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This is the author’s radio script of this article.
I was in the audience for William McInnes’ session at Writers’ Week earlier this year. He was the most anarchic guest, reducing his unfortunate chair to helpless giggles in the middle of his introduction, and carrying a large Sunday afternoon audience along with an effortless flow of hilarious impromptu banter.

McInnes is, of course, one of Australia’s favourite leading men, and he’s developing a nice little sideline as a writer. *That’d Be Right* is his third book. Subtitled *A Fairly True History of Modern Australia*, it takes us through developments in Australian politics and sport, and sport as politics and politics as sport, over the last 35 years or so, seeing elections and grand finals through the lens of his own memories and experiences.

The book begins when he was in his early teens, in December 1975, with the election Whitlam lost to Fraser, and moves through Hawke, Keating and Howard to the latest Federal election and the advent of Kevin Rudd. McInnes makes no secret of the fact that he’s basically a Labor voter, like his parents before him, but he’s hardly partisan. He has a serious point to make about the way politics came to be treated like a sporting contest – especially by Keating – and how sport has fallen prey to economic rationalism, driving away the fans who treasured the local footy games and creating slick mass spectacles, with irrelevant overseas entertainers providing the soundtrack. But there are plenty of laughs along the way. He begins one chapter with the assertion that ‘Mr Darcy was responsible for the last few years of the twentieth century,’ and goes on to describe the marathon viewing of all the film versions of...
*Pride & Prejudice* imposed on him by his mother, with a glance at his own stint as the dashing Fitzwilliam at the Opera House in 1999. Somehow the no vote in the republic referendum ends up being Jane Austen’s fault. But at least he fixed his mum’s gate. Does it all hang together? Just – the logic can be elusive, but that’s half the fun of it. There’s even a bit of narrative suspense, when he describes listening to the end of the Adelaide test against the West Indies in 1993, while he’s stuck in Melbourne traffic trying to get across town to an appointment with a marriage celebrant. The cricket takes over as the drivers around him, without any prompting, sound their horns at the end of each over in a collective attempt to save the game for Australia. Australia lost the test, McInnes lost his marriage celebrant, but the shared experience with strangers and family alike somehow transcended the disappointment.

With the best will in the world you couldn’t call McInnes’ style elegant. The wit is dry and laconic, but the sentences can sometimes tumble out in a rather confused way and you wonder whether perhaps some light editing might have been in order. But there’s plenty of verve, and the best way to read the book is to imagine it spoken by the author. It might not be profound, though it’s certainly thoughtful. It’s not always laugh-out-loud funny, but it’s certainly likeable and very entertaining.