

# THE CHANCE OF LIFE: JEFF LEMIRE'S *ESSEX* COUNTY TRILOGY, CANADIAN IDENTITY, AND THE MYTHOS OF HOCKEY

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*Ghost Stories*, the second book in Jeff Lemire's *Essex County* trilogy, opens with an epigraph from Stephen Leacock that could well stand as an epigraph for the entire work: "Hockey captures the essence of Canadian experience in the New World. In a land so inescapably and inhospitably cold, hockey is the chance of life, and an affirmation that despite the deathly chill of winter we are alive" (112). While the whole of *Essex County* reflects life in one corner of Southwestern Ontario and is filled with references that would be recognizable to many Canadians (such as Captain Canada, Canadian beer, and Canadian settlement history), it is the mythos of hockey that is at the centre of the text. This mythos permeates *Essex County*, mediating communication between characters, shaping their identities, illustrating tensions between isolation and community, and informing the choices that Lemire makes in using the comics medium to tell his story. If hockey captures the Canadian experience as Leacock asserts, *Essex County* explores that experience by drawing on a wide array of the medium's rhetorical possibilities. This essay examines the ways in which hockey is essential to the Canadian identity constructed within the comics medium in *Essex County* in general and *Ghost Stories* in particular.

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Since he is working in comics, Lemire has access to more rhetorical strategies than he would if writing a strictly word-based text, just as the reader must negotiate meaning from this larger rhetorical palette. In comics, meaning is made not only linguistically, but across a variety of modes, including the visual, the gestural, the audio, and the spatial.<sup>1</sup> Words are certainly important in comics, but meaning is also made from the visual mode—the way people, objects, animals, settings, and other elements are drawn, including the use of perspective, shading, depth of field, line, coloring, white space, and panel composition. Visual elements are also used to represent facial expressions and body language (the gestural mode), as well as the

audio mode (through lettering, sound effects, punctuation, and the shapes of word balloons and caption boxes). Finally, the way these elements are arranged on the page—the spatial element—is highly important in the medium of comics, in terms of both overall layout and linear sequencing. These elements combine to encompass the available means of making meaning at the level of the page. However, it is not only at the level of the page that meaning is made by comics creators and readers, but also through the connections that are made between various panels within the comics text (arthology) and between the comics text and external texts (intertextuality).<sup>2</sup>

76 An example from the first volume of the trilogy, *Tales from the Farm*, will allow us to illustrate the central role hockey is afforded in this creation of meaning. As the first book, *Tales from the Farm* introduces how problematic communication is by focusing on the relationships between Lester, his uncle Kenny, and his friend Jimmy. The beginning of the book focuses on Lester and his relationship with his uncle, as he uses his imagination to break away from his feelings of isolation. In the sequence we will discuss, we see Lester beginning to let Jimmy into his imaginative world. This sequence occurs at the end of several pages in which Lester and Jimmy have been sitting in the shack by the creek, lacing up their skates, talking, and reading a comic that Lester had made. The first two panels depict a close-up of Lester followed by a close-up of Jimmy and are positioned as the last two panels of a right-hand (recto) page (67). In the first panel, Lester gazes, both masked and wide-eyed, out of the frame, at the reader and Jimmy (as is understood through interpreting the gutter between panels) and says, “You and me get along okay, and you never had any kids.” The second panel shows Jimmy, cigarette dangling from his lip, staring at Lester and the reader. No words occur in the panel, and since it is the last panel on the page, Jimmy’s silence extends through the reader’s experience as the page is turned to the reveal.

We understand this short sequence through several modes: the words that Lester speaks (linguistic), the way each is framed in close-up against a backdrop of trees (visual), the expressions on each of their faces (gestural), the lack of sound effects or stylized lettering (audio), and the positioning of these panels next to each other in a tier of information and at the end of the page (spatial). All of these elements push the reader to focus on this quiet conversation and the man’s reaction to the boy’s statement/question. As the reader continues to move through the text, the importance of the conversation becomes apparent as the reader begins to understand that Jimmy is Lester’s father. The image of Jimmy staring silently out of this panel informs (or potentially could inform) the way the reader makes sense of information gleaned later about their relationship. At this point, however, the reader does not yet know how to interpret Jimmy’s silence and awaits the information that will be added with the next panel. What will be Jimmy’s response after the pause created by absence of words and extended by the spatial layout?



