



AAC Publications

Sixty Meters to Anywhere

By Brendan Leonard

Sixty Meters to Anywhere. Brendan Leonard. Mountaineers Books, 2016. Paperback, 176 pages, \$16.95.

Brendan Leonard is a relentless machine. He blogs (semirad.com), designs T-shirts, posters, and memes, and he writes books about outdoor adventures. Much of this, one imagines, he does very quickly, and some of it is merely OK: mildly amusing, a quick blip in the infinite competition for 15 seconds of our attention. This book, however, is a serious, measured reflection worthy of every minute of our attention. The story is how an alcoholic Midwestern young man escapes his demons and finds focus and meaning in the climbing life.

When Leonard arrives in Missoula, Montana, for grad school at the age of 23 he had been sober for six months. He describes his intimidation at meeting his new colleagues, imagining his own self-introduction: “Hi, I’m a Small-Town Guy Who’s Never Been Anywhere. I barely graduated from Public University in the Great Plains, and I just got out of jail.” Most of the first 50 pages describe his “fight [against] a constant compulsion to drink alcohol.”

As a recovery narrative, Leonard’s is the exact opposite of James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*. Frey’s story was presented to the world as nonfiction when it was fiction, a highly exaggerated self-portrait in which the hero’s flaws and triumphs are over-dramatized, with the apparent attempt to present the self as the ultimate badass (and make a lot of money). Leonard’s self-presentation is calm and matter-of-fact; he’s not the worst drunk we’ve known, nor the best climber. But he’s very, very good at telling us what it’s like to be human, and we believe his every word.

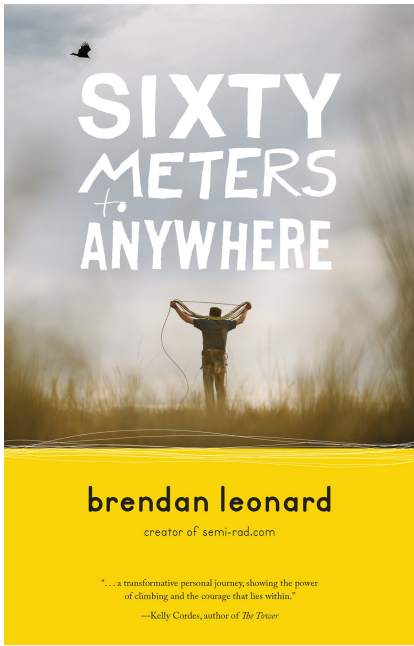
Fifty pages into the story, Leonard finally gets into the backcountry. It’s not like the clouds open up and strike him with a divine calling. His epiphany, such as it is, comes in the form of questions: “Could I come back here? What does it take to be a person who does this stuff? Can I be in the mountains again, and breathe the air, and feel small?”

The answers to these questions are yes, yes, and yes. Leonard is very good at describing actual climbing, but the climbs themselves (particularly their difficulty) are never central. I loved his description of an epic day on Mt. Hayden with a friend who was a beginner: At the end, when you get to the car, or the tent, or just the bottom of the climb, your brain finally understands: I am not going to die today. There is no more doubt, no more fear, and you are warmed with a feeling of satisfaction, just enough so you start thinking, Hey maybe I’d do that again. Not anytime soon, but what a day.

Leonard’s nine-year relationship and marriage falls apart, he takes his parents climbing, and his beloved grandmother dies—none of these events is given short shrift here. Leonard may have thought he was simply telling us what it’s like to be an alcoholic and a climber, but his story is larger: He shows us nothing less than what it is to be wholly human. I’m not an exceptional climber, he tells us, adding that he does, however, consider himself an “exceptional recovering addict.” To that I would add: He is an exceptional writer as well.

– David Stevenson

Images



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