



The Assist: Hoops, Hope, and the Game of Their Lives

Neil Swidey

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Jack O'Brien, the impossibly demanding basketball coach at Charlestown High School in Boston, has led his team to five state championship titles in six years. Less talked about is O'Brien's other winning record: Nearly every one of the players who stuck with his program—poor kids growing up in high-crime neighborhoods and saddled with the lousy educational system available in urban America—managed to get to college. But O'Brien is no saint. Saints give without expecting anything in return. O'Brien needs his players and their problems as much as they need him.

Revolving around fascinating, complex characters, *The Assist* is a captivating narrative of a basketball team in pursuit of a championship that also drills down into the legacy of desegregation and explores issues of education, family, and race. O'Brien is a middle-aged white guy coaching an all-black team playing in an all-white neighborhood that three decades ago was at the center of the busing wars dividing cities across the country—a time and place indelibly described in J. Anthony Lukas's powerful book *Common Ground*. It's the inspiring story of a man who makes a difference, and of boys surmounting nearly impossible odds; it is also the story of the ones who don't make it, and why.

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