

Raiford Guins



FEELING LEEDS

✈️ NOTES ON
LOVING A FOOTBALL
CLUB FROM AFAR

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Saturday, 3pm, somewhere

I HAVE invested over \$90,000 in Leeds United Football Club. My contribution wasn't covered by Sky Sports, ESPN, or any newspaper. I do not sit on the board of directors. And I do not own any equity shares in the club. A 'foreign' takeover isn't likely. I am neither celebrity fan nor ex-player. I've only visited Switzerland, never opened a bank account there. My assets aren't held offshore. I can also assure you that I am not an oligarch, part of a royal bloodline, or a billionaire investor. If I were a money-spinner, that amount would be mere pocket change, hardly worth these words.

Who am I? Nobody. One of the many global nobodies who supports a football club thousands of miles away from its home ground, town, city, even country. I'm the somnolent supporter who arises at stupid o'clock each Saturday morning (or Sunday) to follow my club. The \$90,000 (plus interest) reflects my student loan to attend the University of Leeds in the 1990s. It was a sound investment to diversify my supporter portfolio, if a costly way to close the distance between myself and Leeds United.

The University of Leeds tendered a zone of contact. It meant that I, with international student visa in hand, would finally be there in Leeds, at Elland Road. Not for a one-off match, another tourist jaunt, but for the long haul. Back in 1994 I envisioned this acceptance as a one-way ticket. Life's rhythm tuned into regularly walking down the long, wide steps of Beeston Hill to the ground, buying a chip butty from a food van, selecting tiny enamel football badges outside the ground, and quickly grabbing a copy of the match program along with a fanzine (*The Square Ball*). The mounting elation of kick-off compelled a squeeze into ageing turnstiles to ascend the eminent concrete steps of the Don Revie Stand. I was finally there, unremittingly among the routines, rituals, habits, and superstitious behaviours, all the ordinary, taken-for-granted, sensual and social things people do and experience at a football match. I wished to dwell within this place evermore.

Finally 'being there' was a culmination of years of support, a personal decision to leave friends and family for a career path without guarantee, not to mention accumulate sizeable debt, all in order to experience the everyday intensities of supporting Leeds United: to feel closer to, be a part of, the club I love. This love affair is far from destined. I was neither born into the club via a family line of support nor born in Leeds, neighbouring towns and villages across West Yorkshire, or even in England. I'm from the States. Leeds is a big club with global support, so this fact shouldn't surprise in the least.

What may be the lengths those of us who aren't local, born and bred, or in the same country as our beloved club will go to culture a meaningful connection, a sense of belonging.

A recent article on the 'future fan' in *The Guardian* by Paul MacInnes touches on the question of 'being there' via a different register that nevertheless resounds within this book. The majority of fans, MacInnes reports, 'no longer watch football live in person but digitally through a screen'. This isn't to slight either group, only to note the shifting cartography of football supporters. A polarity has arisen between 'legacy fans' who go to football regularly and so-called 'digital fans' – or the more derisive term, 'Twitter fans'.

The nature of supporting a club has changed, and this emergent demographic of 'digital fans' has prompted clubs – and all fans – to rethink the nature of 'support' and 'engagement'. Is a 'thumbs-up' emoji on Facebook less of a show of support than a scarf swung overhead at Elland Road? Is the sinewy shoulder push of a squeaky turnstile surpassed by the typing of a tweet? Is playing *FIFA* online a form of social interaction on a par with travelling to away matches? It's neither a matter of deciding answers to these off-the-cuff questions nor choosing a side, as it were, but to acknowledge that *how* and *where* many support football, or identify with a club, is being reworked, redefined, experienced diversely. Today, supporters the world over are simultaneously local and distributed. Some *go* to a match; many more *switch it on*.

