

Buxton, Bill (2015). "Review: The Calling: A Life Rocked by Mountains," *Canadian Alpine Journal*, Vol. 98, p.139.

Review: *The Calling: A Life Rocked by Mountains.*

by Barry Blanchard, Ventura, CA: Patagonia Books (2014).

Review by Bill Buxton

Full disclosure: I have known the author for over 15 years, climbed with him (at a low standard), slept on his floor, and over too much scotch, figured out how to fix all things wrong in the world – many times over – only to have forgotten the just-discovered meaning of life by morning coffee at the Summit café.

My words are inevitably rooted in bias, a bias out of which heightened curiosity is the most dominant arc to emerge. I'd read several of Barry's shorter pieces, with their gonzo style of writing, and remember that "Writing" was the answer to a long-ago question that I had posed, concerning what he thought of doing besides guiding. So what would he do with a longer format? How realistic was that ambition? Would I recognize the character in the book? And what would I learn about this person I knew, and what – if anything – would surprise me?

Let's start with first impressions – the book itself. A hefty object of 440 pages, there are no half-measures in this debut (which is fully in character). Then there is the design. Let me put it this way: some might find the typography and layout somewhat not to their liking. They might find that it makes the book harder to read (and the absence of an index annoying). In short, along with the cover design, the book has rough edges. Slick or flash are not words that will come to mind on first encounter - at one level, at least.

But then, there is this other level. And, as with climbing, patience and persistence pay off in spades. Rough edges? Think of the man as you know him, or get to know him (as you will) from this volume. What else would you expect? The book is in character with the man and his climbing - which always has struck me as a personification of the fable of the tortoise and the hare: steady, reliable, respectful, and determined persistence are what wins the day.

But there is more to it. As one absorbs the pages, what emerges is a realization the design and typography bring to one's reading some of the same attributes that characterize Barry's approach to the mountains. They say, "Don't doddle, but also, don't rush. Set a pace that enables you to take in and savour what you are passing through." And believe me, the quality of story-telling, and the extraordinary turns of phrase that you are going to encounter in this volume are well worth savouring.

As further aid, *The Calling* does something unique in my experience: provide a playlist for each chapter. Rather than frivolous novelty, doing so provides a creative and nuanced way to reinforce an important sense of time and place, not to mention a key aspect of the author's character – one that otherwise may be too easily overshadowed by the broad strokes of the mountaineering exploits – namely, that Barry's passion for mountains may well be matched - or exceeded - by that for literature and music.

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Of course this is a climbing book. And yes, right from the start it is a cliff-hanger (literally and figuratively), finding Barry and company up the Rupal Face without a paddle, so to speak. But it is no climber-as-super-hero narrative. Or anti-hero for that matter. In many ways, the book isn't even about Barry. Rather, the protagonist is often as much – or more – the mountains themselves, and the people and things encountered. Hell, in one way, rather than being a vehicle for self-aggrandizement, *The Calling* could be considered a love letter - to the mountains, and partners such as Kevin Doyle, David Cheesmond, Ward Robinson, and Mark Twight.

At this point in the history of the mountaineering literature, it is 5.12 hard to bring a fresh approach to a climbing book. With *The Calling*, Barry red-pointed 5.14. It is an exhausting book, in a good way, an absorbing way. The whole experience is punctuated by intensity, relief, and humour. And it does so while avoiding any "Rum Doodlesque" clichés.

I read the book in two sittings. I cannot think of a chapter in which I did not laugh out loud. And, despite knowing how many of the climbs turned out, often from Barry himself, I learned something meaningful and interesting from each - about the history, climbing, and my friend. Barry had better be careful: he may have found a second calling.

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