Figure 1. Jeff Lemire, *Essex County* (68).

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Rather than another close-up of Jimmy, however, the reveal is a horizontal panel that takes up the top third of the next page (Figure 1). In that panel, Jimmy is depicted in the foreground from the waist up, hockey stick in hand, headed out to the ice of the creek. Behind him the reader sees Lester, still in the shack, looking at Jimmy's back. Jimmy's delayed response to Lester reads, "Come on, let's go!" As will be seen in the next six panels (two rows of three panels each), the serious conversation begun on the previous page is deferred—perhaps indefinitely—by the imperative of the ice as the two begin to play shinny against each other. Here hockey not only forms an integral part of the identities of these two characters, but it becomes a mediated way for them to communicate with each other, first through a discussion of which teams they will each represent and then through a series of panels that depict them playing shinny while Jimmy provides on-going commentary. However, when the reader gains certainty that Jimmy is indeed Lester's father, the deferral created in the latter's blank stare and the transition to the one-on-one game can be seen to position hockey itself as both a roadblock to community and a way to belong.

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These seven panels appear to comprise a straightforward scene of a man and boy playing hockey. The experience of reading this sequence is, however, anything but straightforward as readers must make sense of not only the various modes on the page, but also the arthorological and intertextual linkages that are created, either at the moment of reading or retrospectively. For example, since it acts as a delayed response to the conversation on the previous page, the initial panel is informed by the images (including their facial expressions) and words/silence of Lester and Jimmy from that page. This moment occurs in linear sequence, but that sequence is interrupted by the page break, so that there is no immediate spatial relationship between the initial two panels and the panel in which Jimmy leaves the shack. As readers engage with the panel, they must make sense of the words Jimmy is saying (linguistic), the use of punctuation to indicate how the words are being said (audio), the expression on Jimmy's face (gestural), the composition of the panel and the spatial relationship between the two characters (visual), and the relationship between the previous panels and the panels that follow (spatial). In encountering this panel, readers not only negotiate its meaning, but also glean additional information with which to make sense of the previous two panels, as hockey comes to stand in for that previous conversation and the problems within Lester's family. Beneath the nostalgia and idyllic qualities that readers might attach to this scene on the pond, the persistence of hockey in a moment that invites a much deeper revelation about the characters' relationship seems to underscore an ambivalence about the game in which symbolic connections to traditions and teams also obfuscate one of the book's central conflicts: Lester's absent father figure.

As readers move through the remaining two tiers of panels, they not only connect the panels, but they begin to encounter material that will help them to make linkages both internal and external to the text. The first tier of panels depicts Lester and Jimmy getting onto the ice in the moments before they begin to play (see Figure 1).

At this juncture, they are engaged in a practice that is familiar to those who grew up playing shinny in Canada: arguing over which team each person gets to be. When they finally begin to play, in the bottom tier of panels, Jimmy provides a running commentary in the style of one of the announcers from *Hockey Night in Canada* (HNIC). Readers understand this sequence through the progression of panels, their layout, and their use of the various modes already discussed. Of course, the page is not read in isolation from the rest of the volume or, indeed, the rest of the trilogy, and this sequence forms a part of the web of connections through which readers make sense of the text as a whole. In terms of the text itself, the final panel—a long shot that indicates the spot on the creek where they are playing—connects to similar panels in both *Ghost Stories* (128) and *The Country Nurse* (354-55) that show how playing shinny on this creek goes back through the previous two generations. The visuals thus create an internal connection within the trilogy that not only informs how readers will make sense of the later examples, but also how they will retrospectively make sense of the panel in this sequence. As well, the discussion of which team each of them will represent and the invocation of the HNIC commentary provide intertextual references to specific cultural texts in the lives of Canadians and, as will be seen momentarily, in the lives of the characters in *Essex County*. Multiple modes, arthrology, and intertextuality here come together to emphasize the role of hockey in the lives of the characters and in the narrative fabric of the text.

