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Writing from the margins, yet presenting a strong thesis regarding the profundity of popular culture meanings, Alexander Riley offers us a strong analysis of the multiple-mediated forms of consequence in Riley's engaging book.

Readable by undergraduates but packing sufficient interpretive depth to stimulate the advanced scholar, Impure Play covers an enormous range of current and prefigurative provocations. Just as this work focuses on the meaning-making activities of major cultural if frequently despised social actors, the book itself offers tools for interpretive analysis of the cultural landscape of great relevance to an engaged sociology. Drawing upon rich traditions of theoretical discourse, Riley employs classical concepts in novel applications to displace, if not deconstruct cultural structures, events, activities, processes, and personalities of relevance to contemporary audiences.

While binding contemporary mediated play and gaming to the most mundane media-framed tragedies of current concern, Riley is able to sustain a tone that would attract students, and even enlighten professors. Finding the relevance of sociological applications to topics such as gangsta rap, sports scandals, video gaming, and media death rituals, refreshes us, enlivens our conversations, and adds clarity to otherwise narrow anecdote and gossip that fill our common entertainment discourses.

Turning conventional virtue on its head, Riley argues (for the benefit of analyzing) that the American experience for us is becoming good, or at least worthy of attention. “The sleeper awakes” and finds that dark chocolate, red wine, coffee, eggs, even bread are good for us (not to mention sex). We see that vitamins, milk, and fruits may not be so great for us. Can kitsch culture replace great literature as sources for intellectual elevation? Riley does not so much emphasize the relative merits of forms of mediated play as use them for an entrée into the consciousness of contemporary being. As sociologists, we need to take play seriously. Riley urges, not so much for what it is—a release from work and obligation—but for what it is: a journey into the meaningful emotional texture of being in the world.

Examining play as infused with a significance approaching the sacred, liminal locus of actuality, Riley never seems to lose his own playfulness, and personal bemusement in the midst of his serious meanings, this is a rare sociological species, an entertaining book, cogently written, amiable ... and unnerving. His early discussion of Benjamin Franklin sets a tone of “c’mon folks, let’s get real.” In his autobiography, Franklin insisted on his moderate eating patterns, the specific virtues of frugality, and that he enjoyed the delights of Paris as attested by his girth, his flirtations, and the utter vitality of his charm at court. But Riley’s is not a light book even if light-hearted in many ways. It is an effort to take that which is deemed to be light, and cast it in terms of the power and mystery that will garner the kind of scholarship it deserves. Play is serious business for him, a window into the depths of inner cultural life where we can be real and full to ourselves, but where we seek to hide our impure persona from others under the veneer of “just play.”

Riley’s task is to document the meanings of play, yet the book entails a great deal more intriguing commentary on the contemporary scene. Perhaps some paragraphs are too long and dense for casual reading, and perhaps some references are too arcane for the casual reader, but this book is certainly worth an absorbing few hours.