

Review of *Keeping up with Myself: a Memoir of a World Champion Cross-country Skier.* By Hanrick Bjornson

A surprising memoir about one man's chase after an illusive personal consistency.

Right from our starting line, ski poles held upward and outward, Mr. Bjornson gets a lot of momentum from much of our real ignorance when it comes to the intricacies of competitive cross-country skiing, and, its Norwegian born author Hanrick Bjornson, a fact that Bjornson uses to his great advantage, and seems to cherish.

The insignificance of his sports public perception eases the demand from his readership for gooey gossip or the necessity to explain many of his personal relationships with competitors. These, which your reviewer knows all too well, can so often bog down and fill up endless pages in sports memoirs. Especially from someone who has been such a dominant figure for the last 30 years.

Bjornson does open up about his 15 year marriage to professional ski-jumper Ebba Amundson, but stays away from much detail, retelling primarily moments of happiness. A particularly funny story is told of their two year anniversary which happened to take place at the Olympic Village (a place now notorious for being voluminously sexual) which reads almost like a farce, with a cross dressing male figure skater and Bjornson and Ebba being chased down a hotel hallway by a half naked bobsled team.

There are a few anecdotes about failures at political decorum, crafted endearingly from his free-spirited nature (their structure at many points reminded me of Richard Feynman's book of anecdotes, re-told with a peevish grin). And there are stories of a few close calls at finish lines with rivals who he describes lovingly. But it appears that Bjornson never really meant to talk about all that. He uses the ignorance of his sport to his advantage, to play around with metaphor, nearly to the point where it stops sounding like a memoir at all. In one passage he describes the woods.

“You ask your average person what there is to fear in the woods and they'll say bears or wolves or recount to you that time they were camping and swore they heard a cougar. But what I fear in the woods is what I love (in the same way I love and fear most that one piece of myself. Not the piece that might kill a man, propelled by adrenaline or instinct, but what I get to become when I'm out in front of everyone during a race. I must stay focused on my rhythm on myself and so I become not a skier, or a machine, but a chemical element. The hot iron in my throat becomes that distinct replicate taste of all other iron on the planet. Or chlorophyll. In this state I associate

myself most with plants, this is what I was getting at). That love and fear comes from the trees in the forest. Which near my little village in the strongest winds blow over softly, as if all their creaking cracking and groaning is an endless tune-up between symphonies of silence.

Yes practically, fallen tree branches on a new trail you've been skiing are the biggest threat to your own internal clock (if you are to keep up with yourself) and of course your physical safety. I've even been struck by falling branches in the thigh and skull. But when I blew out my knee, I overestimated being able to glide over what looked like a small branch in the snow. Another branch had fallen perpendicular to my trail and when the pressure of my weight traveled over it, it pushed up just slightly the other branch, which must have fallen on top of it, and I caught the front tip of my ski which wrenched my leg and tumbled me.

But yet, the freedom and thrill of creating one's own trails is more than enough for me to bear the falls as part of it.”

Bjornson is full of reflective poetics which transcend traditional memoir fare and he even talks at times like a religious teacher, borrowing heavily from Buddhist influences when he says things like ..

“I begin every race like it's my first. It really feels that way to me. I know that each race means nothing to the ones before it. When I was younger I didn't feel this way. I raced against others and then felt bad when I lost. Yes, this attitude did push me to try and win but after a certain point I began to lose to myself constantly. I put a great time (I beat the standing course record by nearly a minute) in at a course in Stockholm when I was 30, but I realized if I wanted to keep competing later in life I would have to ignore this accomplishment attributed to me”

and

“Only people who don't believe in happiness don't believe in luck. Sometimes they will say things like 'I make my own luck.' Well sure we all choose the direction in which it's directed, but one can't “make” something which is purely based on belief. It's the belief in luck that brings happiness, not vice-versa.”

Although, these reflections do leave us pondering just *where* Bjornson is going with all this. He never

makes direct suggestions that he is happy, and that it is his beliefs that brought him this. He often goes out of his way to examine more obscure and interesting matters. He runs into interesting questions about himself; such as just why skiing became his occupation and just *why has he felt the ever constant need to be good at it?* He resolves to being satisfied with a cycle of renewal. But it does leave us the audience with a question of such beliefs, his beliefs. Your reviewer finds the suggestion about the belief in luck very scintillating, the concept that peace of mind could be so easy. But she doesn't think that Bjornson even believes his own beliefs, and she doubts that simply believing would change much of her actual physical circumstance, since she has lived very often doing things she never cared to be lucky at. She wonders if this belief in luck doesn't turn us all into un-winable internal competitions.

These are a taste of the questions that Bjornson can raise out of you, and it's appreciated that they are so similar to all our lives.

Therein lies Bjornson's true consistency.

\$25.99

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