

## Book Review

*Memoirs of a Mug Punter* by John Harms

Review by Barry Nicholls

While popular English author Nick Hornby set a precedent for sports writers with *Fever Pitch* – a book about the fluctuating fortunes of an English Arsenal fan – the search continues for an antipodean equivalent. One such candidate is John Harms, a Brisbane based freelance journalist with an undying love for the Geelong Football Club, cricket and horse racing.

In his latest offering – a paperback titled *Memoirs of a Mug Punter*, Harms conjures up Hornby-esque images for the reader as he embarks on a journey of self-discovery through the trials and tribulations of a financial and emotional investment in a disinclined three year old filly named Courting Pleasure. The filly also known oddly as 'The Dog', is owned by winemaker Jim Barry who lives in the South Australian town of Clare, but is leased to a syndicate headed by an economist / banker Ade Sheahan for a 25 percent of winnings fee. 'The Dog' is trained by Daryl (Big Dazza) Dodson at Kaniva near the S.A./ Victoria border.

In the book's opening Harms, the son of a Lutheran Minister explains how his love affair with horse racing progresses from childhood disdain on moral grounds – and the interruptions to the Australian Rules footy broadcast – to an early adulthood sense of wonder and amazement. When we meet Harms in adult life he is feeling frustrated and somewhat trapped in the role of school teacher. However, life changes for Harms when he takes on half of his brother's one sixth share in the syndicate and is introduced to the family friend Adrian Sheahan. 'Ade' is one of a family whose athletic interests arise as progeny of a former Aussie Rules legend – Maurice Sheahan, the 120 game three-premiership Richmond champion of the 1930s. In a sense the Sheahan's represent to Harms the quintessential Australian family who speak what's on their mind and value the concept of 'having a go'. Most importantly the clan has deep loyalty to its members and honesty in its ranks.

While reluctantly toiling in the classroom Harms now sets his sights on glory at Flemington in November. He eagerly gathers another ten punters to further syndicate his one-twelfth part and form a local leg of the racing syndicate based in Brisbane. Flying in the face of tradition, the local syndicate is formed under the banner of the Salvador Allende Memorial Racing Alliance (SAMRA) named after the leader of a popularly led Communist government in Chile in the early 70s. Its mission is to celebrate equality and demonstrate how socialism works even in horse racing.

In Harms' first book *Confessions of a thirteenth man*, an elusive female named Grace fed him on an emotional roller-coaster as he pondered life and the Ashes cricket battle. A similar theme prevails in *Memoirs of a mug punter* although this time the four-legged filly Courting Pleasure and the dream of a Melbourne Cup acceptance speech, (while wearing King Gee workers, a BLF

T-shirt and Dunlop Volleys) are a key focus.

To assist novice horse-racing punters, Harms includes a layman's explanation of how to interpret the form guide and other important track details. Its real strengths however are the author's heart-felt descriptions of personalities and events around the track. This is successfully achieved despite Harms' academic duties generally requiring him to be in Brisbane, or occasionally in Melbourne or Geelong, while their horse is raced at country courses in Western Victoria and then eventually in Adelaide.

Inevitably he becomes an even greater frequenter of the local TABs with their extensive television racing coverage from all States, and with his descriptive skill you feel as if you are almost there at the track, sharing the solidarity with the ever hopeful clan members of the syndicate as Courting Pleasure runs her race. While highlighting a love for all things Australian the book brings to life its people and their mores.

Eventually Harms can wait no longer to see his filly run. So on the pretense of further research for his flagging Ph.D. he heads in his troubled Camira in the heat of an Australian summer for Geelong, and from there to Stawell in Western Victoria and happily sees his dream as an owner fulfilled. Then on to Adelaide; but Courting Pleasure is not yet ready for Capital city racing.

On his travels he reflects on the motivation of 'mug punters' whose lives revolve around the TAB and the next 'sure thing'. What follows is a lucid description of the possible psyche behind a 'mug punter' revealing a darker aspect of human nature in a thought-provoking description of the elements of addiction.

While Courting Pleasure experiences enough success to guarantee SAMRA members a winning photo, she appears beset by psychological problems and eventually longs for a more leisurely life of carefree days in the paddock. This is reflected in her diminishing performance on the track. The journey however for punters and horse has not been wasted and a sense of hope remains as she returns to the Clare Valley.

Overall *Memoirs of a mug punter* is a good read and affirms the Aussie spirit of adventure. It's about realising the difference between fantasy and reality while highlighting the advantages of bringing out the kid in us all.