Body and Identity- Going beyond the Clichés in The Bone Cage

By Karla Weder

Clichéd sports stories are everywhere- both on paper and film. They are distinguishable by characteristics such as dramatic music, inspiring quotes, and the underdog overcoming an obstacle to be successful. Many would think simply by the title and cover that The Bone Cage is just another clichéd sports story. However, Angie Abdou chose to write her novel from an entirely different angle despite her love for the tried and true clichéd sports story. Sadie, a twenty-six year old swimmer, and Digger, a thirty year old wrestler, are both nearing the end of their competitive careers and have one chance to make an impression on the world at the Olympics. They are then involved in a car accident which leaves Sadie with a broken back and Digger unscathed. From that point on their relationship begins to deteriorate and it becomes apparent that Sadie will not be able to compete. Abdou’s novel goes beyond the clichés to describe the unglamorous world of sport with descriptive elements and images, combined with an open ended structure which allows her to deviate from sport and focus on character relationships; most importantly, the non linear structure allows Abdou to develop well rounded and realistic characters that add a depth to the novel that would not exist had she written a clichéd sports story.

From the opening pages of the novel Abdou makes a point of focusing on the ugly side of sport with descriptive images and several inter-textual references. Her vivid quotations such as “Lips white and parched, solidified gunk stuck to the corners of their mouths, breath reeking of shit, eyes dried red, bones nearly visible under grey skin” (Abdou 2), emphasize the gruelling world of competitive sport. They also highlight the dedication and perseverance needed to be the best. Her choice of similes and metaphors are not those typical of the sports world, but ones that
emphasize her message of finding meaning through sport and also without it. Sadie, one of the main characters uses reference to the space race between the United States and Russia as a way of metaphorically drawing comparison to the Olympics:

Well there’s this old story. All the countries are having a contest to see who can be the first to get a man on the moon. They try and try but no one can do it. Then finally, the Russians realize there’s a glitch in the contest rules. Aha, they say, it doesn’t say we have to bring the man back from the moon. So they send their man off to the moon. They win the contest! . . . No one cares about the poor stranded astronaut. . . . Don’t you see the metaphor? . . . For the Olympics. Astronaut, athlete. Moon, Olympics. Countries take their athletes to these great heights in the name of glory, but when they’re done with them— (Abdou 159)

This passage is significant in that it reflects the way in which the novel is written. Rather than focusing on the glory of sport, Abdou focuses on the struggle the athletes face not only while training, but once their competitive career is over. Sadie is forced to confront this transition earlier than expected as result of the accident. Her attitude towards sport had already been changing due to Lucinda’s influence and also the death of her grandmother. However, Sadie struggled to find meaning without spending countless hours swimming endless lengths. Gold’s quotation, “the importance of story to your personal life, your coping skills, your mental health, and your relationship with other people” (Abdou 20) is inserted specifically as an inter-textual element because it aids the readers in understanding the story from Abdou’s viewpoint. Abdou also highlights the pressure placed on the athletes to represent their country well and be successful. No one understands the pressures of representing one’s country more than Clara Hughes. She has represented Canada at both the Summer and Winter Olympics as a speed skater
and cycler and is the only Canadian to have won medals at both. Despite her success at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, she found herself “pinnacle into the blackness of depression” (Christie n.p.), unexplainably crying and sleeping all day with no desire to race her bike ever again. However, with the help of her family, coaches and doctors she has overcome her depression and sharing her story with the world. This summer she will participate in the Summer Olympics in London, hoping to win her seventh medal. This real life example lends realism to the novel as “Abdou reaches toward the possibility of self-deception as physical form (Ricou 8). Sadie displays this type of self-deception most notably after her accident as a coping mechanism in her adjustment to a life without competitive sport. She naively tells herself that she will heal in time for the Olympics, all the while knowing she is lying to herself. This self-deception makes the truth much more difficult to accept when she is finally willing to acknowledge that she will be unable to compete. While some believe that self-deception is a good practice to follow in order to attain happiness, van Leeuwen believes that “that self-honesty is a superior policy to self-deception, if one wishes to achieve happiness” (Van Leeuwen 108). His belief is reflected in The Bone Cage as Sadie begins to heal and adjust only after she accepts that her competitive swimming career is over. Through her use of inter-textual elements and descriptive images, Abdou goes far beyond the typical sports story to emphasize the hidden side of sport and the negative impacts of self-deception.

