
Book Selector

For those wanting to curl up with a good book, but who don't fancy a novel, there is a wide choice of titles available. I have selected here some really good readable non-fiction. What the books have in common is that they are all, in some way, about sport, and they are, of course, all well worth reading. I have also included a few illustrated books which I think warrant a mention.

One of these, and certainly one of the most attractive books to cross my desk in recent months, is **Cricket: the golden age**.

The sporting life

A selection of good reads

It is a large, coffee-table book filled with quality black-and-white photographs from the last 150 years. The pictures are an unusual and eclectic mix; although all are connected to the game of cricket, not many of them show professional cricket actually

being played. Short captions to the photos are the only text. There are elephants playing cricket, children playing on London bombsites, 19th century Himalayan villagers, fashion shoots, streakers, spectators, WWII fighter pilots setting up a game between flying missions, and much, much more. This really is a lovely browse - for anyone, not only the cricket lover. While on the subject of cricket, Simon Rae's book **It's not**

cricket: a history of skulduggery, sharp practice and downright cheating in the noble game is certainly worth a mention. He is a poet and playwright and was the Poet-in-Residence at Warwickshire Cricket Club. His entertaining and lively



book is a real eye-opener for those who think that corruption, cheating and other unsavoury behaviour are new to the game of cricket.

Another attractive new illustrated book is **The official Tour de France Centennial**, which chronicles the 100-year history of the world's most famous cycling race. From 1903 to 2003, each year has at least one double-page spread with photographs and text. The reader really gets a feel for how this race has changed and developed over the years. All the highs and lows are there - the triumphs, the tragedies, Lance Armstrong's incredible comeback after testicular cancer, the drug scandals, and more. Those interested in Armstrong's remarkable story, should read his best-selling memoir **It's not about the bike**, and his new book **Every second counts** (which we have recently bought). One of the tragedies of the Tour de France was the death in 1967 of British champion cyclist, Tom Simpson. **Put me back on my bike**, the recent biography of him by a sports journalist has been described by **Velo** magazine as the best cycling biography ever.

Babbitt's **25 years of the Ironman Triathlon World Championship** is another attractive illustrated sports book. In 1978 the first Ironman event took place in Hawaii. It started off as a casual thing amongst a group of friends but grew to become the flagship of what is now a fast-growing international sport. The course was a combination of three major endurance events on the island of Oahu: the Waikiki Rough Water Swim (2.4m), the annual bicycle race around the island (112m) and the Honolulu Marathon (26m). That first year only 15 competitors took part, the following year the first woman participated (finishing 5th overall), and in a couple of years the event had grown so much it had to be moved to Big Island. This book chronicles the story of the 25 years of the

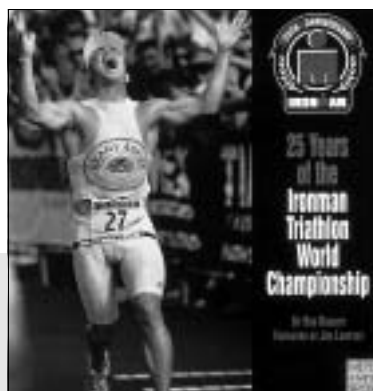
event's history: the people, the rivalries, the disabled competitors, and so on. It really is a fascinating story and the author tells it well. He has been at every Ironman (either as a participant or a reporter) since his first race in 1980 (when he took along a sleeping bag, thinking competitors would take a break, sleeping the night along the roadside). This large, coffee-table-style book is filled with colour photographs.

Obviously people read about what interests them, but I have always thought that the measure of truly good readable non-fiction is in its crossover appeal - whether, when the book's subject wouldn't normally attract you, you can still read the book and thoroughly enjoy it. A book that definitely passes this test is **Muscle: confessions of an unlikely bodybuilder** in which Sam Fussell, an Oxford graduate from a middle-class intellectual background, tells the story of his obsession with bodybuilding. He was a good-looking, lean young man, but with not much muscle on him. Soon after being mugged in New York he came across one of Schwarzenegger's books while browsing in a Manhattan bookstore. He thought that no-one would dare mug anyone looking like Arnie, and so began Fussell's journey into the strange world of bodybuilding. He writes well, and **Muscle** is a fascinating book, both funny and sad.

