

The Red Shoes



A novel

by Mitch Berman

Synopsis

Precis: *The Red Shoes* is a complete reversal of the Hans Christian Andersen story (and the classic film) in which the shoes in question are not ballet slippers but size-24 basketball sneakers, and the protagonist is not a ballet dancer but a young black NBA player, not an innocent victim of fate but a complex Faustian character, tempted by fame and success, who makes all the wrong moral choices. This is the tale of his rapid rise, sudden fall, and final redemption that can take place only when success is no longer possible.

The novel opens with Head, a seven-foot, seventeen-year-old black basketball prodigy, on the point of realizing his lifelong dream: he signs a lucrative contract asw the NBA's top draft pick straight out of high school to play with his childhood idol, Mack Jackson, for his hometown New York Knicks, and moves into a luxurious home with his girlfriend, Dierdre, and their newborn child, Xiomara. Head is a "can't miss"

NBA prospect; but he will miss, and miss badly. And he will continue to miss — until he finally receives the gift and the curse of the red shoes.

Flashback: Head grows up on a steady diet of NBA games on TV and one-on-one basketball against his adoptive father who raises him after his biological father deserts the family in the novel's opening chapter. The boy dribbles a ball everywhere, even out the car window when his father takes him on his paper route. The boy's father is white, the boy's mother is black, and the boy is pitch black. The boy is raised in the dual cultures of his parents.

Father and son closely follow the career of Mack Jackson, a rookie with the New York Knicks who will one day be hailed as the greatest player of all time. When "Skyjax" endorses a basketball shoe, Head wears it proudly.

Head is playing against high school kids before he is out of grammar school, college stars before he is out of junior high. Subwaying to West 4th Street daily after high school to play with veteran street ballers and pros, he falls in love with the bright and independent Dierdre, a freshman at NYU, and like himself the product of two cultures (she is a quarter Chinese).

A dominant force in high school basketball, Head stumbles only once, in his freshman year against the top senior in the country, Xavier Xaiver (nicknamed XX for his alleged sexual prowess). Learning from this brief misstep, Head overwhelms not only his peers, but pro scouts and even Skyjax, who, now in his late prime and a veteran of several NBA championships, demands that his Knicks draft the young player.

Head's much-anticipated rookie season in the NBA is a misery. He becomes Skyjax's whipping boy, and the great star turns out to be a cruel taskmaster who seems to compete even harder against teammates than opponents. Too green to stand either the physical pounding or Skyjax's incessant goading, Head develops migraines that sideline him during a pivotal playoff game and subject him to Skyjax's open ridicule.

Dierdre drops out of college to take care of young Xiomara; the two provide Head's only refuge from the muck-raking reporters, the gold-digging groupies, and the tongue-lashing of Skyjax. Though the Knicks win the championship, Head cannot wait for the season to end. League pundits label him a disappointment. For Head, life in the NBA is a disaster.

The next season Head modestly improves his conditioning and gets closer to his teammates, who serve as emotional armor against the ultracompetitive Skyjax; by his third year he is good enough on the court to make the All-Star team, funny and outspoken enough off the court to make the all-interview team.

Continuing to reject Skyjax's invitations to train with him in the off-season and to resist aggressive groupies, Head grows ever closer to Dierdre and Xiomara. Xio is proving to be a wise and mercurial child with whom her father enjoys an almost telepathic bond; Head tattoos the outlines of her hands on his chest "so she'll always be touching me."

At season's end, Skyjax, aging but still the best player in the game, drops a bombshell: he abruptly announces his retirement. Such is the state of communications between the two teammates that Head has to hear about it on ESPN.

It is as if a heavy burden has been lifted from his shoulders. Head throws himself into the first rigorous off-season training regime of his career. Completely focused on improving his body and basketball skills, Head spends less and less time at home and more in the gym. His addiction to working out presages other, more dangerous compulsions.

Head's newfound success makes it easy to ignore these first warning signs: it is clear by preseason that Head has finally become the dominant force he had been in high school. Like Skyjax before him, he signs a lucrative sneaker deal for his own signature shoe. Head has a hand in the design of the innovative new sneaker — retro red patent leather Converse All-Stars with a high-tech internal support system. Head and the sneaker company debut the red shoes at the All-Star Game.

From the game's opening tip, Head is in the "Zone," the exhilarating stratosphere in which a player can do no wrong. He is not only the unanimous choice as the game's Most Valuable Player, but the buzz is on that he is the frontrunner for the season MVP award as well.

The NBA, its fans, the media and the shoe manufacturers have been searching for a player who can assume the mantle of the retired Skyjax as the league's premiere

player, ambassador and icon. Desperate to anoint Skyjax's successor, they anoint Head. It is disastrously premature.

Head has arrived at the pinnacle of his basketball career and the starting point of his dizzying descent as a human being. Donning the red shoes, Head submits himself as a willing victim to the NBA machine: he becomes an egotistical publicity hound who refers to himself in the third person, makes time only to telephone when his adoptive father falls ill, and grows increasingly distant from Dierdre and Xio.

