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# Kicking Off!

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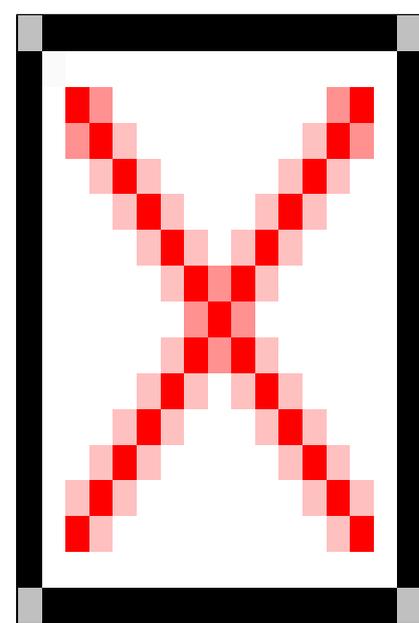
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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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It's surprising that the story of the Dick, Kerr Ladies football team is not better known to younger readers. The team's origins in 1917 are at the centre of this novel. They became one of the leading women's sides in the country, often attracting huge crowds (53,000 on Boxing Day, 1920, at Goodison Park), raising funds for charity, touring France and the USA. Some of their star players became national celebrities. Their skills, commentators noted, sometimes surpassed those of men in the professional leagues. All this despite the chauvinism and hostility of the Football Association, who in 1921 ordered men's clubs to refuse permission for women's teams to play in their stadiums. A century on, given the growth of women's football at club and country levels and its coverage in the media, this novel is timely.

Hettie Blakeford is 15. Her family shares three rented rooms in a working-class terrace in Preston. Mam's intelligence and liveliness are drained by keeping the family going and coping with the moody temper of Dad, in constant pain from an old accident but still grafting through long shifts down at the docks, except for the hours he puts in at the pub. Then there's 10 year old Martha, quick and sensitive. All of them worry about Hettie's brother, Freddie, only a year older than her but already in action somewhere in France.

Hettie is called up to help in the war effort at the nearby Dick, Kerr & Company Factory, packing munitions shells with explosive. She's shy and anxious. The job is exhausting and dangerous ? and will she be able to handle the bustle and banter of the confident women she works alongside? As things turn out, her way-in is partly through football. The men, those that remain, have their own team; but there are also plenty of women eager to play. Despite her slight physique, Hettie has the makings of a tricky winger; she used to love kicking a ball about in the street with Freddie, so long as Dad wasn't watching. For him, football was a man's game; girls who played brought shame on their families, upsetting the proper order of things.

When the women take the men's team on in a match, they beat them. Supported by one of the managers, they challenge and defeat a women's team from a neighbouring factory in a charity fundraiser on Christmas Day, in front of 25,000 spectators at Deepdale, Preston North End's famous old ground. All this is historically accurate. Ainsworth tells the tale through Hettie; the warmth and energy of her story, her modest, engaging character and Ainsworth's down-to-earth prose will surely draw in readers from a wide range of abilities. Just one reservation: in a book which works hard to create an authentic sense of period and place, words such as 'smartypants?', 'nylon?', 'wolf-whistle?' or terms such as 'striker?' or 'an assist?' along with a reference to 'the beautiful game?' are distracting anachronisms.

Hettie gains in confidence. She reaches new understandings of her Mam, and even of her embittered, frightened Dad, enabling her to begin to stand up to him. She needs her newfound strength when Freddie, gassed and wounded, is invalided home. Young women playing football serves as a metaphor for their changing roles and their uncertain, but exciting futures; while glimpses of the suffragette movement offer a wider context.

This story has been waiting to be told to young readers for too long. They will surely welcome the promise of further episodes in the Dick, Kerr team's history.

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