Throughout the trilogy, watching hockey becomes as much a symbol of human interaction as playing it, but each instance of spectatorship is inflected with different degrees of attachment and detachment, togetherness and separation. *Ghost Stories* focuses on the relationship between brothers Vince and Lou as it develops through growing up together, playing semi-professional hockey together, and then finally being separated from each other. When Vince's accident forces Lou to become his caretaker and Jimmy comes to live with his grandfather and great-uncle, watching HNIC comes to represent social cohesion, a family tradition which carries on throughout the years. This progression is demonstrated sequentially in the build-up to Jimmy's first goal as a Toronto Maple Leaf (306-07). The page leading up to Jimmy's shot opens with three panels that seem to be part of the same sequence as the previous page, in which Vince, Lou, and Jimmy have just sat down to watch the game. As we transition between each panel, it becomes clear that, while the characters remain in the same positions, their physical features are altered: Jimmy grows older and larger, and Vince and Lou become older and more frail. What initially seems as continuous commentary spans generations, with each pass of the puck bridging different generations of Leafs players before finally arriving on the stick of Jimmy Lebeuf, who no longer figures visually in the third iteration of the scene. In a matter of a page, Lemire is able to move from Jimmy's childhood, through his adolescence, and into his young adulthood by repeating the same scene in sequence, but framing each instance of it with unique linguistic and visual markers of time. As the sequence continues, it blends into the present, juxtaposing the moment when Lou



and Vince cheer Jimmy's first goal with another instance of Lou watching the Leafs lose alone. In the process, the reader comes to understand that watching *HNIC* was an enduring tradition in the Lebeuf household, as it has been for so many Canadians. Providing his readers with this frame of reference positions *HNIC* as an intertext and posits that the experience of watching it on a Saturday night is one that they can relate to as Canadians.

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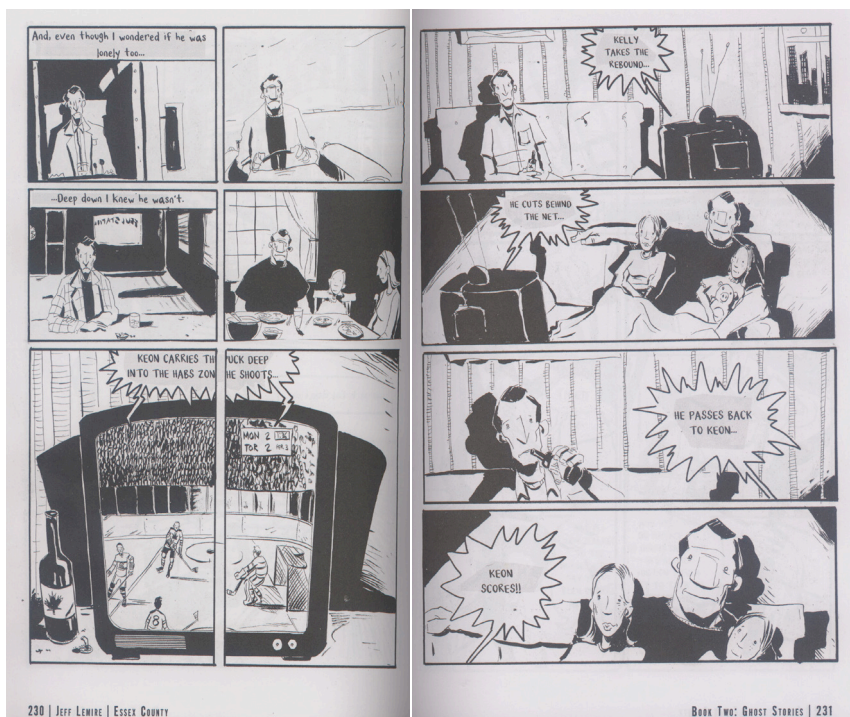


Figure 2. Jeff Lemire, *Essex County* (230-31).

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The sequence above is doubly significant in relation to Lou's ongoing struggle with loneliness, in which his relationship with hockey acts as an indicator of his relationship with the world and those around him. In his lowest moment, Lou wonders how his loneliness compares to that of Vince, what he imagines as the difference between being "lost in a crowd [...] or in total isolation" (229). In the spread that follows these remarks, the reader is invited to compare those ideas of "loneliness" (see Figure 2). All three sets of twin panels on the verso balance contrasting images of Lou's and Vince's lives, the central gutter separating Lou's on the left from Vince's on the right. The sequence draws on the momentum of juxtaposed images to demonstrate that, while each is alone, only Lou is lonely.

