There was a time when I thought I should be allowed to write off running shoes on my income tax because I did more writing on the run than at the computer. My attention span has always been short—I’d give my teacher maybe three minutes to reel me in at the beginning of class, and if the intensity wasn’t great enough, I would stare him or her right in the eye and take leave out the back door of my mind. What no one knew at the time was that a lot of kids like me learned better on the move.

The brain scientist John Medina tells us that from an evolutionary point of view, the frontal lobe—our rational brains—began developing as we came down out of the trees, and during that time males moved about eighteen miles a day, females about eleven, staying ahead of what wanted to eat us and going after what we wanted to eat. So it makes sense that instead of calling guys like me ADD and medicating us, teachers need to realize that we’re just better learners on the move. Nearly 50 years of running has left my right hip grinding in its socket, but my more recognizable athletic identity is swimmer rather than runner, so I show up at my local gym at four every morning to get back in the water. And write.

If you ask John Irving about writing, he’ll tell you about wrestling. Irving wrestled into his 50s, and I’m not talking about rolling around on the floor with his grandchildren. I’m talking focus and grit. Ask me about writing, and I’ll tell you about running or swimming. Hard. With intensity.

At four in the morning, every day I’m near a pool, I hit the water to swim twenty 100-yard sprints, leaving every two minutes (the faster you go, the more rest you get between sprints), and ten 50-yard sprints leaving every minute. Michael Phelps could kick that, but Michael Phelps isn’t 67 years old and trying to put a story together. I treat each sprint like I treat a chapter: all out, fastest I can swim—all out, best I can write. Somewhere around the twelfth or thirteenth hundred, my shoulders start to burn and my cardio rises above 160, but I’ve set a time standard for myself, and if I miss it, I’ve cheated myself out of an optimal workout.

Same with Chapter 12 or 13 of a 20-chapter novel; I’m tired and lost and wondering why I thought I could tell this story in the first place. But if I back off any of those last chapters I’ve done the same thing to my story as my workout. Got to be balls out. That’s an athletic metaphor.

I look at reading a good book the same way I look at writing a good book (“good” being in the eye of the beholder here). I want the reader to bring the same intensity to the reading of any chapter as I, or any other author, bring to the writing. The contract between any reader and any writer is the same. I’ll bring my best imagination to the writing, you bring your best imagination to the reading, and in the end, the work will be better than it ever had a right to be because our individual histories will highlight connections neither of us could have invented.

All that is to say, I think we’re looking at “sports literature for boys” all wrong. Very often editors and publishers look at it as “stories boys will read.” Some editors—not all by any means—will urge us authors to tell those stories in straightforward, simple language, as if we believe the misconception that those “reluctant reading boys” should be engaged at their lowest common denominator.
But here's the thing. If we write the best literary story and infuse it with the intensity that every athletic contest and every good story should have, those boys will read the books, no matter how literary. They’ll do the same thing with complex language that all of us do, define some of the words by context and ask or look up those they need to know more specifically. We need to challenge them with our literature the same way their coaches challenge them with the athletic task at hand.

Now go back through this article and substitute “kids” or “students” for “boys,” because everything I've said about boys is also true about girls. There are girls in every school who consider themselves nonreaders for exactly the same reasons the boys do: because the stories don’t touch them. They like intensity. They like to explore true relationships. They like to be challenged. They’re adventurous. Laurie Halse Anderson, Jacqueline Woodson, Sandra Neil Wallace, to mention only a few, are athletes of the first order and their characters, athletes or not, are often physical as well as cerebral and insightful.

I think it’s time we changed our view of sports fiction and elevate it to the stature we reserve for sports themselves. A good game or an individual contest at any level requires many of the staples required of a good story. Time and place. Context. Good guys and bad guys (depending on your loyalties). A novel that includes sports is, and should be, subject to the same rigorous tests as any novel. The differences between the climax of a game and the climax of a plot are virtually undetectable. Ours is a culture that reveres athletics, probably too much. Team sports are often seen in the same context as is war, and certainly some of the best American literature is about war. Sisterhood and brotherhood are the stuff of great literature in every venue, not just athletics. The loneliness, the solitude, of many individual sports contain all those same human challenges. Truth is, the great Shakespearean issues are all to be found somewhere in athletics and in athletes’ relationships to their world. Sacrifice, cheating (lies), allegiances, you name it.

So maybe it's not about sports or about getting boys (arguably notorious nonreaders) to read. Maybe it’s about intensity. Maybe it’s about human triumph and human failing.

Chris Crutcher, voracious reader of one novel in four years of high school, has for more than 30 years been writing stories he believes might have turned him into a reader.

Call for Proposals: Research Network Forum at CCCC

The Research Network Forum (RNF), founded in 1987, is a pre-convention forum at the CCCC annual convention which provides an opportunity for established researchers, new researchers, and graduate students to discuss their current projects and receive mentoring from colleagues. This year’s forum will be held March 18, 2015, from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., in Tampa, Florida. The forum is free to CCCC convention registrants. As in past years, RNF 2015 features morning plenary addresses focusing on the 2015 CCCC theme, “Risk & Reward.”

The RNF welcomes Work-in-Progress Presenters (WiPPs) at any stage of their research and at any position in the composition/rhetoric field. During roundtable discussions, WiPPs are grouped by thematic clusters in which they discuss their current projects and then benefit from the responses of other researchers. Discussion Leaders (DLs) lead the thematic roundtables and mentor WiPPs; this role is key to the RNF. We ask that Discussion Leaders are experienced, established researchers. Discussion Leaders are welcome to also participate as WiPPs. Participants also include Editors of printed and online composition/rhetoric publications (journals, edited collections, and book series), who discuss publishing opportunities in an open, roundtable format. Editors are encouraged to serve as Discussion Leaders and may also participate as WiPPs.

To submit a proposal (Deadline: October 31, 2014), visit our website, http://researchnetworkforum.org. Please fill out a form for each of the roles in which you would like to participate. You may appear on the RNF Program in addition to having a speaking role at the CCCC convention. Questions? Email Co-Chairs Risa P. Gorelick and Gina M. Merys: rnfchairs@gmail.com.