

The Calling: A Life Rocked by Mountains

Barry Blanchard

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Blanchard shares a legacy of technical and literary pioneers in alpine climbing in this extraordinarily well-written mountaineering memoir.

The title page of *The Calling: A Life Rocked by Mountains* reads, “Patagonia publishes titles that inspire and restore a connection to the natural world.” A Patagonia ambassador, author Barry Blanchard is one of the world’s most respected alpinists—alpinism, Blanchard explains, is “a balls-out style of mountaineering where the climber carries all his gear on his back and bivouacs as necessary along the route.” Blanchard shares extraordinary experiences in this well-written memoir.

The Calling is wilderness immersion in print. Mountain climbers will hang on to every word—transported by Blanchard’s superb description and his ability to coin phrases like “the ‘hour of the wolf’—just before dawn, when the cold hunted and bit.” His many ascents, descents, and attempts will resonate with anyone who has lived life connected to wild nature.

Indie-music fans will enjoy the playlists Blanchard includes as soundtracks to each chapter, while the literary minded will appreciate books he references: in Northern Pakistan, “we discussed Hemingway: the courage of Santiago ‘in the face of no chance at all.’ I ripped through *The Sea Wolf* and passed it to Mark ... he devoured it and we tried to live its strength.”

The images chosen for the book scream authentic. The graphic of a gnarled, grimacing Blanchard on the cover and the insets are from his private collection. These photographs are close, personal images from Barry’s intimate moments with his climbing partners, forging new routes up some of the world’s most inhospitable mountains.

This was mountaineering in the 1980s, before GPS devices and Google Earth cheated climbers out of the adventure of estimating a route or actually learning orienteering. Before an ascent of Shigri Peak—the name his team gave a spire in the Nanga Parbat that they used as an acclimation climb for the Central Spur of the Rupal face—Blanchard and two of his compatriots camped before the jagged, massive snow-covered rock face. The team estimated the face to be three thousand feet; in reality, it was five thousand.

A twenty-seven-minute avalanche that his group of four survived at above twenty thousand feet in their descent of Nanga Parbat is a testament to the climbing life—one that depends on the belief that ultimately the mountain is in control. Blanchard’s faith in mountains and their often harsh and indiscriminate variables will strike a chord with the hard-core mountaineer, and with anyone living in proximity to mountains and their unpredictability.

KAI WHITE (Winter 2015)

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