In order to emphasize this disparity, the sequence focuses on an instance in which

Lou and Vince watch the same game in very different circumstances. At the bottom of the verso, the panels present two halves of the same image: a television broadcasting a game between the Leafs and the Montreal Canadiens. The match-up carries its own significance as symbol of enduring tensions between French and English Canada, even as it represents the enduring tension between the two brothers. Each panel bears one half of the announcer's commentary, with sentences continuing on each side of the gutter to emphasize both visually and linguistically that the scenes and settings coincide. From the layout of previous tiers in the sequence, the reader can assume that the left and right halves correspond to Lou and Vince, respectively, as they watch the same game. This is confirmed on the following page, where the commentary is continued in panels alternating back and forth between Lou and Vince. While the panels are no longer marked by the continued divide of the central gutter, the contrast between the brothers' experiences is no less marked—Lou watching alone on his couch in his apartment and Vince watching with his family on the couch in their home.

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In a similar sequence from *Tales from the Farm*, Lemire illustrates both the connection and the distance between Lester and his uncle through their shared, but separate, viewing of *HNIC*. The page opens with his uncle's offer to watch the Leafs game together, which Lester declines, and closes with Lester watching the game alone in his room (16). Lester and his uncle remain connected by what they are watching and by the visual design of the first and last panels. The spatial layout of the page also clearly shows the distance between them. Each example uses hockey as a shared experience to exhibit the trilogy's founding tension between isolation and community. Lemire draws on sequencing and page layout as a means of contrasting each character's grasp of society, drawing on linear relationships to draw parallels that accentuate the differences between their identities. Even so, when this divide seems at its widest, the very idea of the shared viewing positions hockey as a constant—albeit tenuous—connection to Canadian society and the different communities of which it is comprised. What becomes problematic to the reader is the artificiality of this connection, in which a parade of isolated and visibly depressed characters must rely on the shared viewing as their only sense of community. Just as Vince's family reminds us of the difference between an authentic and perceived sense of community above, here the distance between Lester and his uncle during the game exposes the tenuous nature of their relationship and highlights an important aspect of the hockey myth: a fulfilling sense of community requires more than simple spectatorship.

At different moments in his life, hockey represents for Lou a sense of companionship and belonging. It is ultimately their love for the game that brings Vince and Lou together in Toronto, and sharing that love with Jimmy offers them a brief respite from their feud years later. The only time that Lou ever feels at home on his own in Toronto is when he volunteers at the local ice rink, where the sights, sounds, and smells re-initiate him into the fraternity of hockey players. When Lou finally returns to the ice for the first time, years after his stint with Vince on the Grizzlies ended in

heartbreak and injury, he ruminates upon the importance of his relationship with hockey. “The game is like family,” he attests. “It won’t let you go, no matter how long you’ve been away” (282). In Lou’s traditions and memories, hockey’s ability to cement social bonds and inform identities is so important to him that it becomes synonymous with family. For most, family is the basic social unit, but for Lou, hockey competes with kinship as an ordering social principle. However, the sincerity of that idea is not fully understood in the sequence depicting his return to the ice, nor the different sequences surrounding *HNIC*, nor any other moment; rather, it is the way these instances link together in Lemire’s text as testimonials to hockey’s profound importance that reveal its true impact.

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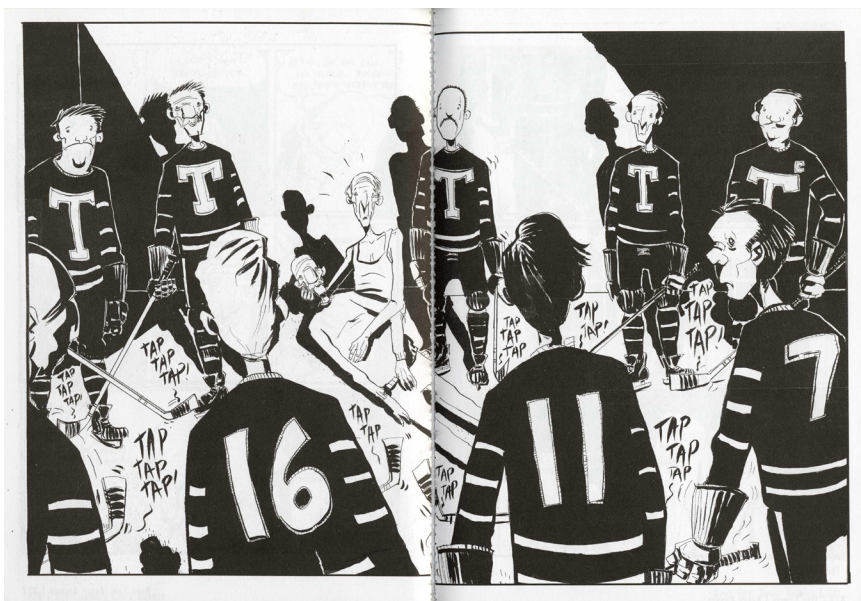