I can't say that I embrace being lumped into the category of 'digital fan' because of my location, which Google Maps tells me is 3,911 miles from Elland Road. I bump up against it out of necessity rather than choice. Supporting a club from a vast distance isn't a new phenomenon, as anyone crammed into a British pub Stateside for an early morning kick-off in the 1980s and 1990s will affirm. Sky didn't invent football as per the popular maxim, and many across the pond, like me, were watching the English game well before 1992. The difference today, of course, is one of scale. More watch, beyond the seating capacity of any ground. On the flipside, I wish that I could embody the status of 'legacy fans' and go to matches on a regular basis as I once did. This category I long to embrace out of choice but cannot because of economic necessity. To the tune of *Trainspotting's* opening riff: I chose a job, career, mortgage, family, my son's college fund, insurance, car payments, hotel and airfare costs; life's expenditures a cruel reality, grounding my many flights of fancy. I chose life, just not where I wanted to live it.

I cannot inhabit the label of 'legacy fan', yet I do not neatly fit into the 'digital fan' label either. I'm not convinced that the two categories are mutually exclusive, so I will share what I have done and continue to do to show support and feel connected when 'being there' is more dream than reality. This short book is my attempt to reconcile the practices of passion in the absence of place while acknowledging the reliance on different modes of interaction across 30 years of

supporting Leeds United: when ringing the ground for midweek results was the means to acquire news before the internet made such information readily available, when out-of-date copies of *Shoot!* and *Match* plucked from a newsstand became a lifeline to events transpired and the raw material for working out league tables with pen and paper, or when jumping up and down madly while pumping gas as I watched Leeds beat Villa away 3-2 on my iPhone on 23 December 2018 (to the bewilderment of rednecks at the southern Georgia gas station I stopped at when travelling to Tampa, Florida, for Christmas, a sunny pitstop on my way to a Boxing Day match at Elland Road).

Moments like these, travailing for immediacy, along with many more detailed in the book, may seem superfluous to the supporter who can walk, train, or bus to the ground, but those of us with an ocean or continent between ourselves and the turnstiles rely on an assortment of objects, practices, attitudes, and sacrifices to build and sustain our lived – if remote – complex experience of conveying and mediating our support: intimacy through frequent flyer miles, international postage, and the internet. Without the benefit of attending matches routinely across my life, I have had to fill that void with other ways of generating a feeling of belonging. I'm certainly not alone. There are a lot of us out there, strung across the globe. Many attend live matches only a few times a year or never actually visit the home ground of the club they support.

Supporters in these circumstances cannot experience the same sense of belonging that Nick Hornby relishes towards the end of *Fever Pitch* when declaring that Arsenal's victory over Liverpool at the 1987 League Cup 'belonged to me every bit as much as it belonged to Charlie Nicholas and George Graham' on account of the author putting in 'more hours, more years, more decades than them'. My time invested and disparate ways of supporting suggests a different sense of belonging – one nonetheless meaningful but conditioned by the reality of distance – and this book is an attempt to share that difference. It peers into the peculiar and neglected world of the dislocated supporter, the fan who follows a football club devotedly and passionately from afar.

Belonging by place

Why does 'being there' matter? Tony Rickson's *Football Is Better With Fans* sets a scene familiar to many. Matchday, he says, '[Is] about meeting up with friends for a pie and a pint, walking the last bit before going inside the stadium, and getting a first breathtaking glimpse of the magically green grass. Then there's the work to be done. Clapping the players as they come out to warm up and cheering them all over again when they emerge for the match itself. And the following 90 minutes of breathless, heart-warming action. The singing, the chanting, the drama, the experience, the celebrations, the passion. Being a part of it; the warm tingle of camaraderie.'

To help capture this experience for my son and I, our most recently attended match being against Norwich on 13 March 2022, you'd have to add a transatlantic flight, memberships renewed each year for little actual usage, hotel and train bookings, advance planning to coordinate his school and my teaching schedules, the challenge of actually obtaining tickets now that we are back in the Premier League, and, perhaps most important, saving money to actually indulge in that 'warm tingle of camaraderie' (even if only infrequently).