Boxing is another sport that holds no appeal for me, but both boxing books by the South African-born Donald McRae can be enjoyed by people like me. Both have won the William Hill Sports Book of the Year Award - which is always a good barometer of quality. The author's obsession with boxers and boxing began after being told about Muhammad Ali when he was still a young boy in Germiston. In **Dark**

trade he writes about black, Arab and Hispanic boxers that he knew well. He also discusses the whole boxing industry (which seems to be controlled by the promoters and managers), issues of race and violence in English and American boxing, and his own obsession with the sport. We have recently ordered his **In black and white** in which he tells the story of two black American sportsmen who rose to fame in the 1930s: sprinter, Jesse Owens, for his achievements in the 1936 Munich Olympics, and his close friend, Joe Louis, who became world boxing champion a couple of years later.

I confess to having a rather negative view of the game of golf. I grew up next to a golf course and enjoyed the extra playing space it afforded us children. Of course, we weren't allowed to go there, because of the danger of golf balls (and the odd irate golfer being put off his shot by a rattle-taggle of children running across the fairway) but we went anyway - catching tadpoles and such-like, and occasionally hitting the odd ball. Our view of golf was that it was a dull, boring game for middle-aged people wearing funny clothes, people who didn't know better than to stay indoors when it was pouring with rain. I know golf has become more fashionable, but I still harbour a lingering prejudice. So for me to recommend golfing books is quite something. There are three books which I've read recently that are all thoroughly enjoyable. The first is **In search of the Tiger** by Ian Stafford, a sportsman and sports writer. He had always been rather anti-golf, thinking it uncool and dull, until one day he decides to learn to play. This is his entertaining account, illustrated with plates of colour photographs. The second is **Nice jumper** by a rock music journalist telling the story of his adolescent obsession with golf. The book is a kind of confessional, well-written and very funny. There was no



history of golfing in Tom Cox's family - he describes himself as 'lefty hippie spawn' - but, somehow, when he answered a local ad for free golf lessons for the under fifteens, he was smitten. 'For golf and me, it really was this simple: one day we woke up and found ourselves utterly, inexplicably in love.' For a few years he lived and breathed golf, until he joined a punk rock band and went on to become a music critic. **Nice jumper** is both charming and entertaining.

Mark Frost's **The greatest game ever played: Harry Vardon, Francis Oimet and the birth of modern golf** is something very different. Mixing biography and golfing history he tells the story of the legendary 1913 US Open, in which Oimet, a 20-year-old amateur, shocked the golfing world by beating the famous British champion, Harry Vardon. It is a good story and the author, a thriller writer and television scriptwriter, has used his writing experience to good effect here, producing an absolutely riveting book. I was completely hooked, it really is a thrilling read.

Moving from the world of golf to the more adventurous one of mountaineering, we find an incredible assortment of good books to choose from. Mountain literature really deserves an article of its own, so I won't go into it here, except to recommend one particularly memorable book:

Touching the void. It is not a new book. First published in 1988, it won the Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature of that year and the NCR Award the following year. It tells a powerful and compelling story of survival and friendship. While climbing in the Peruvian Andes with his close friend, Simon Yates, the author, Joe Simpson, fell and broke his leg. After attempting the descent together, Yates was eventually forced to cut the rope to save himself. He thought Simpson dead, but, miraculously, he survived the fall and crawled back into base camp a few days later. 'The book tells a remarkable story

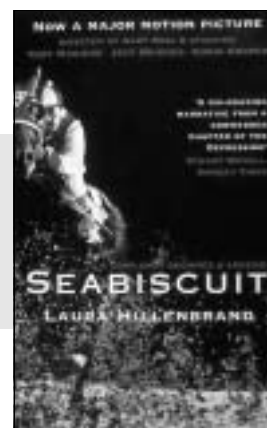
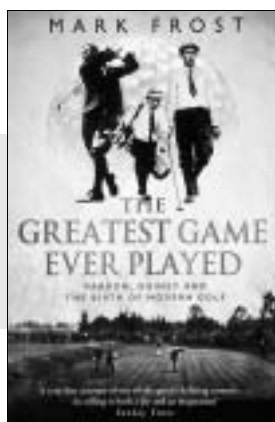
and offers a rare combination of literary merit and sheer suspense...[It] includes accounts by both men of what happened from the moment the rope was cut: Yates describes his guilt and horror at what he had done; Simpson writes of the agony of his semi-conscious journey to safety.' (**British Book News**, 12/98, p.875.)

