



A Blistered Kind of Love: One Couple's Trial by Trail

Angela Ballard , Duffy Ballard

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Winner of the 2003 Barbara Savage Miles from Nowhere Award and Winner of the 2004 National Outdoor Book Award

A blend of romance, humor, and adventure on the Pacific Crest Trail Written in "he said/she said" alternating chapters, this young couple each tell their own story They're not sure which came first -- falling in love with each other or falling in love with the idea of hiking the Pacific Crest Trail (the length of California, Oregon, and Washington). At the trailhead, the young couple was warned that there would be tears, that each would have to find their own separate pace, and that at times the tent would seem awfully small for the two of them. They were told that their biggest obstacles to success would be . . . each other.

Their first surprise: freeze-dried meals do funny things to your GI- tract. Their first fight: when Angela noticed that Duffy's long legs propel him along the trail faster than she can muster. But on they pressed -- encountering snakes, bears, and fellow thru-hikers with trail names like Crazy Legs and Catch 23. They baked in the deserts of Southern California, gazed awestruck at the snowy, serrated peaks of the High Sierra, and attempted to hide from Northern Washington's seemingly incessant rain. One hundred thirty two days of Pacific Crest Trail later, they made it -- blisters and all.

A Blistered Kind of Love: One Couple's Trial by Trail Details

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Natasha says

I think this book has been harshly punished for what it isn't rather than what it is. If you already know a lot about distance hiking and the PCT, you'll probably find this book boring and the narrators annoying or even condescending. It is not a story of rugged people surviving in the wilderness. It's a narrative about two relatively inexperienced hikers hiking the PCT for the first time. It's about their struggles, triumphs and revelations as they make their way from Mexico to Canada on foot for five months. It's well written, enjoyable, and inspirational.

Ahimsa says

This book succeeds in nearly every aspect it wishes to. It's not easy to write about yourself without going into too much detail, particularly under these grueling conditions, but both authors do a great job. There is a great sense of place here; you meet many of their trail friends, see their relationship suffer from some bumps and bruises, and feel the love of the trail angels.

The real star of this book is, of course, the Pacific Crest Trail. From the dusty desert to the High Cascades, the trail is described in great detail and is a character in its own right. Though both seem to be chuffed that they finished but this book about convinced me not to go. Having to rush past places like Yosemite, Goat Rocks, and Crater Lake seems a high price to pay.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, but have some minor quibbles. The writing is effective but never great. The alternating POV's doesn't entirely work--when done correctly, it can add an interesting he said/she said element to the narrative. Instead, we just get each writer's "turn." It works but the device is not used to its utmost.

It's not quite the PCT's equivalent to "A Walk in the Woods," but it's the closest thing so far.

Maria says

20130703 ◇ This book was awful. The main characters were entirely unsympathetic. I kept waiting to feel some resonance with their adventures, and it never happened. I read this book in advance of my own 8-day backpacking trip with my fiance, thinking that it might have some good advice -- or at least some points of interest to share, since he hiked a good portion of the PCT after college. It had neither.

To be clear, I really *wanted* to like this book. Written from the alternating perspectives of a male/female couple as they attempt to through-hike the Pacific Crest Trail, the premise was set up to be inherently interesting. However, each protagonist was whiny, immature, and annoying in their own special way. The gentleman of the autobiography, to put it mildly, sounded like a complete dick. And the couple together was so painfully vanilla that reading their perspectives on different situations blew past charming straight through to wince-face. They were not interesting people; they had very few interesting thoughts; the book was

thoroughly uninteresting. And annoying. Unfortunately.

Darla says

I really enjoyed the Ballards' perspective on the PCT experience and appreciate their sense of humor and honesty about the difficulties they encountered. I'd recommend it to anyone considering hiking the PCT, especially if you plan to hike with a significant other. What makes this a 3 out of 5 for me is the Ballards' not-that-subtle irrational fear and judgment of Mexican immigrants (illegal or otherwise). The book starts out with them afraid of encountering a boogiemán-esque illegal immigrant near Mexico, to the point that they're examining and fearing "illegal" looking clothing and candy bar wrappers as if they were bear or cougar prints. Though it's not unreasonable to be afraid of unstable or desperate people in the wilderness, it strikes me as irresponsible--bordering hateful--to assume that these immigrants would be unstable, murderous, or even desperate; these are human beings with a range of stories, characteristics, and reasons for being here. The Ballards demonstrate essentially no sympathy for the immigrants' plights, goals, or shared humanity. At the end of the book, when the Ballards finally make it to Canada, they reflect on how many millions of Americans and Canadians live within easy reach of the PCT but fail to take advantage of it. It's a good point with striking statistics, but they fail to mention how many Mexicans also live within easy reach of the PCT. Their omission isn't innocent; the implication is that the people who would want to hike the trail are American and Canadian, not Mexican. Mexicans are wild hiker-stalkers who illegally run along the trail, throwing t-shirts and candy bar wrappers behind them. Despite all my enjoyment of the trail stories the Ballards present in this book, I could never shake the frustration I felt over their apparent bigotry or, if I'm generous, insensitivity. So, I recommend the book for the PCT perspectives and for the humorous and heartfelt anecdotes, but I do so halfheartedly and with a bad taste in my mouth.

