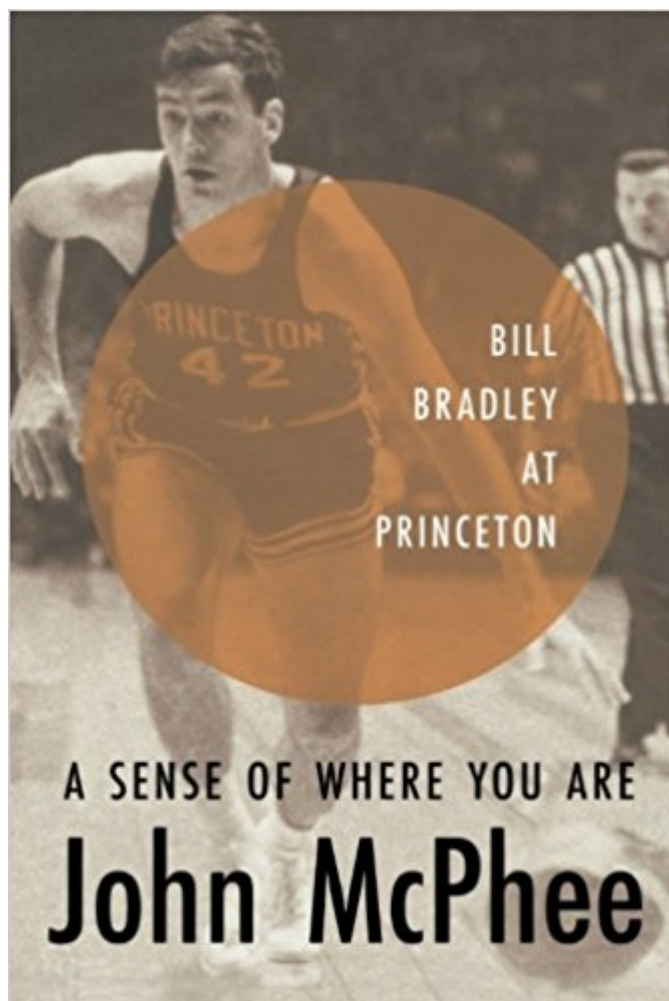


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A Sense Of Where You Are: Bill Bradley At Princeton



Synopsis

When John McPhee met Bill Bradley, both were at the beginning of their careers. *A Sense of Where You Are*, McPhee's first book, is about Bradley when he was the best basketball player Princeton had ever seen. McPhee delineates for the reader the training and techniques that made Bradley the extraordinary athlete he was, and this part of the book is a blueprint of superlative basketball. But athletic prowess alone would not explain Bradley's magnetism, which is in the quality of the man himself—his self-discipline, his rationality, and his sense of responsibility. Here is a portrait of Bradley as he was in college, before his time with the New York Knicks and his election to the U.S. Senate—a story that suggests the abundant beginnings of his professional careers in sport and politics.

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Customer Reviews

First published in 1965, *A Sense of Where You Are* is the literary equivalent of a harmonic convergence, a remarkable confluence of two talents--John McPhee and Bill Bradley--at the beginning of what would prove to be long and distinguished careers. While McPhee would blossom into one of the best nonfiction writers of the last 35 years, Bradley segued from an all-American basketball player at Princeton, to Rhodes Scholar, to NBA star, to three terms in the U.S. Senate. McPhee noticed greatness in Bradley from the start; the book is an extension of a lengthy magazine profile McPhee wrote early in Bradley's senior year; the title comes from Bradley always knowing his position in relation to the basket. What's so noteworthy about the book is the greatness it

promised--both for writer and for subject, a greatness both have delivered through the years again and again. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“Immensely well-written, inspiring without being preachy, and contains as well the clearest analyses of Bradley’s moves, fakes, and shots that have appeared in print.”
Rex Lardner, The New York Times Book Review

I can’t exactly say how I came to hear the two of them recommend this book, but when Robert Greene and Paul Graham both say something is good, I don’t need to be told a third time. The title comes from a Bill Bradley quote about his hook shot, about how after enough of them his feel for the game was so good that he didn’t need to look to see where he was on the court. He just knew. I guess it’s probably a bit of the selection bias, but it’s fascinating to me to read a biography of someone before they became who they ultimately became. In a way, it gives you a much more honest picture of what made them successful and a lot less opportunities to create that heroic narrative or sense of destiny. Having read most of the research behind Gladwell’s *Outliers* I’m surprised I haven’t seen more use of Bradley as an example since he is undoubtedly proof of the concept of deliberative, expert practice.

