

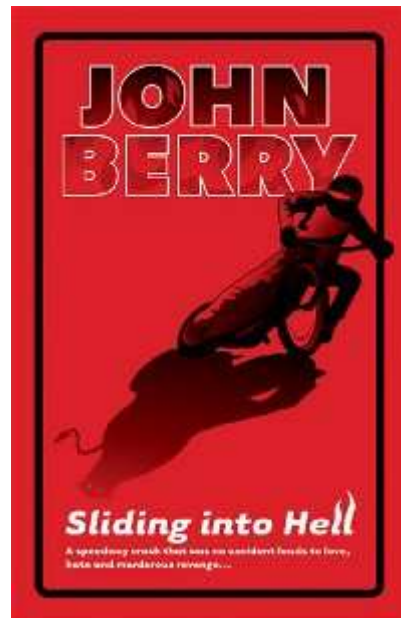
Book Review: Sliding Into Hell

Sliding Into Hell

By John Berry

£4.99, in softback

256 pages



Former Ipswich promoter John Berry has fashioned a new career as a speedway writer of some note in recent years. His feature pieces in 'Backtrack' magazine and his books 'Confessions of a Speedway Promoter' and 'More Confessions' have been well received, have shed considerable light on events from the past and even suggested future directions for the sport to take.

In between his 'Confessions' books another piece of his work hit the bookshelves, then seemed to sink without trace. The book in question was "Sliding into Hell", a novel, and we actually featured an extract from it here on the site. In retrospect that was probably a mistake as the extract doesn't really make sense on its own and you don't really get a feel for what the book is like.

When read in its entirety it's actually an entertaining piece of fiction, set in and around (but not exclusively about) speedway. The central character is Vincent Hansing, a paralysed speedway rider that makes his fortune and moves into the promotional side of the sport. Initially his motives are linked to a thirst for revenge against the sport and individuals that led to his paralysis. As he gets more involved his attitude softens and he ends up doing the sport a lot of good, though some of his methods are probably not advocated in the BSPA handbook.

Berry's frustrations as a promoter are clearly exemplified in the way these sections of the book are written. He makes sure that Vincent Hansing rids the sport of the old-school, self serving promoters and is actively able to drive change. The result, in this fictional world, is a sport much more fit for purpose and in-tune with the modern world. Scattered throughout the text are references to the changes that 'Vincent' would

like to make to speedway, the majority of which seem sensible. We're even told that he's come up with a solution to the age-old problem of guest riders, though frustratingly we're not told what it is!

Worryingly, there's so much evidence of skulduggery and race fixing in this tale, the reader is left to wonder how much of this is based on Berry's real life experience and how much is purely fiction. Similarly, several characters seem to be based heavily on some of the sport's personalities from years gone by. The popular former World Champion Bryce Penrith, 'Crazy Jack' Miller and travel agent turned promoter Steve Bray being particularly obvious examples. Now these three are all likeable enough characters in the book, but are the more unsavoury characters, and there are plenty, also based on real people? We can only hope that they're not, or that if they are, those individuals are long gone from the sport.

If speedway is the primary subject in the book, then there's no doubt about the second most important – sex. There's lots of it, Vincent's circle of friends certainly don't go short and constantly rearrange themselves into different groupings (note that the word pairings would not have been appropriate). If you like your novels to contain some lesbianism, bi-sexuality and the graphic description of sexual acts, then this could be the book for you. It's definitely not one for the young or the easily offended.

There are some minor gripes with the book. The names of the teams in the league are a combination of real tracks (Glasgow), real places (Brighton) and some totally invented (Shelford). It may have been better to avoid mixing them up in this fashion as it does seem odd when Marsdon are racing against Exeter. Marsdon, one of the fictional place names used, actually switches between being called Marsdon and Marsden from page to page. Another small gripe is the ease with which Vincent acquires his vast wealth, although great pains are taken to explain how it's happened, he'd have to be a latter-day King Midas to make quite so much from so little initial capital.

It seems unlikely that Berry's novel is ever going to pick up awards, it hasn't to date certainly, but don't let that put you off. If you're looking for a book to read at the poolside on your summer holidays then consider this one. It's one of those books that's difficult to get into at first, you need to persevere for the first couple of chapters – after that it's plain sailing and you'll become gripped by the multi-layered plot and the insights into the world of the speedway promoter.

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