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A review of books

With Christmas posing the usual challenge of finding something for everyone, our book reviewers have cast their collective eye over some printed matter so that you don't have to.

The Leisure Review may not be the place most people would go to for a Christmas present suggestion and, given that all subscriptions to the magazine are free and we have yet to source the raw, Indian cotton, long-sleeved t-shirts with apropos quotations from editorials past which we have been promising ourselves since 2008, we have no product of our own to offer. What we do have, however, is a staff of people who read nearly as much as they write and we thought that as a service to our readers who are too busy to browse the plethora of books available to the discerning gift-getter working in the sport, leisure and culture industry this Christmas we would offer you a steer.

The first thing anyone buying a book for a sport-loving significant other should do is find the shelves in the bookshop marked autobiography and walk past them, possibly averting their gaze into the bargain. It is highly unlikely they will find anything there which does much more than rehash tired stylistic devices, stretch unremarkable anecdotes as thin as strand of Michel Roux Junior tagliatelli and demean both the nominal author and his or her ghost writer equally.

The second thing the prospective purchaser should do is pause, turn, go straight to 'M' for Millar, pull down a copy of *Racing Through the Dark* and move swiftly away. David Millar has apparently written more of this book than is held to be the norm in the celebrity sportsman autobiography genre – after all who doesn't need professional help with the commas – and he has done so with a candour known and loved by aficionados of his Tour de France post-stage interview technique. He likes to give it both barrels.

Millar is a professional cyclist with a history of using performance-enhancing drugs. You could say the same for most of his generation, and many before it, but what takes Millar out of the ordinary is that having faced his own frailties, admitted his guilt and served cycling's sentence, he got back on his bike, swore to stay clean and, most remarkably, started a crusade to make professional bike racing follow his lead.

Racing Through the Dark tells the tale of his rise, fall and second coming. And there is something of the messiah in David Millar; he spares himself little or no pain as he recounts how a fresh-faced "neo-pro" became a "doper", and a world champion doper at that; he names his sins and the sins of the cycling fraternity; and he points the way to a sunlit upland for a sport mired for decades in the most pernicious of corrupt cultures. Is it a good read? Assuredly. Is there much in it about chain rings? Blessedly little. For whom should you buy it? Yourself.

If Millar's book is the present best kept to yourself, the book to get for a friend, or a higher-ranking colleague you need to impress and flatter, is a collection of essays from Patrick Collins called *Among the Fans*, the first book to come out under the Wisden Sports Writing imprimatur.

Collins writes for the Mail on Sunday but only a bigoted fool (and you can draw your own witty allusions to the readership of the Daily Mail) would leave this book unread simply because of that. The conceit is simple. Over the course of the year Collins attended 13 sporting events from a speedway meeting in Eastbourne to a cricket Test match in Adelaide but rather than report on the sport, here he writes about the spectators. His style is accessible and balanced, his eye for the telling detail keen and his ability to draw cosmic – or at least national and socio-economic – inferences from mundane occurrences is the stuff of gonzo journalism at its best. This is the kind of writing to which The Leisure Review aspires.

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To select a populist example from among the more obscure descriptions of point-to-point, darts and speedway may seem perverse but the web of detail Collins weaves before adding an aperçu remark can take pages so taking the short cut of quoting his piece on the football World Cup in South Africa will hopefully tempt readers to a longer relationship with the book.

“And the English have made themselves at home. Flags of St George are hung around the door, festooned with place names: Babbacombe, Leighton Buzzard, Sutton-in-Craven. Two men dressed as crusaders lean against a wall. They are carrying cardboard swords and pints of lager and staring at a large screen that is showing the closing stages of Greece versus Nigeria. And then the singing begins.”

You could be there; but would you want to be? Collins goes on to discuss the English abroad, the shortcomings of the FA and the venality of the modern footballer, on which point he is swingeing: “For some of these young men, playing for England had become a chore, an optional extra, something which will come in useful when their agent negotiates the next commercial endorsement.”

In the chapter Cricket at Canterbury Collins uses a gentle day out in Kent to discuss the parlous state of our summer game and in 14 pages encapsulates what former Wisden editor Graeme Wright takes over 200 to tell us in his own examination of the sport in *Behind the Boundary*, a book which involved him travelling to all 18 first class counties and speaking to the people in charge. Many were frank and open, many had visionary ideas for the rejuvenation of a game “struggling to cope with unprecedented levels of debt, a decline in membership and attendances and the demands on players and spectators of an unsustainable fixture schedule” and many went on a bit.

Wright goes on a bit. In an effort at being comprehensive, as befits a man who produced the cricket-lovers’ bible, *Wisden Cricketers’ Almanac*, on six occasions, he makes every point in every argument from all sides and then quotes someone else doing the same thing. This may be an exaggeration but this is a dense tome written by a man who knows more than he should, certainly more than you, and he does like to let you know. It is a book for aficionados or for the borough treasurer if you draw him as your Secret Santa.

In the introduction to *The Coach’s Book*, Sir Ian McGeechan OBE, a sports coach of some standing, welcomes the publication of “a book about coaches rather than coaching” and suggests it is “truly uplifting”. Unfortunately he is wrong on a number of counts.

First of all, it is not so much a book as a pamphlet. A thick pamphlet, although that might be due to the heavily glossed pages, the large number of very large photographs or the idiosyncratic set-up of the copy which gives every sentence the luxury of a paragraph to itself, but a pamphlet nonetheless.

In contrast to the design, the subject matter is run of the mill and the approach of the various writers to their subject anodyne. How an interview with Jurgen Grobler or Shane Sutton could be made to feel mundane is hard to imagine but perhaps it is because the writers are not coaches. It is a common mistake to think that being coached as a performer or being “passionate about sport” is qualification enough to comment on or manage coaching but the current chair of SportsCoach UK and the editor of *The Coach’s Book* both prove this is not the case.

Produced by Coachwise and heavily influenced by the minds behind their quarterly magazine *Coaching Edge*, the most accurate and fairest review of this book would be: if you love *Coaching Edge*, you will love this.

Racing Through the Dark: the Fall and Rise of David Millar by David Millar and Jeremy Whittle. Orion Books, 2011

Behind the Boundary: Cricket at a Crossroads by Graeme Wright. A&C Black, 2011

Among the Fans: From Ashes to the Arrows, a Year of Watching the Watchers by Patrick Collins, Wisden Sports Writing, 2011

The Coach’s Book. Various authors. Sports Coach UK 2011

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