunning feats of strength and coordination in mid-air. Baseball is the mythological pastime that can engage both a statistics professor and their child at the same time while also being easily followed by radio. They are also slow. Basketball needed a shot clock because of its lack of action, baseball has refused one for the same reason, and football is designed that way to allow for play calling at decent intervals.

The essence of a lack of speed for a sport is critical for its narrative capabilities. No one would understand the long, unbroken chain of commentary that accurately describing a hockey game would necessitate. So, instead, it has become the background video of Wednesday nights across the country because the good basketball games only happen on Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons and the playoffs conflict with Opening Day. Coincidentally, this is why True North is not a long series of reciting write-ups of fictional games. Telling a story about hockey means telling the story around hockey. It is telling the story of its journeys, a tale in common with Kingston.

When the media describes a certain player, there is often a focus on his statistics, his underlying numbers, or perhaps his individual awards, the Norris, the Rocket Richard, the Lady Byng, or the Hart Trophy. When a player is asked about another player in the league, they will often mention the number of games played first, before any other characteristic. This is not because players do not want hardware to put on their mantels, it is because hockey is fundamentally a sport about securing a roster spot. Going to the NFL is difficult because there are so few positions; the NHL is difficult because there are so many. A player can spend years shifting between different levels of the minors to find a place on a big-league bench. Traveling across Canada on the back of a bus, staying with billet families, bouncing from small town to industrial cityscape to old fishing port, for years on end. These are the experiences of most

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players in the league, those that are not named Matthews or McDavid or Crosby. It is these stories that I sought to capture in True North through the story of a fictional player, Alex.

But beyond that, there is another story, those of the communities that serve as the backdrop for those journeys. The arenas, local media, town support, these are critical aspects of the narrative as well. They matter, just as much as any player. They outlast even the longest-tenured coach, the most established face of the franchise. Every night needs an audience, rough and rowdy and proud and sincere. Of all the choices for entertainment on a Saturday evening, throngs of people choose to watch any game. It is this side of the story, the one personified by Grace and Maggie and even Julia, that is the bedrock of True North. For Grace, hockey is merely a story that interweaves with her larger life in Kingston, bookending Alex's journeys to the Limestone City. Julia is drawn to the sport by necessity, though its stories, including that of Chris Tanner, remains endearing. Maggie ties these threads together in her constant demands of the station, embodying a desire for a true homegrown host along with the polite but rougher edges of the sport. Without each, the world of the show and the sport of hockey would not be complete.

I want to end on a personal note. True North began as an idea to tell a story about the sport and city that I love, each having become second homes. This essay series was meant to highlight elements of the process that are often hidden from view of the audience. The first essay of the series were my first thoughts before I wrote the show, while the others detailed my thoughts about the game, about the setting, and about writing itself. However, this essay series has missed something, until now. True North could not have occurred without its technical director, its cast, its stage manager, and its mentor. Sebastian, Samarra, Katie, Shira, Annabelle, Gillian, Rosemary, all of you have worked tirelessly to bring this story to air, often through difficult and strenuous conditions. Your contributions will not be forgotten, every one of you. In truth, this story is for you. You all made it your own.