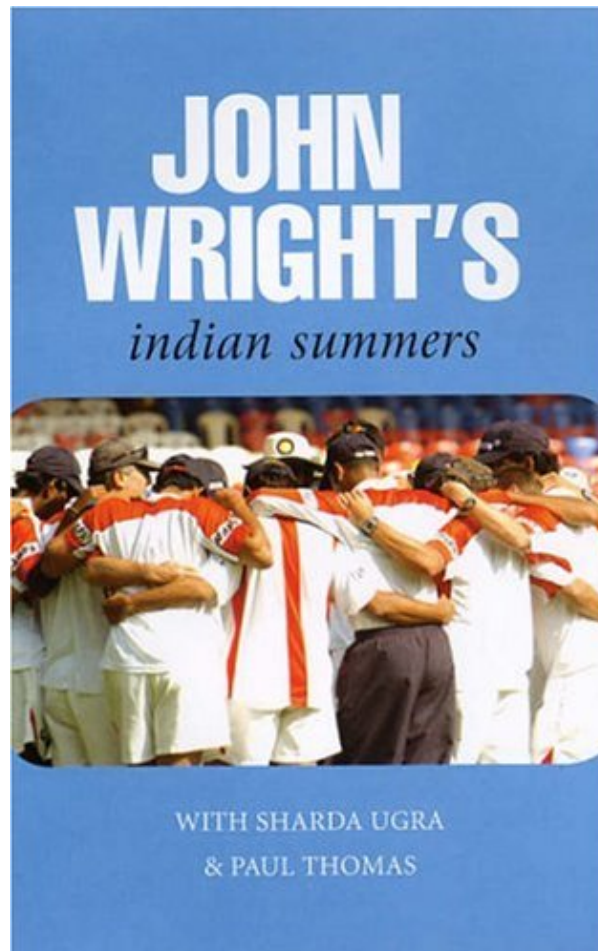


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Heart warming, funny, and down-to-earth

By Abhinav Agarwal

A feel good book. Period.

John Wright was the coach of the Indian cricket team for five years, and the Indian cricket team had unprecedented success during that period. Coincidence or not I don't know.

The book is neatly divided into chapters that correspond to a tour or season of the Indian team. So, there is one chapter each on the Australian team's visit of 2001 (who can forget that!), India's tour of Pakistan in 2004, the England tour of 2002, the West Indies tour of 2002, the Australian tour of 2003-04, etc... Then there is a chapter on Wright's experiences with the selection system, its regional quota system, another one on the struggles that the aspiring Indian cricketer has to go through to make it, or not. Srinath, Kaif, Kumble, Yuvraj, Harbhajan and many more are covered...

A few things I really liked about the book - Wright almost never drops names to sensationalize or scandalize, he writes about controversial topics without resorting to being sensationalistic (the Dravid declaration in the Multan test when Tendulkar was on 194* for example or about the team manager who liked to shortchange the team on their lunch money). The second point is that Wright ultimately comes across as a very decent man with a genuine love for India - which is very heartwarming indeed (contrast it with the rather supercilious 'In Spite of the Gods' by Ed Luce).

Rather than write more, I shall simply include excerpts from the book itself:

"I'd aspired to a successful second career. I wanted at all costs to avoid living in the past. In a sense, I failed."
[Page 8]

About his visit to India for the interview as India's coach:

"The BCCI's travel people had told me just to turn up at the Lufthansa check-in counter with my passport; everything would have been taken care of. The dragon behind the desk asked, "Where's your visa. You can't travel without a visa." ... I could have produced a ukulele and serenaded her with 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips'. She was one of those implacable petty functionaries whose guiding principle is that there's no point in having the power to screw up people's lives unless you exercise it. I spoke to her supervisor, who'd evidently taught her everything she knew." [page 24]

Care to guess who Wright's talking about here?

"In Jodhpur, a guy with the biggest diamond ear-studs I'd ever seen wandered into our viewing area as if it was his private box. I went nuts demanding to know who the hell he was and, more to the point, who the hell he thought he was. The answer to both questions was that he was India's biggest beer baron." [page 43] - it's the one and only Vijay Mallya!

Here is spot on, and this is especially true of the press and former Indian cricketers (Bishen Bedi is one) who go overboard in running down the Indian team. Anyway, John has no love lost for the Australians, as is evident from the last sentence!

"Indians love their own team, but when a major side arrives they know how to make the tourists feel special. There's very little of the media mind games and psychological warfare you get touring some other countries, notably Australia, where the welcome usually takes the form of a dismissive spray from a famous ex-player." [page 46]

About the greatest Test every played:

"India is a country of one billion people, but on the second night of the second test in Kolkata I sat in a room 214 of the Taj Bengal with what felt like my only friends: four cans of Heineken and five cigarettes. Australia had made 445, despite a Harbhajan hat-trick, the first by an Indian in a test, and we were 128 for 8." [page 50]

"They were all out for 212 in 68 overs; having followed-on, we'd won the test by 171 runs. I remember embracing Andrew and dancing a jig with him..." [page 55]

"People would stop me in the street to thank for being 'our' coach. It was humbling, but also guilt-inducing, because many of those who thanked me for doing a well-paid job that I loved led lives of day-to-day struggle. The gratitude and support I received from ordinary Indians was the most positive force I've ever encountered, in that it simultaneously lifted me and kept my feet on the ground." [page 70]

Sabse bada rupaiyya:

"I had many deep and meaningful pre-game discussions with Indian groundsmen, pointing out that we had two spinners, so would they please push the ropes back? Then the TV company would demand more space for the advertising hoardings, and when we arrived at the ground on match day the ropes would have come in again and I'd get dark looks from the spinners. Money talked a lot louder than I did." [page 113]

"Yuvraj Singh's father, Yograj Singh, was a medium pacer who took 1 test wicket in his single test. Here's a clue: his sole scalp was a dashing left-hand opening bat from New Zealand who thrilled crowds the world over and later went into coaching." [page 117]

The 2003 World Cup match against Pakistan:

"As our openers walked down the long flight of stairs to begin the chase, Viru told Sachin, "Don't say anything to me about my batting except 'go and lagao' - basically, go for it. Sachin replied, 'I'm going to get these guys.'"

"Decked out in military uniform, General Musharraf spoke of the two teams setting an example of co-existence. Once he'd get the serious stuff out of the way, he had both teams in fits of laughter, referring to the sweets we were being served as 'weapons of mass destruction'. He said he knew the Karachi match was getting tight when he saw Inzamam-ul-Haq dive for the crease for the first time in 14 years.[page 178-179]"

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