Head throws open his bedroom door to the groupies who have always clamored there. Reading about his exploits in a blind item ("*Which All-Star is cutting a seven-foot swath through the groupies of 30 NBA cities?*"), the humiliated Dierdre severs contact with him.

Head's increasingly dissatisfying sexual encounters are highlighted in a nightmarish scene with an especially determined groupie who programs herself into Head's cell phone so that Head, repentant after their unpleasant bout in the bedroom, attempts to call Dierdre for a reconciliation, but instead reaches the same groupie for an unwanted encore. Dimly aware that his appetites are spiraling out of control, Head has a disturbing half-dream about a broken condom.

With his career finally in high gear, however, Head soon forgets this moment of despair and allows himself to be swept away in the swirl of stardom. The red shoes carry him to the Most Valuable Player award and an NBA championship. Released as the "FootHead," the shoe breaks sales records; every teenage boy has a pair. As Head

ascends, his old high school nemesis XX finds himself entangled in a series of paternity suits and positive drug arrests that finally get him drummed out of the league.

Skyjax follows Head's prowess from his new life as a well-heeled idler in the casinos of Las Vegas; unable to resist playing with his former sidekick but unknowing of the full extent of Head's personal problems, Skyjax makes a comeback to the league.

Conceding that their roles will be reversed, Skyjax joins Head for another severe off-season training program. Unable to stand Head's obsessiveness, Skyjax quits his boot camp in disgust.

Head attacks the new season with a vengeance, shattering records not simply for scoring and rebounding but for sleeping with groupies and alienating fans and reporters, despite their former good relations. Even his best friends on the team, with whom Head used to seek solace from Skyjax, now commiserate with Skyjax about the man they call "Bighead." Finding himself alone at the epicenter of his greatest public acclaim and private chaos, Head surrounds himself with an entourage of toadies.

There is nothing he does that does not involve either his NBA career or the relentless promotion of the hot-selling red shoes; there is nothing inside him. First he turned himself into a basketball machine; now he has turned himself into a malfunctioning one.

Surprised by a reporter in the locker room with the information that his biological father, absent for two decades, has resurfaced in what seems a naked attempt to cash in on Head's success, Head lets out a bleep-ridden invective that is

replayed over and over on sports radio and TV, and that makes its way into late-night show opening monologues.

Still Head does not realize that he is spinning out of control until three disasters befall him in a span of days. The first is that his beloved adoptive father dies after a long illness, the second is that the previously encountered groupie announces through a high-powered attorney that she is pregnant with Head's child, and the third is that Head's biological father finally surfaces on his doorstep. Head flies into a blind rage and physically attacks the man, leaving him badly injured and exposing himself to charges of felonious assault.

Though Head, the Knicks and the sneaker company combine to offer Head's biological father a seven-figure settlement, he angrily refuses to drop criminal charges. He finds a potent ally in the Manhattan District Attorney, hustling for a mayoral bid and hoping the backlash against Head can put him over the top. At the televised trial, all of Head's extracurricular behavior becomes a matter of public record. With three games left in a season in which Head seems destined to lead the Knicks to another world championship, he begins serving a sentence of six months in prison.

Hailed by his fellow prisoners as a conquering hero, Head has grown so myopic that the adulation of this insular society feels much like the adulation he enjoyed on the outside. His sole real regret is that he has missed the NBA playoffs.

Only after Dierdre pays him a surprise visit does he start to realize how much he has lost, and, for the first time, begin to grasp the enormity of his fall.

But Head's disgrace has only begun with his release from prison: he faces a ban from the NBA and a civil suit brought by his biological father that drains away everything he owns. His sneaker company tears up his contract, citing a morals clause, and summarily discontinues the red shoes.

Reunited with Dierdre and Xio, Head seeks treatment for sexual addiction. Unable to play in America, he goes to France to join the Arles Argonauts, and from there to teams in Spain, Israel, Italy, China and finally Lithuania, where frighteningly rowdy fans toss coins at the aging American star, in retaliation for his behavior at a long-ago Olympic Games, back when Head was in his arrogant prime.

Through these years Head earns a living while helping to raise Xio, but the NBA continues to refuse his appeals for reinstatement.

Head is unable to return to the NBA until Skyjax, now a successful businessman who has become part of the Knicks' ownership combine, brings him back to America and to his old team. But by now Head is an old 38, and his body has stiffened and eroded.

Though he plays in pain and feels acutely the loss of the skills that had made him, for a brief time, the world's dominant player, Head is satisfied to finally return to America, and enjoys the NBA life as he never could before. His return from exile coincides with Xio's first year at NYU.

In the second year of his homecoming, brittle and ailing, now only a marginal benchwarmer, Head becomes a father figure to a troubled, thuggish young star who, as

a small boy, had followed Head's legendary career — much as, a generation before, Head himself had watched Skyjax. On the day Head is waived out of the league, the young player asks him to autograph his vintage pair of the red shoes.