*To Imogene: A Flagstaff Love Letter*

*One town’s long-distance romance with an iconic trail run.*

Edited by Myles Schrag and Julie Hammonds

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Reviewed by Bruce Pratt

*To Imogene: A Flagstaff Love Letter,* edited by Myles Schrag and Julie Hammonds is a beautifully presented work of visual art and an inspiring collection of personal essays and reminiscences by a group of Arizona runners who share a unique relationship with the Imogene Pass Race—an annual trail run that begins in Ouray Colorado at a point just below 8000 feet, climbs above 13,000 feet, then descends to 8700 feet at the finish in Telluride. The book, unique in my experience, is well described by these words from the frontispiece:

*This book was created to celebrate the Flagstaff running community through the lens of our town’s unique relationship with the Imogene Pass Run.*

And a wide and telescopic lens it is—nearly 200 pages of text, photography, and art skillfully imagined and contextualized to bring the reader as close to the race as words and pictures can. (One caution, reading this book may inspire carb-loading or a sudden urge to drive to Colorado)

*To Imogene* began with a call for stories and memories from Flagstaff participants in the Imogene Pass Race, or IPR as it is known, in 2016 in “High Country Running” Myles Schrag’s weekly column in the *Arizona Daily Sun*, Flagstaff’s paper. Though he expected sufficient responses, he was overwhelmed by the reaction, and the proposed book grew in scope and purpose. The call also attracted an offer from Julie Hammonds to join the project. Not only did she and Schrag garner ample anecdotes and tributes detailing the almost mystical connection between Flagstaff’s running community and the IPR but enhanced their effect by adding stunning art and photography.

Though track and cross country coaches send their athletes out on runs together, distance running is for most a solitary pursuit. This is because the most talented and motivated runners chafe when forced to adhere to a slower pace by the pack that does not challenge them. Yet in Flagstaff distance running has become a more communal endeavor, as evidenced in this collective narrative, which does not simply recount the running of the race, but illuminates the joy of running, the importance of community, and highlights the resilience of the human spirit. Flagstaff IPR runners actively recruit friends to train to become part of this annual pilgrimage to which they carpool, share rented condos and motel rooms, bring potluck meals, and encourage their compatriots all the while maintaining a competitive purpose and attitude. As a result, the reader is drawn again and again into the lives of people they will recognize as being like their own neighbors and friends.

*To Imogene* is about the willingness to face, and the benefits derived from meeting, a stiff challenge. The IPR is not for the casual weekend runner, and those who train for it do so with an intense commitment to finishing. In fact, runners must reach the checkpoint at the top of the pass by a certain time or retire from the race. Veteran Flagstaff runners of all levels introduce those new to the race their best strategies and alpine training practices, because they take great pride in having more finishers than any other community. (In 2017, 151 runners from Flagstaff finished the race as compared to 123 from Denver. (Schrag and Hammonds 36) Flagstaff’s 2017 population was 71,975, Denver’s more than 617,000.)

The race conditions can be brutal. The IPR has been run in intense heat and through every form of precipitation, because, as anyone familiar with the Rocky Mountains knows, even slight changes in altitude can cause wild swings in the weather. As a result of the likelihood of cold and wet conditions, all racers are required to carry certain gear with them, which adds to the challenge. As noted, the racecourse rises nearly 5300 feet in the ten miles between Ouray and the summit of the pass. For perspective, if you ran from the lowest point in southeast Kansas located on the Verdigris River to the state’s greatest elevation near the Colorado border, a distance of over 200 miles, the rise would be only 3,360 feet. As one Flagstaff IPR runner noted, “As I neared the pass it was so steep, we were nearly walking on our toes.” (Schrag and Hammonds 117).

The book’s stories and photographs are divided into eight sections, each focusing on a different aspect of the race and Flagstaff’s relation to it. One of the most interesting pages contains the advice offered to people considering taking on the IPR for the first time by Nat White a veteran participant that begins with him addressing each runners motivation. His training suggestions are customized for those who wish to compete for the top prizes, those who simply want to see how well they can do against the field, and for those whose sole desire is to finish. This, too, echoes the book’s main theme—It’s the individual stories in a collective history.

The end result of Schrag and Hammond’s diligent, inspiring, and thoughtful work is a book as beautiful to leaf through as it is to savor.