

# Review: A Life in Cricket and in the Mind

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## **Mike Brearley was England's most successful captain; in this book he talks about how he juggled cricket and psychoanalysis**

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By S Giridhar

First things first. This is a remarkable book by a remarkable person. And though the author is one of the best captains in cricket history, those seeking mainly cricket in the book must be told that the game is merely like a vine running through the narrative. If you go straight to the Index, you will see Botham is mentioned just thrice, Boycott and Greig only four times. On the other hand, Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Mozart, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Henry James, and others from the world of philosophy, psychoanalysis, music, and the classics make up most of the references.

It is a book that is majestic in its sweep. It is the story of 81 years where cricket has played a wonderful part in life and yet is only a part. For the fullness of Brearley's life and experiences includes philosophy, the moral and the ethical, the arts, the mysteries of human mind and helping countless patients through psychoanalysis.

It is not an easy read. Brearley, right in the beginning says, this book is a memoir of his mind, and not a chronological autobiography. Thus, the events and milestones during his school years, his studies at Cambridge, his stint as a lecturer in philosophy and his subsequent years of training and practising psychoanalysis – serve like the railings of a staircase as we join Brearley in the exploration of the mind. A subject like this can get chaotic in lesser hands but the honest and reflective Brearley ensures that the narrative has a wonderful coherence.

The beauty of this narration lies in its inclusiveness. Brearley invites us into his mind and his thought process. It is inevitable that we will bring our own life, mind, and memories even as we read Brearley's memoirs and make our own personal connections. I said it is not an easy book to read; perhaps what I meant was that it is not a quick read. I had to pause at the end of each of the fourteen chapters to reflect, absorb and introspect. It made me seek and question in my own small way. There are times where Brearley said something that made me pause to dip into a bit about Adi Sankara, Vivekananda, or Freud. Or for that matter, an occasion where I put down the book to watch YouTube clippings of Brearley's batting in the 1977 Centenary Test and a few other games.

As we journey through the book, we recognize that Brearley from a young age had freed himself from the tyranny of "or". Even as a college student, he can recognize the value of opposing dimensions. For instance, as early as in Chapter 2, he declares, 'We need both

ways of thinking. Vagueness and precision, wide focus and narrow.’ And that spirit runs through his discussions on cricket, philosophy, music, literature, and psychoanalysis. Brearley’s mind is remarkable for its ability to create space for different masters and different opinions. Thus, Brearley can discuss Wittgenstein’s philosophy while allowing space for critics of the great man. In the same vein, about Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, but with an entire chapter to discuss Wilfred Bion and his influence on Brearley’s own approach to psychoanalysis.

Gratitude runs through Brearley’s book, for the many people who enriched his life. Be it his great aunt Dee-dee, who taught him the precious value of grandparents; or John Wisdom, his professor at Cambridge; Professor Karl Britton, who gave him his break as a lecturer at the University of Newcastle or Dudley Doust his first writing collaborator.

Some years ago, in an essay on great cricket captains, my colleague and I wrote that Brearley wore very lightly his educational qualifications and his scholarship, thus enabling him to connect with everyone without being overwhelming. Reading this book, I realise why. The crux is that Brearley had worked out his answers to complex and vexing questions such as: ‘Which skill expresses the higher value - the sportsman’s or the intellectual’s, beauty of body or mind?’ and ‘Which is superior, sensory or intellectual certainty – that which is derived from the bodily organs of sense, combined with inductive reasoning, or conclusions from revelation, pure logic and deduction?’

A tough-as-nails captain

Does this explain how Brearley could immerse himself in the world of Descartes and Wittgenstein or Freud and Jung, and at the same time be a tough-as-nails captain for Middlesex and England? In that unforgettable Ashes series of 1981, he led England with a combativeness that was never more evident than in the picture where he, one hand on hip and the other out-thrust, is goading Botham. Unbelievably, it was during these peak cricketing times that Brearley would spend the mornings before a game on the couch as he trained for a career in counselling and then drive down to the ground in time for the cricket.

By the time Brearley tells us how he juggled psychoanalysis training and Test cricket on the same day, one ceases to be surprised. Was he not after all the man who some chapters earlier told us that he memorised sonnets written on his hand during a game and discussed philosophy assignments with a colleague while keeping wickets? As though that is not enough, the polymath informs us that he had qualified for the civil services in the 1960s and turned that down and later when approached again by the Foreign Office for a role - hold your breath, as a spy – turned that down too. For Brearley the active cricketing years were precious and he gave that his all. But from being a student and teacher of philosophy to then training himself in psychoanalysis so that he could spend the rest of his life helping patients with their mental wellbeing, was a natural progression towards a life’s mission and calling.

Towards the end, he discusses how as one advances into the seventies, the mind copes with the challenge of ailments and prepares for when the great umpire will call time. It is interesting to see the calmness with which Brearley describes his lymphoma and its treatment while at the same time expressing fears of a life where his mind is no longer his own. Knowing that both his parents suffered from Alzheimer's in their final years, it is poignant to see Brearley discuss his fears. But the self-deprecatory humour is always at hand, in every chapter and for every occasion. It makes the author so much more accessible to readers. The discerning will realise that such digs at oneself is possible only when one is at peace with oneself.

*(S Giridhar is a member of the Azim Premji Foundation)*