Have We Got Enough?

Warwick Hadfield

John Gascoigne (ed.)

OVER AND OUT: CRICKET UMPIRES AND THEIR STORIES
Penguin, $23pb, 331pp, 0 14 300041 1

Gideon Haigh

THE VINCIBLES: A SUBURBAN CRICKET SEASON
Text, $19.95pb, 217pp, 1 877008 35 4

W HEN YOU BUMP into people who know Gideon Haigh — and that happens a lot in Geelong — they will tell you about his encyclopedic knowledge of cricket, his dedication to detail and his casualness with money. I want to add to this list of his idiosyncrasies a delicious ability to turn the mundane into the magnificent. For this is exactly what The Vincibles is to us weekend warriors — a magnificent vindication of our very existence.

I will try not to descend into hagiography, but right from the title — a clever play on the epithet given Bradman’s 1948 side — this book starts out as beautifully as Trumper V. in full cry. Some bits are so cleverly constructed they have to be read twice, even thrice, to be fully appreciated:

We look, accordingly, very rusty, not to say crusty. Big John’s first over for the season includes a full toss metres above the batsman’s head, and a triple bouncer that zeroes in on point. I wear one in the chest when I get into position to hook, then remember I don’t hook. ‘Jeez, you’re tough,’ comments Tommy, my partner. ‘No,’ I confide, ‘just crap.’

This is the reality of being smitten by cricket for all but the select few. At fifty years of age, I simply can’t imagine not playing cricket on Saturday, something I have been doing since I was fourteen. Not only would I miss batting and bowling but the exchanges between people with whom you share your smitteness — or the challenges of just getting underway. We don’t play on carefully manicured grounds. Only last week, we had to dig a trench almost the length of the Suez, or the sewers, to drain the water around the concrete and plastic wicket just so play could start. The ‘super-sopper’ was a couple of old towels from the boot of someone’s car.

It was a lively, humorous, even glorious reality for the intimates, even though we don’t often get the star treatment that Haigh has managed for his colleagues at the Yarras, a Melbourne club. That vast chunks of decent literature could be dedicated to the, theoretically at least, simple act of putting the aim of one day collating them into something more permanent. Gideon’s trumped me on that, too. In my book, he could only get away with it by producing something brilliant … and the bastard has!

A BOOK ON UMPIRING seems to defeat the whole purpose of umpires. If they are doing their jobs proficiently, they should not be noticed. But they are people with egos and ambitions, too, and more than a few go out of their way to be noticed. Witness Dickie Bird. As big as these egos can sometimes be, John Gascoigne’s publishers thought it wise to put a picture of Shane Warne on the cover just to attract the browser’s eye. Once obtained, this is, beyond Warne’s rounded form (the cover photograph is pre-diotics), a pleasant collection of umpirisms rounded out nicely by essays from international umpires such as Mel Johnson, the no-nonsense Queenslander, and Robin Baillhache, whose pen pics of Kim Hughes, Viv Richard et al(lan) Border make fascinating reading. Rarely do we get the umpires’ view of these great characters of the game, but they see them even more up close and personal than the Channel 9 cameras. In the end, Gascoigne has managed a bit of a Haigh: taking something that might seem pretty ordinary and making it a good read, one of those books you can jump into almost anywhere and find something to keep your interest until the train or tram gets you to where you’re going — probably to watch the Yarras play.

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