In addition to the vivid imagery and inter-textual elements, Abdou uses an open-ended structure as a way of deviating from the traditional sports story in order to focus on the characters’ relationships. The novel has no clear ending which leaves readers wondering if Digger will be successful at the Olympics and if Sadie will find happiness and contentment without sport. The structure is a critical part of maintaining the main theme and preventing the
story from becoming too stereotypical. Abdou deviates from the pursuit of excellence in sport to address Sadie’s relationship with her grandmother. Early in the novel, Sadie faces an emotional struggle as her grandmother lay dying in the hospital. Sadie is forced by her coach to ignore her emotions in order to give her training the focus it deserves: “A successful athlete, Marcus would say, must block out the rest of the world, must concentrate on the task at hand” (32). Once her grandmother dies, Sadie has no desire to swim and spends days coping with the loss of her grandmother. Ironically, her final coping mechanism is to get back into the pool and swimming becomes a distraction to mask the pain she feels. The exploration of Sadie’s relationship with her grandmother is the beginning of her changing attitude towards sport, which gives the novel depth beyond the archetypal sports story. In addition to her relationship with her grandmother, the structure allows Sadie and Digger’s relationship to be explored from both angles. Sadie and Digger are isolated from the normal world as a result of their rigorous training schedules, both having few friends outside of their sport. Their relationship is formed because of commonality—they are both training for the Olympics. However, it is soon apparent that Sadie and Digger could potentially be more than friends. While the open-endedness and meandering structure allows their relationship to develop, the style is also important in ensuring that their relationship doesn’t overshadow the book’s main theme. Once Sadie is injured their relationship becomes strained, as Digger sees no use for Sadie in his life. The crumbling of their relationship emphasizes that their relationship was based on commonality and that without a common goal it will not survive. While some dislike the novel because of the back and forth style and meandering plot line, it is a significant structural element used by Abdou to ensure the novel stays focused on the main theme of one’s struggle to find identity outside of sport. The character relationships are a substantial component of this discovery of self-identity; however, they are not the main element.
While the open ended conclusion allows Abdou to focus on the relationships of the characters as well as their sport, the relationships would be lacklustre without well developed and realistic characters. By using a non-linear structure for the novel, Abdou is able to create well rounded characters that are easily relatable. Abdou believes that her novel achieved the success it did because everyone is able to relate to her characters, not just dedicated athletes. As Lisa Salem-Wiseman wrote in her review of *The Bone Cage*, “She builds sympathy for all of the athletes she portrays, and one finds oneself rooting for them – not to win, but to find happiness and fulfillment outside of the competitive arena” (Salem-Wiseman 2). Abdou once again breaks away from the confines of a clichéd sports story to address the complexities of life. By doing so, she creates characters which can more easily be identified with by readers. Her characters are so realistic and believable because they were taken from her own life. To a certain extent, Digger is moulded after her younger brother, who wrestled at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. Abdou herself was a competitive swimmer in college, and while not at the same level as Sadie, there are elements of Sadie’s character that are taken from her own life. The characters are also complex because of their struggle to find an identity outside of being an athlete. Sadie is forced to confront the struggle much earlier than Digger as result of her accident. However, her attitude towards sport was starting to change before the accident due to Lucinda’s influence and perception of the Olympics. Lucinda forewarns Sadie that “. . . it’s not real. It’s all spectacle” (Abdou 128), and that realistically she has no chance of winning a medal in an Olympic year with her time and that “no one cares unless you get a medal” (Abdou 127) and “anything less than a medal at the Olympics is a failure” (127). Lucinda’s influence and her grandmother’s death begin to change Sadie’s perception of sport long before the accident. These changes in mindset help her to overcome her injury. Once injured, Digger begins to push Sadie away for he
has no interest in her anti-Olympic thoughts, as he is still focused on competing and winning, completely ignoring the hurdles he will have to overcome once the Olympics are over. Abdou drops subtle hints that Digger will be unsuccessful at the Olympics and that his struggle to find an identity outside of sport will be much more difficult than Sadie’s: “She knows that no matter what happens in Sydney, she will need to be strong for his return” (Abdou 233). Sadie’s accident and her changed perceptions of sport allow her to recognize that Digger will have a more difficult transition to a life without sport and she promises him that she will help him, although at the time he doesn’t truly comprehend what she is promising. The emotional struggles and detailed characters are amplified by the open-ended conclusion and all that much more realistic because they reflect actual people that Abdou has known.

The typical clichéd sports stories are popular; however, Abdou’s novel is popular because it is not a clichéd sports story. She goes beyond the clichés to write a novel which is filled with vivid, yet ugly, quotations about the real world of sport. Glamour is not the focus of the novel, nor is success. The purpose of the novel is to understand the difficulties of sport and the struggle to find meaning without it. Her novel is successful as it’s easy to relate to, whether one is an athlete or not. The struggle for self-identity is not a struggle specific to the world of competitive sport, but it is one faced by everyone at some point. Had Abdou written just another clichéd sports story she might have received the same success. However, her novel is memorable as more than a sports story because its detailed and descriptive images, the inter-textual references, and open-ended structure—all add depth to the novel, and encourage the reader to proactively engage with the relationship of body and identity.
Works Cited

Abdou, Angie. Interview/Public Reading. Grant MacEwan University. 29 February 2012.