Figure 3. Jeff Lemire, *Essex County* (328-29).

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This symbiotic meaning forged between panels and the moments they represent in Lou’s life with hockey are the primary function of general arthrology in *Ghost Stories*, and they are reinforced in its denouement. Here the notions of camaraderie and respect embedded in the mythos of hockey combine with the rhetorical possibilities of the comics medium to temper Vince’s passing with its full significance. In a two-page spread immediately following Vince’s sudden death, Lou imagines that he is surrounded by his former teammates, tapping their sticks as he holds his brother in his arms (see Figure 3). For some readers, the tapping of sticks is instantly recognizable as a complex symbol of sportsmanship, remorse, and pain, signifying that an injury has taken place on the ice. For all readers, however, this image works



arthrologically to evoke earlier panels that show the team on which Lou and Vince played and the time before the rift in their relationship; the reader is reminded of a specific earlier spread capturing the locker room banter preceding Vince's first game as a Grizzly (140-41). Though they are separated by almost one hundred pages, the two panels are linked as two of only three instances in the entire trilogy where a panel dominates an entire spread (spatial) and as panoramic views of the team as one entire unit (visual).

The continuous, layered movement of the dialogue in the locker room helps to stitch the characters together, creating an image of a unified group. Through the use of ethnic and cultural slang such as "Yank," "Squarehead," "Hayseed," and "Frenchie," the team's unity is built upon each player's unique (if crassly defined) identity, so that the banter and faces blend into the brick in a visual and linguistic mosaic that is so often attributed to a distinctly Canadian collectivism. The scene and the team's success demonstrate that, even amid a backdrop of mild animosity, hockey holds the potential to unite a group of diverse individuals in a common goal: to create a sense of community. As Michael Buma suggests, "the idea of the cultural mosaic argues that Canadian identity is rooted in our ability to get along despite the fact that we have nothing in common. The hockey myth, however, maintains we actually have something in common, our shared cultural obsession with hockey" (11).<sup>3</sup> When Lou imagines his teammates joining him at the moment of his brother's death, Lemire is drawing on the sense of community that we first see in the locker room scene from earlier in the volume and the mythical importance it holds. The spatial and visual similarities between the two scenes allow readers to create that association. By replacing the banter (linguistic) with a chorus of tapping sticks (audio), Lemire accesses hockey's unique vocabulary by performing the sport's gesture of respect, a way to communicate that for which there are no words. The two scenes are different in this respect, but they share hockey as a cultural intertext with which many Canadians can relate, representing a fabled cultural mosaic in its locker rooms and a sense of unity that is super-lingual. In a sense, the fact that Vince's death can only be understood through the symbolic stick-tapping also indicates that ritual's failure, its silence a willful omission of the violent and chaotic potential each game of hockey carries. Even so, drawing on the sport's rich traditions as an intertext visualizes the community of hockey as a remedy, albeit imperfect, to the isolation that plagues the millions scattered across the country's vast landscape, and one that so many are eager to cling to, even in their darkest moments.

