

## SUNDANCE FEATURES

January 15, 2008

### Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden, *Sugar*

"The guy is caught up in the baseball machine; it's a huge industry and he's just one piece of it."

**THE REELER: Congrats on another Sundance. What can you tell me about *Sugar*?**

**RYAN FLECK:** *Sugar* is about a Dominican baseball player, 19 years old, who is training in a Major League academy down in the D.R., and he comes to the United States to play minor league ball. It's a new take on the immigrant story, I guess. We became interested in the idea right before the last Sundance; we went there hoping this would be our next film. We wrote it shortly after the festival in 2006.



**R: You could have gone any number of directions after the success of *Half Nelson*; what in particular appealed to you about this story?**

**ANNA BODEN:** I don't know how to describe exactly what it is that attracts us to one thing over another. Like many filmmakers, we have a bunch of ideas lobbing around in our heads, but this one felt particularly timely. The number of Dominican players in the U.S. Major League Baseball system has grown enormously over the last 30 years -- and keeps rising. We hear the stories about Sammy Sosa and Pedro Martinez, and to think about the thousands of kids who come here to play in minor league towns all across the United States -- small towns, people who we never hear about -- we were fascinated by what their experience is like. When we started scratching the surface and doing a little research and interviewing people who'd been through that experience and in various stages of that experience -- currently playing in the Dominican Republic, or currently playing in a minor-league town in Iowa -- the stories we heard were so fascinating that it became what we were writing before we'd even decided it was our next projects.

**R: *Half Nelson* and its origin short, so to speak, *Gowanus, Brooklyn*, were both such essentially New York films -- in location, tone, everything. What did you want to accomplish with such radically different locations like Iowa and the Dominican Republic?**

**RF:** It starts with the story. We had to go down to the D.R. to shoot to make it feel real. But the reason we picked Iowa was because we did research on racial demographics; we really wanted to isolate the character and find the place that had the smallest African-American and Latino population, and Iowa was the place for that. That was what led to that decision. But when you see the film, I think you'll be surprised. There's some New York flavor to it.

**R: Like what?**

**RF:** It's a surprise!

**R: All right. One of the themes that motivated *Half Nelson* was the idea of effecting social change; Dan Dunne teaches as a way to take action in some way. *Sugar*'s story implies social issues of its own; how do you sense that thread continuing here?**

**RF:** This story is much more subtle in its themes. There's nobody looking at the camera and talking about Pinochet and Allende or any of that. It's not what the movie is about; we really just wanted to focus on this character and his journey. But part of the journey is the guy caught up in the baseball machine; it's a huge industry and he's just one piece of it. The movie is about one guy coming to that awareness, so in that sense it's similar to *Half Nelson* -- a character who is kind of coming to terms with how they fit in to injustice and larger issues.

**AB:** We're following a very personal story -- kind of a coming-of-age story, kind of an immigrant story, kind of a baseball story. It's all those things. But as writers, we're really interested in not just the personal journeys people go through, but how their social contexts influence them. That's definitely there.

**R: It's kind of a clumsy segue, but Sundance is a long-standing thread in your own careers. What does this festival mean to you as filmmakers? How has it shaped your work, and what are you looking forward to this year?**

**RF:** Sundance was where our first short films played; before *Gowanus*, I had a short film called *Struggle* -- just an old student film I made. Going to the festival for the first time together in '03, it really just sparked our desire to make more movies. We met Mark and Jay Duplass [*This is John*, *The Puffy Chair*] that year. We've been friends since, so just in the sense of meeting cool filmmakers, Sundance has been a big inspiration. There are the labs that we did, and *Gowanus* landing the short film prize [in 2004] was huge for us in landing an agent and putting our names out there. It was so important for *Half Nelson*. We're happy to go back and have a good time. We wish we didn't have to sell the movie, which is a new development.

**AB:** But it's a good launching pad for that. But Michelle Satter and everyone at the labs has been so supportive of us and other filmmakers over the years, and as time goes on, we appreciate it more and more. We were so new, and we hadn't done anything the first time we did that. We realize how rare it is to have people who so selflessly are trying to help you tell your story and vision -- and do it in a way that is so separate from commercial pressures has been special for us. **R**

[Email this](#) • [Technorati Links](#) • [Save to del.icio.us](#) • [Digg This!](#)

[Nanette Burstein, \*American Teen\* | Main](#)

## TrackBack

TrackBack URL for this entry:

<http://www.thereeler.com/cgi-bin/mt/mt-tb-AjOOtIAL.cgi/1471>