‘JOURNALISM,’ according to Oscar Wilde, ‘is unreadable and literature is unread.’ We could become involved in a debate as to what constitutes journalism, good writing and the not entirely unread literature when it comes to sport. A landmark work such as Neville Cardus’s *The Summer Game* is from the latter category. John Arlott’s writings were always touched by his days as a BBC producer of poetry, including the works of Dylan Thomas.

In this anthology, the editor invites us to stop tugging the forelock to these fine literary fellows from Mother England and to celebrate the works and workers we have in Australia. He does this in part by reprinting an essay he wrote in 1997, presenting a strong, if not entirely compelling, argument. Certainly, the sports sections of today’s English broadsheets, including *The Guardian* — Alma Mater to Cardus and Arlott — rarely outshine those of the quality newspapers in Australia, particularly *The Australian*, *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

What Cardus and Arlott did many years ago was to give us a star to sail by, whether our home port was in the small island just off Europe or the big one Down Under. These days, the navigation is not always successful on either side of the equator. Cardus and Arlott both managed to create an illusion where there are no doldrums, no impossible deadlines, no sub-editors who delete what they don’t understand — believing the reader equally ignorant — and no editors more concerned with filling holes than building monuments.

Paradoxically, as technology has advanced in the newspapers, so have deadlines. When Stephen Waugh was still pulling, cutting and square-driving together that century in the Fifth Test against England, Peter Roebuck from the *SMH* was already supposed to have filed his flowing, glowing critique of the suburban boy as a modern Horatio for a six p.m. deadline. At times like these, I am always reminded of the words of a great newspaperman at *The Australian*, who on this occasion should remain anonymous, and who said, ‘computers don’t make newspapers any better, but they certainly make them more cheaply’. And, it would seem from time to time, cheapen the journalism to the untenable as well as the unreadable.

By including straight reporting in *The Best Australian Sports Writing 2002*, Garrie Hutchinson has brought all these factors into play. Many journalists can’t write like Cardus and Arlott. Those who would aspire to often find the pressures...
listed above conspiring against them. However, there are still those moments, as precious as gold medals, when we do pass over the boundary between good writing and something superior. ‘Unsurpassable Johns’, by Roy Masters, is probably the best example in this book. Masters starts his report on Andrew Johns’s performance in a State of Origin rugby league match with: ‘It was like watching Andy Warhol run IBM.’ You are compelled to read on, and richly rewarded for so doing. Johns’s contribution to that game was a couple of side-steps and a deft kick beyond inspired; Masters’s reporting of it equally so.

I am surprised that Patrick Smith’s contributions are limited to four. While he can occasionally miss out with the facts, both badly and unapologetically, and while he sometimes sounds like a spin doctor for the AFL, at his best he ruffles precious feathers in the most eloquent, acerbic and readable manner. There is umbrage at The Age because Caroline Wilson is not represented in this book. Her reporting on the Wayne Carey affair was as good as any of the other news stories included by Hutchinson. Perhaps the fearless ‘Caro’ has upset yet another soul.

Happily, Martin Flanagan — The Age’s great bulwark against the advancement of bean-counter journalism — is included. His essay on the life and times of Anthony Liberatore through the occasionally lachrymose eyes of Libba’s parents is timeless. You may not like Libba, but you’ll be charmed by his parents and what they represent in an Australia unaffectedly distancing itself from the Mother Country by taking in people from all over the world. Tullio and Maria knew little English, and even less about the local game, when they came to Australia. They were willingly broadened by football, the irresistible common bond for people from myriad backgrounds and circumstances in Melbourne. Until you have lived in ‘bleak city’, as folk from Sydney are wont to call it, you can never fully comprehend how Australian football seeps in at every angle, as surely as the wind-propelled rain once did at the Western Oval.

Reading anything by Flanagan — especially this paean to the little professional pain in the neck and other bits — is a good primer for the outsider.

A personal delight is Maria Tickle’s interview with a number of sports scientists and identities for The Sports Factor on Radio National. I listened to the original broadcast with a mix of nostalgia and desire to join in. Forbes Carlisle, the swimming coach, talked breezily about working with Professor Frank Cotton, the grandfather of sports science in Australia. In 1988 I spent a couple of days with the cyclist Dunc Gray, then Australia’s oldest-living Olympic gold medallist. As we drove from his home on the south coast of New South Wales to the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra, he told me all about Professor Cotton and his ‘funny ways’. Remember, Gray never had a coach and, according to folklore at least, won his gold medal in Los Angeles in 1932 after taking a swig of something medicinal to help him overcome a high fever — real cutting-edge sports science. At the University of Sydney, Professor Cotton had hooked the young champion to a reconstructed bike using delicately suspended bricks for resistance and convinced Gray to ride like billy-oh in the interests of unravelling the secrets of élite performance. Even in 1988, though full of a childlike respect for the good professor, Gray remained baffled by the motives, and unconvinced by the outcomes. Yet, when we got to the AIS, where we discovered that old bike as part of an historical display, Gray leapt the barrier and jumped aboard, the years falling away in an instant, tears welling in his eyes, probably at the memory of all those bricks.

We have always had great stories to tell in Australian sport. Sometimes, as befitting the sunburnt country, we have told them drily. Sports reporting, like sport itself, can reflect the society in which it is performed. The BBC gave us the fruity — or is that fruit cakey? — Brian Johnston, while we had the preciseness of Alan McGilvray, each masters of their type. The truly unforgettable times came during an Ashes tour, when these two would be on air together — the best of both hemispheres. Rather than resisting the influence of the great English sports writers and broadcasters or developing some post-colonial chip on the shoulder about a continuing and justifiable reverence to them, we should seek the perfect blend. Given the right circumstances, we can achieve that. Amid the clichés and breathless tabloidese keeping us up to date with Wayne Carey’s most infamous groin injury, or the demise of the Bulldogs, rugby league version, we do find moments of perfection from 2002 in Hutchinson’s anthology.