Michele says

Rob and I read this book together. I'm pretty sure if either of us had tried reading this alone, we would have given up at some point. Let's hope we approach the PCT with a little more gusto.

I appreciated the he said/she said format with each author writing every other chapter but other than that, there wasn't much to like in this book. There was a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth and too many pages spent on things that are just not huge concerns and arguably, not real- desperate, violence-prone illegal immigrants haunting the trails; crazy, gun-toting backwoods locals haunting the trails; blood-thirsty bears/snakes/other creatures also, you got it, haunting the trails.

Also, and this may be petty, I took particular offense to their description of "chaparral-infested" scenery. That phrase really turned me off. The chaparral of Southern California is beautiful in its own right and pretty freakin' impressive for it's ability to survive, look good, and support as much life as it does.

I connected with neither the story nor the authors.

Erica says

I had somewhat high hopes for a memoir about the Pacific Crest Trail, considering it is something that Tal and I want to do someday.

Alas, rather than giving me inspiration, it put me in a funk. Instead of hearing crazy trail stories and soliloquys on the beauty of nature I read about the authors relationship to each other, about crying on the trail and having basic trail/outdoor knowledge condescendingly explained to me.

I could seriously care less.

Then, to add insult to injury, they skipped the section of the PCT that we are doing this year (Stevens Pass to Rainy Pass), which is supposed to be one of the most beautiful and made barely any mention of the section we did last year.

I think I would have been better rewarded if I read a trail guide to the PCT, and I think I will.

Liralen says

You know...you can learn something from any book. Sometimes that's a more *practical* something than others, but hey. In this case, the lesson: pick your hiking partner well. *Do not make backpacking plans with somebody who will refuse to adjust his pace for you, make repeated disparaging/paranoid comments about 'illegals', suggest that your refusal to kiss a banana slug is a 'trust issue', and blame you for his weight loss and demand that you eat less so that he can have a bigger share.*

Ugh. Look. From a hiking-the-PCT perspective, it's okay. Not great, but it's always interesting to get different viewpoints; in this case it's sort of two-for-the-price-of-one, since there are two authors and thus two different interpretations. But this was one of those books where I couldn't get past the authorial voice. Angela's sections are okay, if a little bland. Duffy's are...harder to swallow. I don't know what he's like in real life, but the writing does *not* paint him in a good light, and not in the 'narrator was a jerk but the writer knows it' sense. One of the problems, I think, is that he tries to create a sense of drama/danger throughout the book, talking up how dangerous certain things might be—they might run into killer bees! Or mountain lions! Or *gasp* *illegals*! And they might die! But nothing comes of any of these, so it just...doesn't come off very well.

Or there's this: *As one of just a handful of single women on the trail, she [another woman] received plenty of attention and enjoyed every minute of it. With dark, flouncy hair and a pleasantly round face, she was attractive in a crunchy sort of way. This made her even more of a rare commodity. Besides Pansy Ass and my own Chigger, I hadn't noticed many attractive women hikers. Not surprising, I suppose, since dirt, blisters, and sunburns aren't typically associated with beauty* (Duffy, 102). Oh lord. Where to start with this? Let's see. There's the part where he makes assumptions about how this other woman feels about receiving 'plenty of [male] attention'. There's the dismissive, patronising tone of 'attractive in a crunchy sort of way'. There's the fact that he refers to a woman as a commodity. There's his choice of 'Chigger' (and, later, 'Chiggy the Piggy') as a nickname for Angela. (I'll concede that weird trail nicknames are not unusual, and he presumably didn't give 'Pansy Ass' her nickname. Still, I find it peculiar.) There's the assumption that any woman hiking the PCT would give a flying fuck what he thinks about their appearance. There's the assumption that what he thinks of as attractive is universal. (What am I missing?)

It was just...kind of a hassle to get through. The nail in the coffin was the food conversation (their eventual agreement: he got a ladle and she got a normal spoon, matching each other spoonful for spoonful; he got the first bite out of every candy bar/granola bar/cookie she ate; he got two peanut-butter crackers for every one of hers. It is worth noting that he rejected her suggestion that they just carry more food), but, uh. This is not what I want out of a backpacking memoir. Or a backpacking trip.

jessicamax stein says

Angela and Duffy Ballard are a super-straight couple who hiked the Pacific Crest Trail together and wrote a book about it. The gimmick of the book is that they alternate narrating sections. However, you could open up the book at random and know which one is writing, because she's a much better writer than he is. The book is a great read, but it's in spite of Duffy, not because of him.