Why bother? Seems like a lot of hassle for 90 minutes, right? It's certainly easier to watch via the numerous apps now available in the US that carry Premier League matches, such as Peacock or fuboTV. In-depth pre-match commentary followed by match reactions are readily available across a range of social media outlets, such as Leeds United Live for example. In fact, I can absorb so many reactions during and after a match via the likes of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube that I feel bloated by the range of differing opinions. Too much banter, stats, highlight clips, and passion in my diet. What lacks is my own perspective, one that can only be had from the stands.

I will confess to the reader that I place profound value and meaning on being at matches. That's precisely why I went into debt; the reward not financial but cultural, to be privy to the experience of home and away matches. Such proximity is no longer mine to enjoy at ease. So why continue to romanticise it – to plan, save, long, and live for

it? A line from Rita Felski's *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, a book not devoted to football but that studies how we connect with and attune ourselves to the things we admire, helps explain my preference for 'being there'. Shunning the long-standing western philosophical position that judgment and criticism requires a removed evaluation, or discerning detachment, she proffers a different direction, 'Distance is not always better than closeness: the bird's-eye view will miss crucial details and telling anomalies; it may result in knowing less rather than more.' Being at a match provides a view that is not universal like the one shared via cameras for television spectators, one that covers only a tiny corner of the pitch to show the on-ball action. But the camera view doesn't capture everything encountered and felt going to the match and walking back, stewing over a poor result or splashing pints in victory.

My view in the stands is subjective. Mine. It has a distinct angle, story, feel, flavour, and smell. It is my experience of being there. The view is obstructed by another supporter's head, arm, or outstretched scarf. It impatiently observes build-up. The beginning of a run not captured on the ball-focused camera. It glances up in disbelief at a missed chance, glances down at my trainers in disgust when scored against. It jostles, jumps, shakes, and quakes when the back of the net is struck. It captures my son tearing up after Norwich's equaliser. It's clouded by tears when we make it 2-1. Unable to control my relief, my joy of being back to witness – after a two-year hiatus – this moment proves overwhelming, raw, hysterical.

It embraces strangers in jubilation. It looks at my son to smile, hug, and dance up and down tumultuously when Joe Gelhardt scores *that* winning goal against the Canaries. We punch the air in chorus to the Kaiser Chiefs' 'I Predict a Riot', raucously applauding the players' grit and determination after the match. This exemplifies the 'rush of togetherness', the collective song of support (the emotional effect of the voice captured elegantly in Simon Critchley's *What We Think About When We Think of Football*).

The angle from the stands isn't just the intense rush but an indicator of the banal, the tiny details missed in such celebratory moments. For instance, being there to have a supporter sat next to my son spy his Adidas trainers as bodies depart for the half, 'Stockholms, flippin 'eck, where did you get those?' The two struck up a conversation. Deck, ten years old, talked to a fellow supporter probably 40 years his senior, explaining that his dad couldn't find his size (UK 12) in shops while he casually strolled into The Hip Store off Vicar Lane the day before the match to find his (UK 7) in stock. Deck got one over on me, he proudly boasted to the bemusement of his friendly inquisitor. The supporter's comment affirmed our presence at the match. It was one instance of the minutia of being there: intimacy of place, the presence of fullness, richness, pure feeling.

In the foreword to Steve Leach's excellent *Twenty Football Towns*, David Cooper, co-director of Manchester Metropolitan's Centre for Place Writing, claims that many

books on football like *Fever Pitch* and Tim Park's *A Season with Verona* 'interrogate what it means to steadfastly support a team that is rooted in a particular place. In different ways, therefore, both books are concerned with the assertion of what might be described as authentic insidersness.'