Intertextuality allows Lemire a third means of speaking to a uniquely Canadian experience by synthesizing the different aspects of what might be called the mythos of hockey. Along with its traditions, Lemire appeals to hockey's legendary moments and figures, its rites of passage, and its codes of conduct because they are easily recognizable to many of his readers who have internalized them as cultural knowledge. *Essex County* takes a semiotic approach to hockey by illustrating it as a means of communication, drawing on the lexicon of signs, symbols, gestures, and actions

that Canadians recognize and react to on a visceral level. There is no mistaking, for instance, the likeness between Lou's game-winning goal that propels the Grizzlies to the playoffs, and what is often referred to in Canadian vernacular as "The Goal": Bobby Orr's Stanley Cup-winning goal (189). The image of Orr flying through the air in celebration has become an indelible image for many Canadians, thanks to the famous photograph captured by photojournalist Ray Lussier. The extent to which Lou's celebration recreates that scene, flying prostrate through the air and flanked by a dejected goaltender and a phantom defender's leg, respectively, uses a visual association as a means of signification. Where the drawn photograph of Lou acts as an intertext for the photograph of Bobby Orr, so does the significance of the moment it captures, drawing parallels between Orr's defining moment as a Boston Bruin and what is perhaps Lou's defining moment as a Grizzly.<sup>4</sup> The astute reader is also drawn to what is unspoken in this association: that both Orr's and Lou's careers were ended by knee injuries. Hockey's threat of injury is omnipresent throughout the trilogy

**84** in the persons of Lou and Jimmy, both of whom had their careers ended by violent trauma and both of whom act as reminders of the cost we pay to participate in hockey's unique sense of belonging. The evocation of Orr is also ambivalent, then, in that it hints at the agony soon to follow the celebration.

What Lemire exploits here is what Roland Barthes identified as the two natures of the photographic message: the first is that of a perfect "analogon" of reality, a continuous message that captures rather than relays as a denoted message; the second is that of a stylized reproduction, which supplements the message with ideological or cultural values in a connoted message.<sup>5</sup> To Barthes, drawings and photographs are both "analogical reproductions of reality" (18). However, by illustrating a photograph, Lemire's depiction is even further removed from the reality of the goal. The freedom afforded by the comics medium allows Lemire to maintain the character of the photograph while taking liberties with its analogical content ("scene, object, landscape"). The result is that Orr's goal is condensed into a gesture and a posture, and his flying celebration and its significance are solidified as an archetype that Canadians might recognize intertextually as signaling a defining moment.

In the opening montage for the 2013 season of *Hockey Night in Canada*, Tim Thompson, then the current producer of *HNIC*, noted that the "gesture of Canadians viewing [*HNIC*] at once [was] a way of tying empty places and big cities together." Hockey's many gestures inform the characters and their relationships in Jeff Lemire's *Essex County*, a book that takes full advantage of the rhetorical potential of the medium—through the use of multiple modes, arthrology, and intertextuality—to explore the way hockey not only permeates the Canadian experience, but often shapes or defines it, for better or for worse.

## NOTES

1. This multimodal approach is adapted from the work of the New London Group. For a more extended look at adapting this approach to comics, see Jacobs's "More Than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies."
2. In *A System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen defines arthrology as the internal textual linkages between panels, both in linear sequences within a page or page spread (restricted arthrology) and in distant relations within the text as a whole (general arthrology). Braiding works within arthrology and narrative sequencing to create meaning through series, defined by Groensteen as "a succession of continuous or discontinuous images linked by a system of iconic, plastic, or semantic correspondences" (146). When we refer to intertextuality we mean a direct reference to other texts or the formation of external linkages between the text being read and others that readers have encountered or may potentially encounter." For more on intertextuality and other transtextual connections between texts, see Gerard Genette's *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*.
3. It is important to stress that both the ideas of hockey as a community builder and the idea of hockey as a symbol of Canadian multiculturalism are complex and contradictory. As Buma notes, the hockey myth often does more to divide Canada's "two solitudes" —taken simultaneously as both French vs. English and Catholic vs. Protestant—than it does to bridge them (116). He also contends that, "the myth of the team-as-community appears to deliver the idealized male fraternity promised by national manhood, which suggests male community as both the rationale and reward for individual toughness and effort" (Buma 224). For a sustained reading of these and other criticisms of the hockey myth, see Buma's *Refereeing Identity: The Cultural Work of Canadian Hockey Novels*.
4. The use of Orr as an archetype for Lou is continued in the similarities of their career-ending knee injuries. Evoking Orr, then, not only speaks to the importance of Lou's goal by comparing it to a timeless image ripped from hockey lore, but also foreshadows what comes next in his career.
5. In his essay "The Photographic Message," Barthes goes on to argue that "Signification, in short, is the dialectical movement which resolves the contradiction between cultural and natural man" (28). The photographic message represents the potential for that movement in its balancing of denotation and connotation.

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