

The Cerebral Set Picks Up a Paddle

From First Arts Page

Eli Horowitz, an editor at McSweeney's, is an exhaustive documentation of Ping-Pong's status as a common denominator in recent history: a pastime that united the Eastern and Western Hemispheres and that also links Forrest Gump, Fidel Castro, Sasha and Malia Obama, and Henry Miller. (In a 1967 interview, Miller, the "Tropic of Cancer" author, said the secret to his longevity was "the purity of my soul, playing Ping-Pong and, above all, love!")

If that's not a sufficiently persuasive endorsement, "Everything You Know Is Pong" also includes Ping-Pong-centric essays and musings from writers like Mr. Foer, Nick Hornby, Harry Evans and Howard Jacobson, the newly minted winner of the prestigious Man Booker Prize in Britain.

What the book and its promotional tournament also illustrate is a special affinity that men and women of letters have for Ping-Pong. If writers do not spend more time than the general population playing it, they have spent a lot of time reflecting on it and are highly entertaining at articulating their feelings about it.

Mr. Jacobson, whose novel "The Mighty Walzer," a comic coming-of-age story about an adolescent Ping-Pong champion, will be published in the United

For some writers, Ping-Pong is the perfect obsession.

States next year, said that the sport was well suited to writers because it was "perfect mock-heroic, absurdity in grandeur and grandeur in absurdity."

"It's a game without glamour," Mr. Jacobson said in a telephone interview, adding, "You feel you're doing something worthy and intelligent, but you know it's funny at the same time."

Long before his novel-writing career, Mr. Jacobson was a shy teenager growing up in Manchester, England, who was helped out of his shell by playing Ping-Pong, a sport he said "Jewish mothers love because nice Jewish boys can't get hurt" playing it. Never mind that his first competitive match ended with his opponent slamming his knee into the table and being taken away in an ambulance.

Mr. Jacobson also suggested that Ping-Pong can be an ideal medium for propagating literary rivalries, a fundamental part of intellectual life. He recalled how, at a table-tennis salon in the home of the art collector Charles Saatchi, he challenged Salman Rushdie to a match, but Mr. Rushdie declined, either out of personal animus or intimidation.

"Salman and I have never got on very well," Mr. Jacobson said, "so he wouldn't play with me. He knew he would have gotten beaten."

Via e-mail, Mr. Rushdie responded: "It's true that I refused to play table tennis against Howard Jacobson, but not because he's a much better player than I

am, which I readily concede — he's a terrific player."

Susan Sarandon, the Academy Award-winning actress and a co-founder of the Manhattan table-tennis club SPiN New York, said in a telephone interview that writers were attracted to the sport because it is a contest that comes down to the individual and his or her paddle. Like Ping-Pong, Ms. Sarandon said, "writing is a very lonely discipline, and it demands so much of the organization of your mind."

"You alone are responsible for the good and the bad," she continued.

Then again, Ms. Sarandon added, "We have booze at our place, which I think is probably a mainstay of most writers."

In between matches on Wednesday night, Mr. Foer speculated that sedentary literary types appreciated the game because it didn't require them to wear revealing outfits, and because of its apparent simplicity.

Despite the Ping-Pong proficiency he picked up, he assumed, during his "high school, hot beer in the basement" days, Mr. Foer learned the true extent of his skills in a scrimmage with the Austrian table-tennis champion Werner Schlager, whom he wrote about in a magazine profile.

Of the many furious serves that Mr. Schlager sent his way, Mr. Foer was able to return only one. "It hit the side of my racket," he said. "It was a fluke. My glasses came off after the third serve, literally."

The Lincoln Center Ping-Pong tournament continued to serve up unlikely face-offs and unexpected victories. Sloane Crosley, author of the essay collections "I Was Told There'd Be Cake" and "How Did You Get This Number," prevailed against the *Found* magazine editor Davy Rothbart. And A. J. Jacobs, the comic memoirist of "The Know-It-All" and "The Year of Living Biblically," scored a surprise win over Peter F. Vallone Jr., the City Council member, who had been a champion college player at Fordham University.

("He's getting his car towed right now," Mr. Vallone said. "He doesn't know it yet.")

Mr. Bennett and Mr. Horowitz, the "Pong" authors, walked the atrium in red blazers and provided over-the-top introductions for their star athletes, whom Mr. Bennett described as "an eclectic group of Pong nerds who are going to battle to the death."

But one by one, the literati fell in quarter- and semi-final rounds, until Judah Friedlander, the burly, bearded "30 Rock" actor and comedian, defeated Will Shortz, the crossword puzzle editor of *The New York Times*, in a championship match. ("Hot chicks, stalk me afterwards," Mr. Friedlander declared in his victory speech.)

Most competitors seemed pleased to have helped raise Ping-Pong's visibility for a night, but Nancy Franklin, the television critic of *The New Yorker*, seemed inconsolable about losing in her first round of play.

Told that her quick exit from the tournament meant nothing, Ms. Franklin clutched her hardbat paddle, made for her by the table-tennis champion Marty Reisman and engraved with her initials, and replied, "Ping-Pong is everything."



JOSH HANER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jonathan Safran Foer playing a game on Wednesday night.