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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

There Must Have Been an Angel: The Cross-country Odyssey from Badwater, Death Valley, to the Summit of Mount Whitney

Lee Bergthold
CreateSpace (Apr 18, 2012)
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Eloquent descriptions of the landscape convey a sense of awe and suspense.

Trekking 125 miles of the infamous Death Valley, Lee Bergthold and his traveling companion, Jerry, maneuvered the dry desert to conquer the direct path from the nation's lowest point to its highest, despite canyons, bogs, and blizzards. The lighthearted *There Must Have Been an Angel* is Bergthold's exciting and conversational account of survival and determination.

This journal-like memoir begins at the bottom of Badwater, in California's Death Valley, where Bergthold dives directly into the story. He and Jerry stand in reverence of the mucky salt bogs juxtaposed with the peak of California's Mount Whitney. At least once a day, the pair meets up with a friend who provides them water, which they could not carry on the hike.

As Bergthold charts his journey, he often stops to exclaim in wonder at broken glass bottles or jagged rocks, to matter-of-factly describe how filthy, hungry, or cold they were, or to share a scene of dialogue. These stops and starts of the narrative flow are sometimes as rough as the terrain, but each tangent and aside adds something valuable to the story.

The abundance of exclamation points and rhetorical questions is akin to an adventurous uncle telling a story to his nieces and nephews. The eloquent descriptions of the landscape convey the sense of awe and suspense the author experienced and that he seems to wish to evoke in his audience: "We got closer. We grew silent. We approached the rock. We made the turn! We stopped dead in our tracks. Our fairy tale was real. The earth did drop off—I mean, *it dropped off!* We had walked in from a high-desert, cedar-strewn plateau that looked like a Sierra Club backdrop right onto an overlook that plummeted into purgatory." Though it is easy to get swept up in the story once engaged in Bergthold's narrative, it can be difficult first to enter, due to the unusual voice. The building of suspense as the hikers progress, though, sustains interest.

Even while his excitement and wonder are evident, there is little depth concerning Bergthold's emotional journey on his hike, and almost no background is given, except to say that the pair has previous hiking experience. The portrayal of his and his hiking partner's actions and the descriptions of what they see are thrilling, but aside from a sense of danger and occasional mentions of fear, there is little insight into what compelled the pair forward—all of the conflict and turmoil is external.

Acknowledgment of a guardian angel adds some spiritual substance, but those who yearn to escape within a fun and rigorous adventure will be more likely to get into *There Must Have Been an Angel* than those seeking an emotional or spiritual catharsis.

The few photographs included are clear and provide a decent visual of the hikers' gear and the landscape. With a cover that accurately depicts the contents, *There Must Have Been an Angel* tells the story of an amazing feat in a friendly, engaging voice.

AIMEE JODOIN (January 23, 2014)

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