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Autobiography & Memoir

A Blistered Kind of Love: One Couple's Trial by Trail
Angela Ballard
Duffy Ballard
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An old pearl of wisdom says that two people wanting to know if they are truly compatible should take a long trip together. They will have the answer by the time they hit the end of the road.

The authors, a husband-and-wife writing team, took such a journey prior to committing to marriage: a 2,655-mile hike that extended from the California-Mexico border to the Canadian border. Their route-the famous Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail-would take them through the deserts and mountains of California, the Cascade Range of Oregon, and the dark green forests of Washington.

Tackling a hike this long and arduous is not for the weak, unprepared, or faint-hearted. Only 300 people a year even attempt to “thru-hike” the PCT, and, out of that number, only a small percentage complete it. The Ballards, both Easterners at the time they started it in 2000, wanted to see a part of the country new to them-“spectacular monotony,” as a fellow hiker described it-and they wanted a trek that wasn’t crowded. That prerequisite ruled out the older and more-publicized Georgia-to-Maine Appalachian Trail.

The book is a day-by-day journal of this five-month adventure. The entries include a history of the PCT, the characters encountered along the way, hiking buddies, frustrations, defeats and victories, discussions of gear selection, and the unique communities they would visit.

What made this book stand out from the growing ranks of other self-discovery hiking books was the dual authorship. Each writer wrote a separate account of a particular incident, providing a different perspective with results that sometime surprise the reader. For example, at one hostel, Angela Ballard found herself ignored by the male host, who seemed to act as if she were simply the chattel of her male companion.

The fear of an injury that would halt them both dead in their tracks was always lurking in

the background. At one point, Angela Ballard reflected on her increasingly bum knee: “Despite my best efforts to grin and bear it,” she writes, “I’d found myself limping and slipping farther and farther behind with every passing mile. That’s when it crossed my mind that maybe it was over … During the ensuing two days I tried to mentally prepare myself for going home a failure.”

The knee cleared up, and Duffy Ballard had his own demons to fight. He was burning so many calories he was turning into a meatless skeleton with a receding hairline, which he attributed to dietary deficiencies.

“I’d become a stick man, the incredible shrinking man with the sloughing scalp,” he writes. “No matter how much blubber I ate in town, I still got thinner and thinner and balder and balder.”

Couples interested in embarking on a long hike together can learn some gender-related differences and biases from these observations. Angela Ballard, for example, noted that women like to communicate their feelings and work together as a team to achieve a goal. Men, however, tend to be more competitive, self-focused, and goal-oriented.

This well-researched nonfiction account is presented as a history lesson, a sociological study of hiker mores and folklore, and an exercise in self-discovery and personal growth. Readers learn of the State of Jefferson, a thinly populated region between northern California and southern Oregon whose inhabitants have felt since the 1940s that they were double-crossed by state representatives who ignored their needs. They actually lobbied to create a new state, so they could control their own destiny. The name was chosen in honor of Thomas Jefferson, a champion of states’ rights and independent thought. Today, according to the co-authors, hikers frequently see the “XX” or “double-cross” logo on graffiti, tee shirts, and bumper stickers in that region, keeping the dream alive.

After completing the hike in 2000, the couple returned to Philadelphia, where Angela pursued a career in freelance writing, including assignments for Men’s Health magazine. They married soon after Duffy completed his M.D. and master’s degree in bioethics from the University of Pennsylvania.

This book was such a page-turner that the co-authors would have been hard-pressed to write anything more exciting even if it had been a fiction thriller. The only question a reader is likely to have after finishing this book is what adventure the Ballards will be writing about next.

Karl Kunkel