I read *A Sense of Where You Are* because it is listed in the bibliography of *Mastery*. It isn’t a guide to mastery; it illustrates mastery using Bill Bradley as an example. The book has a tight focus - the book profiles Bill as a senior at Princeton. Only several pictures and the preface hint at Bill’s later achievements. The best line is aptly used in the title. The line refers to Bill’s ability to shoot without looking at the basket; he has spent so much time on the court practicing, he has an imbued sense of where he is. Bill’s sense is the finger tip feel that Robert Greene describes in *Mastery*. It is cliché to talk about fundamentals in sports, but McPhee avoids cliché while addressing Bill’s dedication to practicing the individual skills. Each individual skill is isolated and drilled. The skills are the foundation of strategy. Because of his refined fundamental skills, Bill has more option when reacting to opponents. Whatever they do, he can answer. The book is decent, but not McPhee’s best. McPhee elevates his writing in *Levels of the Game*. It is a better example of how to dissect the different levels of strategy - you see tennis differently, like an insider, after the book.

Bill Bradley was born in a small Missouri town, the son of the town’s banker, who taught him

discipline, hard work, and a love of learning, and his wife, a fiercely competitive but loving former athlete. Their son was one of the most celebrated schoolboy athletes in Missouri history, and was offered scholarships to over 70 colleges to play basketball. However, he chose to attend Princeton University, which did not provide athletic scholarships and was not known for its basketball team, as he had higher aspirations beyond sports. He began to play with the varsity team as a sophomore, as freshmen were not allowed to participate in varsity athletics at that time, and immediately became the star player of the team. Princeton quickly became an Eastern basketball powerhouse, culminated by the 1964-65 team in Bradley's senior year, which reached the NCAA Final Four before losing in the national semifinal to Michigan. Bradley's last collegiate game was against Wichita State in the third place game, and Bradley, normally a pass first, shoot second player despite his immense talent, was given free rein by his coach to shoot and score at will. He finished the game with 58 points, which is still the record for the most points scored by an individual player in a Final Four game. After his collegiate career he attended Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship, and then became an NBA star with the New York Knicks, helping them win two championships, in 1970 and 1973. After his retirement he entered politics, and served as the junior U.S. Senator from New Jersey for three terms. He retired from the Senate in 1997, and ran an unsuccessful campaign for the U.S. presidency in 2000, losing to Al Gore. After that defeat he left politics, but he maintains an active public life, as he has written six nonfiction books and hosts a weekly radio program. John McPhee grew up in Princeton, as his father served as the physician for the university's athletic department. He attended Princeton, and while working as a writer in New York his father called him to come see a kid on the freshman basketball team, who his father described as possibly the best basketball player, bar none. McPhee attended a game with his father, followed Bradley over his career at Princeton, and wrote his first book about him, in 1965. "A Sense of Where You Are" describes Bradley's upbringing in Missouri, and his basketball career at Princeton, including his work ethic and approach to the game, which was far beyond even the best players at his level and allowed him to surpass his modest physical abilities. McPhee also portrays Bradley as a well rounded student athlete who participated fully in campus life and maintained a sense of modesty and humbleness that seems archaic, yet refreshing. The latest edition of the book contains numerous photos of Bradley in action, along with addenda written in 1978 and 1999. I would highly recommend "A Sense of Where You Are" for any sports fan, but this would be of interest for anyone who appreciates good journalism or wants to learn about an inspiring and influential man, who has been one of my heroes since I was a child.

For fans of John McPhee, this is the author as he began. He obviously held Bradley in high regard. If I were an English teacher, I would have my students do a "compare and contrast" with "Levels of the Game." The author's fascination with athletic achievement carries through both books, but by contrasting Ashe and Graebner in the later book, he avoids the tone of near hero-worship that sometimes edges into "A Sense of Where You Are." McPhee has written outstanding non-fiction for decades; his dedicated readers should put aside a couple of hours for this thin volume.

I was familiar with author's father, and friends of mine have played basketball with author when he was a basketball intern at Princeton. I always wondered why the allure of Princeton for Bradley, and whether they could possibly have taken total advantage of his abilities as he progressed for four years under the guidance of the Princeton athletic department. I would have liked the book to have had a little broader interpretation of the impact of Bradley, since following his graduation I believe Princeton had several teams that entered, and did quite well in the NYC tournament that was ramped by the success of the NCAA. John McPhee can string together a wonderful story, and indeed is fun reading.

It would take a Full House to beat this pair of Aces. An all-time great writer does justice to the story of one of basketball's all-time greatest players. McPhee was the perfect person to write Bradley's story: a literary giant telling us about a giant of a person, on and off the court. Too bad Bradley didn't make it all the way to the White House. It would have given McPhee's book the perfect story book ending.

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