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The Calling: A Life Rocked by Mountains

By Barry Blanchard

The Calling: A Life Rocked by Mountains. By Barry Blanchard. Patagonia Books, 2014. 440 pages. Hardcover, \$27.95.

The Calling: A Life Rocked by Mountains is Barry Blanchard's story of rising out of what would have been a soon-to-be-forgotten life to becoming one of North America's most cherished and respected alpinists. Raised by a single mother of mixed blood in tough Albertan neighborhoods, Blanchard's emotionally painful childhood lessons lead to his avowal to never abuse women. In turn, his conversion into "climber" follows a familiar theme: hero figures, men living to higher ideals, great literature (*The White Spider*), and the proximity of the vertical world (the Canadian Rockies). In short: born into a potentially crummy life, he found his way out. *The Calling* is that story.

Blanchard's vision for alpinism, the apex of his early career, and the most gripping tale of this book play out on the Rupal Face of Nanga Parbat, where he, Kevin Doyle, Ward Robertson, and Mark Twight launch up the tallest face on Earth and get totally hosed. Reminiscent of René Desmaison's *Total Alpinism*, Blanchard's account brings the reader into the suffocating force of the cold world eating its prey one cell at a time. In some ways "The Avalanche" chapter is an expression of the ideal depicted in Al Alvarez's *Feeding the Rat*, in which the idealized self finally matches the actual person. What makes the story of Nanga Parbat so remarkable is that it was a shared experience.

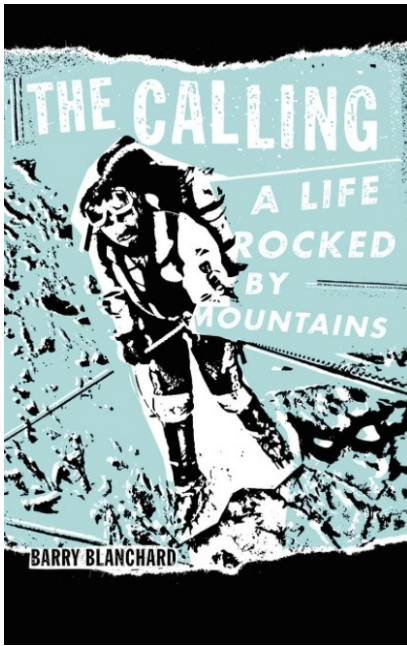
The body of the book is a stream of progressively more difficult routes with partners each stepping up to perform greater and greater acts of heroism and nerve. It's funny as well, really funny, no doubt because Blanchard is such a practiced storyteller. Listening to him describe George Lowe's nasally whine—"I KNOW!!"—was enough make this reviewer wet his britches.

As much of Blanchard's being is founded in merit, there must have been some disappointment that's left unspoken here. He was tuned and poised for Everest's West Ridge when political aspirations of others were placed ahead of merit, and Blanchard and Doyle were first displaced and then forbidden a summit bid. While a difficult pill to swallow, Blanchard sucks it up and moves on, setting in motion a vision for what would unfold on Nanga Parbat.

Reading *The Calling* left this reviewer longing to have moved to Canmore when the window opened and found a way into that special tribe. My hope for future generations of readers and alpinists is to find their inspiration in Blanchard's words. Why? Because Bubba is the real deal.

– Charlie Sassara

Images



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