Book Review: *This One Wild Life: A Mother-Daughter Wilderness Memoir*

by Angie Abdou

reviewed by Judy Hakola, University of Maine (retired)

Memoirs as a genre provide readers with very specific and personal lenses through which they learn about certain aspects and events in the lives of the memoirists. So it is important to understand the kind of lens through which the story they are reading will be filtered. In the case of Angie Abdou’s *This One Wild Life: A Mother-Daughter Wilderness Memoir*, an incident early in the book that describes the birth of her daughter, Katie, gives us a clue. Preparing for that final push that will expel her daughter, Abdou says, “A long-distance swimmer with decades of under-water swimming practice, I could hold my breath for a very long time”—so long and so intensely, in fact, that she forgot to breathe during that final stage and Katie was born oxygen-deprived and spent her first two days in an incubator. This writer is not an easy-going person.

Although the ostensible subject of this memoir is Abdou’s attempt to help her daughter overcome her shyness by developing her competence and persistence by hiking the mountains near their Fernie, British Columbia, home, the real subject, as with all memoirs, is Abdou herself. Abdou is an intense competitor by nature and training, and her approach to these hikes is to reach the top—to conquer the mountain. Just as Katie has to learn to be more confident when facing a challenge, so her mother has to learn to be less competitive—to turn hiking from a competitive sport with winners and thus losers to recreation when recreation equals re-creation and nothing is at stake. It’s a distinction that will be well understood by SLA members and a lesson that Abdou learns as well.

That lesson begins early in the book when, deeply stressed by a series of very nasty social media attacks, she looks out her window one morning at an ordinary cottonwood tree in her yard (which her husband jokingly disparages as “the weed of the forest”) and feels “its positivity flooding in like sunlight. Its branches reached out to me . . . . the massive tree embraced me with unconditional love.” Yes, she is projecting her own need onto the tree, but the point is that–unlike those attacking her on social media, her family, her friends and no-longer-friends, and her readers—the tree expects nothing of her, is not judging her. It just is. Later, she analyzes her habit of using her running time to think through her writing projects, working out character, plot development and other writing issues but totally oblivious to the environment through which she is running, head down, shoulders hunched. Eventually she realizes that the natural environment cannot help her if she does not consciously admit it into her life so she begins to run with her head up and shoulders back, breathing deeply and actually looking at the places where she is running. But these are all personal decisions. The more complex ones develop when she proposes Katie that they undertake a peak-a-week, mother-daughter bonding experience during the summer between Katie’s third and fourth grades. The plan is complicated by a number of factors, but ultimately it turns out to more of a parenting challenge than a physical challenge. Time and again Abdou must figure out when and how to keep Katie going to reach the summit, and eventually to decide when *not* reaching the summit is a better outcome. Although the objective originally is Abdou’s aim to give Katie more mother-daughter time and to overcome her shyness when outside her family, again and again Abdou must face the question of “Whose goal is this anyway?”

To be worth reading, a successful memoir must offer readers more than a focused look at a slice of the author’s life. “What can *I* get out of this book?” is a legitimate question for any reader. In the case of readers who are neither parents of young children nor avid hikers, reading *This One Wild Life* is still worthwhile. It raises many issues of interest to SLA members and readers in general. The matter of both the value and the drawbacks of competitiveness is obviously one, but Abdou’s thoughtful observations on writing are another. For example, in describing the week-long hiking-camping trip on the Juan de Fuco trail that she took with her husband and their two children, she calls it a success *as a trip* because “Nothing happened”—no sprained ankles, no encounters with angry bears, just lots of immersion in the natural world. But things happening is essential for a successful story, and Abdou is a storyteller. Storytelling is how she figures out things, yet she acknowledges that shaping a narrative, even a narrative of “true” events, is almost always a form of manipulating what happened to make it a good story, and once that narrative is in print (or its electronic equivalent), it takes on a life of its own.

Abdou also takes on matters of more philosophical interest such as the drawback of always looking ahead (as in planning to get to the peak of a mountain) rather than being “in the now” (as in enjoying the trip toward the peak for its own sake). During the time covered in *This One Wild Life*, Abdou tells us, “I have learned a new way of writing, one that involves less urgency and less stress . . . . Now, I think of writing [and one can assume living] as an intense form of listening. I remain open to possibilities. I let the process lead me.”

A slight distraction in the overall progress of the story is caused by Abdou’s decision to frequently devote whole paragraphs to professional sources she has consulted when looking for expert information on topics such as shyness, father-daughter relationships, endorphins, and a dozen others. (Happily, there are no footnotes, just a four-page reading list at the end of the book.) As she tells us, she is a researcher trained to look to expert sources for answers, but these sudden breaks in the narrative, although topically relevant, affect the flow of her otherwise skillful storytelling. But that is a slight quibble; otherwise, the book is insightful and enjoyable to read.

Abdou is a complex, multi-talented person with her share of quirks and hang-ups. But, more importantly, she is a *thoughtful person*, and time spent with her will certainly offer much to ponder for equally thoughtful readers.

NOTE: This review is based on the pre-publication copy; the book is scheduled for publication in April 2021.

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