Leach's book is much more 'promiscuous' in sharing his tales of match-going across multiple clubs and their towns. Being there, for Cooper, helps the supporter 'break out of bubbles of isolation, if only for the afternoon or evening, and experience place as part of a collective'. Simon Critchley shares this conviction, though his word of choice is 'enchantment' to best capture when we are 'lifted out of the everyday into something ecstatic, evanescent and shared, a subtly transfigured sensorium'.

While I appreciate such sentiments, my isolation cannot be measured in afternoons or evenings. More like months. 'Insidersness' eludes. Unless a four-year span of living in Leeds constitutes such a quality? Such status, in my mind at least, isn't one to defend or escalate. It simply points to a different mode of engagement and other types of experiences. Trying to position this form of support, its endurance in particular, requires new language, neither insider nor outsider, 'legacy' nor 'Twitter'. Dislocation seems fitting to describe my personal relationship to Leeds United. Unlike Leach's, I cannot describe my book as 'place writing' but as 'displaced writing'. If 'place matters', and I believe wholeheartedly that it does, then I say that 'displacement matters too' – a desire to feel part of a place and community when proximity fails.

‘Being there’ supplies the ‘crucial details and telling anomalies’ of support, the magical stuff, the experiences for attaching ourselves to the club that come from being close, though more often than not lived at distance. These sensations cannot be had when watching remotely. Our view is restricted, fixed for us by the ‘bird’s eye’, not subject to intoxicating, erratic chatter and clutter of life happening en route to the match, outside and inside the ground, and on the mile-and-half walk back to our hotel, when we try desperately to squeeze out as much of that feeling of being within the ‘collective’ amid the muted sounds of gummy-soled trainers departing. Obtaining, occupying, owning our view in and from the stands places me and Deck in the ground, with and among supporters at Elland Road. Prepositions like ‘in’, ‘with’, and ‘at’ orient me *to* the world of Leeds United, a monogamous affair. The trouble is, when not there, I have to work much harder to replicate this orienting perspective, stretch it out, find ways for it to endure.

Belonging by practice

If place is a profound, though irregular, means of belonging what do I do in the months – years – in between? Life becomes ongoing efforts of re-enchantment, enactment through practices. Permit a little context. One reason for writing this book grew out of my vexed relationship to the profusion of football writing, many exemplars already mentioned above, devoted to personal, evocative narratives on football culture and individual clubs. Not

that I dislike such books. In fact, the opposite is the case. I *envy* them.

I long after their collective histories: acts of reflection and remembrance, the exquisite portraits their words paint of standing on terraces, walking to a match, away days, collecting match programmes, attending evening matches played under floodlights, or being at a cup final. In every *Fever Pitch*; *Going To The Match*; *Twenty Football Towns*; *The Quiet Fan*; *What We Think About When We Think About Football*; *32 Programmes*; *Saturday, 3pm*; and *Black Boots & Football Pinks* that I read, my years of support, memories, experiences are absent. They do not, cannot, reside within these pages, though I wish they did. While some memories are shared from my time in England (e.g. Ceefax results, away matches, even a cup final), others appear out of reach. The Englishness of the authors, their ‘insiderness’, be it by country, place, past, imagined community, or shared social history, removes those histories, experiences, and encounters from the practices of others whose alarm clock ringing just before 7am Eastern (or 4am West Coast) serves as the official’s whistle for a UK ‘lunchtime’ kick-off.

Like Nick Hornby, I did move closer to the club’s ground, swapping countries along the way. Unlike Simon Critchley, though, I cannot claim a familial line or reminisce of boyhood heroes like Bill Shankly though I certainly do share his non-neutral perspective when it comes to writing about a beloved club. My support, as you will learn, is accidental, not familial. Unlike Daniel

Gray, I cannot claim the same collective identity he does so easily when declaring, at the outset in *Black Boots & Football Pinks*, 'I am marked by a desire to record what is gone, the consequences of which is the book. I wish to preserve in words the relics of our identity.'