Don't read this if you don't love this kind of long-walk narrative. If you do keep tabs on that genre, however, this is definitely worth reading, for the Dos as well as the Don'ts. DON'T, for example, tell your wife-to-be that she eats too fast and needs to save you more of the food because you're a MAN, and if your husband says this to you, DON'T hike the entire PCT with him! DON'T make fun of your wife's armpit hair (you have some too!), and DON'T let your husband call you "Chigger" or worse yet, "Chiggy the Piggy"! These are not affectionate nicknames!

Still, the narrative is fun, the descriptions are beautiful (when Angela writes them), the background info is helpful and not overmuch (when Angela writes it), and ultimately I really enjoyed this book -- again, perhaps a little too much in spite of its authors. Come on, Angela, DTMFA!

Jill says

I used my REI dividend to purchase Day & Overnight Hikes: Oregon's Pacific Crest Trail last summer, and this summer I used it to plan several trips, both day and overnight. In poking around the library for other guides, I found "Blistered Love" in the PCT section and decided to check it out, hoping it had some funny stories about the part I was going to go through.

It didn't have much reminiscing on Oregon, but after reading it I became fascinated with the Pacific Crest Trail in general. "Blistered" was a great introduction to the trail as well as the culture that goes along with it - trail angels, gear heads, rest stops, craziness... Okay, I'm kind of a nerd about the whole thing, but when I saw my first PCT through-hiker in the flesh I seriously freaked out with happiness. Thank you Angela Ballard for giving me something else to obsess about.

I doubt I'll ever do the whole trail (sorry, after reading about the California sections, I think I'll pass on that whole state), but it was a good read. Even if you aren't a hiker, you will probably enjoy Ballard's humor and the interpersonal relationship drama that happens. I did, anyway.

Beth Jusino says

For all of us who cringed at WILD--the "helpless female" author's reliance on others to rescue her, not to mention the sense that she brought most of her discomfort on herself through willful lack of preparation--there's A Blistered Kind of Love. This is a true travel memoir, which means that it's a story about travel, with all of its boring parts and minor adventures. While the authors both have their quirks and hangups (him: medical information; her: a weird obsession with her parents' disapproval), they stay focused mostly on the realities of a long-distance walking adventure: the deserts, the mountains, the toll it takes on both mind and body. The book is charmingly dated (Palm Pilots and phone booths), but the experience of the trail itself

comes across as authentic. The characters they meet; the daily, and sometimes hourly, highs and lows of hiking; and the life-changing effects of leaving it all behind are familiar to anyone who's set off on an adventure of their own.

Mindi Bennett says

I didn't want to put this book down. I loved the writing, the helpful insider knowledge, applicable quotes, and the book recommendations. I'm probably more drawn to this book than most because our family of 6 has a goal to hike the PCT in the next few years. Although, some of the hardships the Ballard's shared really makes me question our sanity...however, I'm still convinced that Walt Whitman is correct (as quoted on page 258) in saying: "Now I see the secret of making the best persons, it is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the Earth."

Cheryl says

This book was a fun read but after reading several other books about hiking the PCT I was a little disappointed in not more about trail magic and other PCT hikers they met along the way and that foods they ate etc. I like that the chapters were his and hers so I got both perspectives. My other issue was that these two hikers seemed to spend a lot more time in civilization and motels than other PCT hikers. It was a good book though and I enjoyed it.

Shannon says

Racism, sexism, classism...Everything you could want in a hiking book. Oh and pages and pages of mansplaining, too.

Brittany says

I'm enjoying this hike with Angela & Duffy. The first book that I read about the PCT was Wild by Cheryl Strayed. Cheryl is an amazing writer & the whole hike & story of her life was poetically written. I guess that is what I expected when I purchased this book. Thus far that's not exactly what I have read. That doesn't mean that I like it any less but it's just been something that would have almost made a better internet article. I have been aggravated by the jumping back & forth between him & her because sometimes I would read more than a few paragraphs before I could tell which one was talking. As the book moves forward though I can almost feel Angela becoming more comfortable with her writing as she jumps into paragraph long, beautiful descriptions of her surroundings but I also can't help but think maybe it took her 1,000 miles to start enjoying her hike. Or maybe after finishing & looking back she saw the beauty. Either way they are nice but almost don't seem fitting. They feel out of place & would be better if the whole book was more intimately written. (That's All For Now)

Danielle says

I'm sorry, but this book is awful. I wanted so much to like it, being one half of a hiking couple, but by the end of the book, I am sort of hoping that the happy couple gets mauled by a bear.

I enjoyed the fact that each chapter came from a his or hers point of view, but the heavy handed cliches and cutesy language was almost unbearable at times. Also unbearable was Duffy's need to educate the reader on the most basic of concepts, like how mountains are formed and very basic history. If I wanted those things, I'd get a book on them. I am reading this book because I'd like to hear about your experience hiking the trail and not a basic geography/history/health lesson.

Perhaps this is a bit harsh, but it's been awhile since I read a book that made me audibly groan in pain.