Like mountaineering, sailing too really warrants an article of its own, so I will mention just two books, both recent. The first is **Red sky in mourning**, another story of tragedy, endurance and survival. The author and her fiancé, Richard, were delivering a yacht to San Diego when they ran into Hurricane Raymond. She was knocked unconscious below deck, and when she came to, found herself knee-deep in water and Richard gone. Most of the food had been ruined by salt water, the mast destroyed, the radio dead, the rescue beacon useless and the engine not working. This moving book is an account of Ashcraft's 41-day solo trip home, interspersed with her memories of Richard and their courtship. The second book I'm recommending is also about courage, but it is one of triumph without the tragedy. **Taking on the world** is a compelling book by a single-minded young woman whose entire life, since the age of four, has been obsessed with sailing. While other teenagers were going to discos and parties, Ellen MacArthur had her nose buried in yachting magazines. She writes of her youth and childhood, and a lot about the hard work and loneliness when she spent nights sleeping in boat-building sheds. Although still young, she has achieved a great deal in the world of international sailing. She made headlines in 2001 when she came second in the Vendee-Globe, the nonstop, 26 000-mile race that she completed alone in 94 days. She gripped the world's imagination perhaps because she was so small and so young. The French in particular have really

taken her to their hearts, calling her *la Petite Ellen*. Her story makes inspiring reading.

While there are many readable non-fiction titles about sailing and mountain-climbing, there are surprisingly few about surfing and diving. Unfortunately we did not buy Tim Ecott's **Neutral buoyancy**, but it is a good read for anyone wanting to understand the attraction and learn more about undersea diving. It is also a great gift for any diver. I have selected three surfing titles. The first is **Stoked**, a lavishly-illustrated, coffee-table book about the history of surfing and surf culture. There is an emphasis on the personalities involved, not only in the sport itself, but also in the whole surfing culture of music, literature and movies. This is a wonderful, and sometimes nostalgic, browse for surfer and non-surfer alike. Another good armchair title about surfing, but one with perhaps not such wide appeal, is **Maverick's**. Written by a former editor of **Surfer** magazine, it tells the story of big-wave surfing at Maverick's, a seriously scary spot on the Californian coast which only became known to the world in the 90s. It was at Maverick's that celebrity big-wave surfer Mark Foo was tragically killed on his first morning out. This quarto book is filled with stunning colour photography. Warshaw weaves the history of big-wave surfing into the text, from its ancient Hawaiian origins to the modern practice of tow-in surfing. The third book I want to mention is not new. Englishman Andy Martin, a lecturer in French at Cambridge University, wrote **Walking on water** in 1991. It is his entertaining and very readable account of the time he took off to act out his 'surf bum' fantasies.

I haven't seen much readable non-fiction about horse-racing but here is a title which I can strongly recommend. One would think a book about a racehorse an unlikely candidate for international best-sellerdom,



but that's exactly what happened to Laura Hillenbrand's **Seabiscuit**. It won the William Hill Sports Book of the Year Award and has been made into a movie (currently on circuit) featuring Toby Maguire and Jeff Bridges. It really is a wonderful book. The story of the rather unlikely champion, Seabiscuit, and the three men connected to him, has all the right ingredients of an enjoyable read. It is a rag-to-riches, triumph-of-the-underdog tale.

Hillenbrand vividly brings to life the character of this rather ungainly horse - complicated, wily, and very intelligent. Seabiscuit is really the main character in this book, and I think it is his personality that makes the book so appealing. The men are interesting too, particularly the trainer, Tom Smith. He was a real 'Western' man, solitary and a loner, with an exceptional rapport with horses. He used to break in wild mustangs for the US Cavalry and he was the one who found Seabiscuit and believed he could be a champion, but it was the owner, Charles Howard, who gave him the opportunity to train him his way. Howard was a self-made wealthy man, very image conscious, but with an eye for the underdog and lost causes. And then there was the jockey, the likeable Red Pollard. The book is set in the 1930s when Seabiscuit set American racetracks on fire and dominated newspaper headlines. There were record attendances as this odd-looking horse became the darling of the American public. This is riveting stuff - I loved it.

I'll end with another best seller, because one can't really write about sports books without at least mentioning Nick Hornby's **Fever pitch**. It is an honest and self-deprecating book in which an ardent soccer fan gives us a well-written and entertainingly fresh look at football fanaticism. It has been around for a few years and there has also been a movie (starring Colin Firth), so many of you will be familiar with it, but for those who somehow missed out, **Fever pitch** is a treat in store.

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**Titles marked with an asterisk denote books not yet available in WCPLS libraries.*