Gray's 'our' doesn't fit me or many others like myself who possess a strong, committed, abiding, 'non-indigenous' history of English football. After all, football is a world sport, and I want to see myself within that world. Our sense of recollection is indirect and complicated, multi-mediated, taking the form of worn VHS copies of *The 1992 Tennants FA Charity Shield: Leeds United v Liverpool*, a bucket hat acquired via mail order from the club, or a scarf gifted to me in 1975. Our recording of events 'gone' looks noticeably different, as the global context of support tosses up other instances, other things used to express love, actions for remembrance, and feelings held from distance. Though different and distant, we still share passion, desire, and deep feeling for the clubs we support. The question of 'how' animates this book. I cannot write books like those of Critchley or Gray. I can only share other experiences and encounters hopefully familiar to many more than the 37,890 that can squeeze into Elland Road on any given matchday.

My shared views rely less on match attendance (or tweets) than on a recording of my encounters with objects, conveyance of experiences and practices cutting across many decades of following Leeds United. It elucidates the 'stuff' I use and do to feel a sense of belonging. In this

book, objects, like scarves, badges, or even videocassettes, are deemed magical: they are imbued with qualities and values beyond their intentional functionality. An official club membership card, sticker, 7-inch record, or copy of the *Yorkshire Evening Post* are more than mere things. As with Steven Connor's description of 'magical things' from *Paraphernalia*, they are 'things that we allow and expect to do things back to us'. They are to be 'conjured with, though their magic is done on ourselves rather than others'. These ordinary-cum-magical things are, in the words of another conjuror, Sherry Turkle, 'evocative objects'. They are 'companions in life experience' (greeting me each morning as I welcome the day, slowly drinking coffee from my David Batty mug) heightened in their properties, abilities to emotionally connect, orient me to the world of Leeds United. They keep me in touch. The ordinary objects, habits, routines, hang-ups, peculiarities, and incidental details within these pages are my ways of feeling Leeds. The ordinary, Kathleen Stewart insists in *Ordinary Affect*, 'is a circuit that's always tuned in to some little something somewhere'. I hope that the moments and practices expressed will resonate with other supporters scattered far and wide, celebrating, communicating our shared passion, and varying 'somewheres'. I have tried to texture the labour of support across these pages for those for whom the normal act of watching football is anything but and dislocation defines more than regional accent. It is written by a fan who cannot always be there.

The other reason for writing this book is temporal. For many, the Covid-19 pandemic spurred self-reflection – the occasion to step back from routine and rethink how life is lived, or perhaps can be lived anew once the mask is finally removed. Orange Juice’s ‘Rip It Up’ (and start again) played on regular rotation in my house during 2020. The pandemic proved a moment when *all* supporters became dislocated. Locked out. Locked down. Distanced from their clubs.

This universal dislocation – stinging even more as it was our championship season – prompted me to reflect on my decades of support and sense of self *as* a supporter. With shop shelves empty, toilet roll stockpiled, and cargo ships held outside harbours, time seemed the only commodity in abundance. I used it to look at my own ways of supporting. Writing itself proved emotionally vital during this period, a precious and available means to feeling closer through exposition: committing words to illuminate my practices and experience of support, brief encounters with my efforts, tireless as they are, to orient myself nearer. For large chunks of time during lockdown, the only place I could travel was to the forlorn blank page (a journey with its own peril), a portal to the outside world.

My life has often felt like a series of misses, events just beyond the reach of a goalkeeper’s fingertips. I missed being a native Californian by a few months. I missed a riotous period of music (1977–1982) by being born a little too late. Record collecting is the costly means to subvert that misfortune. I caught the tail end of the Howard

Wilkinson era but left Leeds just before David O'Leary's babes blossomed. I refused to miss this opportunity, even if steeped in the prolonged disappointment, disarray, and death wrought by a pandemic. In the vein of many bands who socially distanced in their studios to produce pandemic recordings, this book is my cathartic jam session: a concept album about distance and my personal efforts to collapse it.