

Ken Piesse, *Warne: Sultan of Spin*. Modern Publishing Group, Baxter Vic., 1994. Bibliog., illus., index, stats. pp. 224. \$19.95.

There can be no doubt that Shane Warne is one of the most marketable products in world cricket. His popularity with the masses is rivalled only by that of India's Sachin Tendulkar and the West Indian Brian Lara; that he is a bowler, and a spin bowler at that, sets him apart from them and most of the other cricketing heroes of recent times.

It is only natural, then, that those who rely on their literary outpourings for a living should consider Shane Warne as a subject for consideration. Equally, it is natural for Warne and those who manage his affairs that they should seek to maximise their earning potential by reserving for themselves the task of penning his life story and selling it to the public. There is thus scope for some conflict, which manifests itself in the degree of co-operation that the entrepreneurial author receives from the subject.

In this case, it is blatantly obvious that Ken Piesse, the prolific Australian cricket writer and editor, is very much on his own in this enterprise. The front cover boldly proclaims that what follows is 'AN UNAUTHORISED BIOGRAPHY BY KEN PIESSE', and the author's preface explains that 'Warne and his management preferred not to be involved in this biography' which is unauthorised'. The back cover is similarly annotated. Piesse goes to great pains throughout the book to acknowledge the source of quotes that are attributed to Warne, and overall there is a strong impression that the author is keen to establish with the reader (and presumably with the Warne camp) that he is keeping his distance from the subject. Unintentionally, the reader is thus left with the lingering suspicion that the author is not privy to the whole story.

Leaving aside the fact that this reviewer is perplexed by the need for this strong strand of denial, it is a pity that such an impression is formed, for Ken Piesse has engaged a veritable army of helpers to make this book an exhaustive account of the achievements of Shane Warne to the end of the triumphant tour of the West Indies in 1995. The Acknowledgments lists 112 individuals, ranging from school friends to Test team-mates and opponents, who provided Piesse with the information to make a very readable story. Piesse quotes liberally from his assistants, using them to tell the story, as well as providing evidence for his conclusions. The book concentrates mainly on his cricket, although we are kept abreast of his brief incursion into the world of football, and the romance that led to his marriage. One of the most valuable aspects of the book for the reviewer is the detail on his cricket at school and in his early grade days; nothing has been spared in providing the full picture.

The one or two low points of an otherwise remarkable career, such as his premature departure from the Cricket Academy in Adelaide, and his uncharacteristic outburst at Johannesburg, are treated objectively, although we are not enlightened any further about the intriguing Pakistani bribery scandal.

Piesse is also not afraid to use statistics to make a point; his tables comparing Warne to other spin bowlers are particularly interesting. These are presumably the work of Melbourne statistician Ken Williams, who provides the comprehensive statistics at the rear of the book. One of the themes of this analysis is the work load with which Warne has been encumbered since his introduction to international cricket. Comparison is made with other Australian bowlers in this respect (Warne averages 301 balls per Test against Grimmer's 392 but McDermott's 236), but a little more could have been made of this by showing, for example, that since the start of 1992, Warne has bowled over 13 000 balls in Test cricket. This is far in excess of the next highest (McDermott, 9143), and only Walsh, Akram and Kumble of others around the world have bowled over 7000 balls in the same time.

Warne's bowling record, Test by Test, is provided, but in the interests of saving space in a form that is difficult to follow; a tabular format would have created a better impact for the reader. The book is embellished with many photographs, both black-and-white and colour; the latter are of a commendable quality and scope, many of them showing that million-dollar smile that has made Warne such a favourite with the public.

The overall impression is of a well-written and researched book of excellent value neatly divided into mainly chronological segments of Warne's career (forty-nine chapters in 194 pages), meticulously factual, and well-supported with eyewitness accounts and solid statistics. It may tell the story of a popular cult figure, but it deserves to be taken seriously.

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