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Believe in the Sign

By Mark Hodgkinson

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Mark Hodgkinson Believe in the Sign

Sometimes the world seems full of football; it's as if Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* lifted the lid on some nasty Pandora's box of glitz, fantasy players and disposable managers. Before that, wasn't it all a bit more muddy and real?

Hodkinson's memoir of a lifetime spent supporting Rochdale AFC, a team who, over the years, have built up enough experience of aching defeat to teach the current England cricketers a thing or two about what to do when you hit rock-bottom, is hardly a shiny, clean kind of thing. Polished, perhaps – his prose is never less than first-rate – but this story of life in a “damp corner of England where nothing much ever happens” is the kind of understated, witty but dry, very English tale that seems to be in short supply these days.

Introducing his family, he tells us: “Back then mums and dads didn't go in for quality time or anything so fey with their kids.” His childhood, spent doing things like seeing who could jump the furthest down flights of concrete steps, didn't involve adults. Of the two family outings he can remember one was to see *Planet of the Apes*, the other was to Spotland, home of Rochdale Association Football Club: “We sat in a shabby wooden stand full of middle-aged and old men, coughing and moaning ... The rain came down and the pitch and players disappeared in mist.”

The way Hodgkinson's permanently knackered team play is a microcosm for life's grittier realities. Clever, occasionally brutal and regularly amusing; a story of football when shorts were short.