**Abdi Abdirahman with Myles Schrag. *Abdi’s World: The Black Cactus on Life, Running, and Fun*. Flagstaff, AZ: Soulstice Publishing, 2021. 228 pp. Paperback. $19.95**

*Reviewed by Willie Steele*

Even the most casual fans of men’s American distance running are familiar with the names of the great athletes who have performed well on the world stage. Billy Mills, Jim Ryun, Gerry Lindgren, Steve Prefontaine, Frank Shorter, Bill Rogers, and Alberto Salazar, for instance, were the marquee names for the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s. More serious fans remember the few bright spots of talent during the lean times of the 1990s, a time when Bob Kennedy and Todd Williams often battled each other on the track for recognition as America’s top runner. But none of these athletes was able to accomplish what Abdi Abdirahman was able to do at the Olympic Trials marathon in 2020: qualify for five Olympic teams. And while some of the aforementioned athletes placed higher at the Games, some even winning medals, none ran at such a high level for as long as Abdirahman has.

In his biography, *Abdi’s World: The Black Cactus on Life, Running, and Fun*, the acclaimed runner provides insight into his life as a Somali immigrant who began running seriously at Pima Community College in 1995 after being encouraged by some friends to try out for the cross country team. From there, “The Black Cactus” as he’s known to his friends and fans, competed for the University of Arizona where he finished second at the 1998 NCAA Cross Country Championships, before later signing a contract to run for Nike.

Unlike many runner’s biographies, Abdirahman doesn’t lay out his training plan. In fact, in the book’s Preface, he says, “I don’t always pay attention to my Garmin GPS watch and I’ve never kept a training log” (ix). Rather than diving into specific details of training and racing, the Black Cactus divides his story into six parts, all Olympic years, including 2016 when he missed making the team for the Rio De Janeiro Olympics. Each part focuses on a lesson Abdi learned through his running: possibilities, belonging, belief, humility, perseverance, and unity.

Although these lessons are rooted in his running experience, Abdirahman weaves in stories of his family’s escape from the political turmoil in his native Somalia, the immense pride he has in his American citizenship, his friendships with runners of all nationalities, and the fun he’s had training and competing around the world. While casual runners will never come close to the world class times the Black Cactus has had for nearly thirty years, they will likely connect with his love for the sport and the relationships he has formed through it. The most poignant of these reflections is when he details his relationship with training partner and housemate, Ryan Shay, who collapsed and died during the marathon trials for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

And while the book is largely Abdi’s own story, he invites his friends, training partners, fellow competitors, and coaches to speak about him as well. Two-time Olympian Ryan Hall, legendary coach Joe Vigil, and coach Mike Smith are just a few of the voices who offer insight into what makes the Black Cactus unique. Abdirahman also incorporates numerous interviews from magazines, websites, and podcasts, allowing readers to understand where he was at various points in his career.

Beyond running, the book explores the challenges of being a Muslim in the United States after 9/11. Along with his own story, Abdi draws from the experiences fellow Olympians Bernard Lagat and Meb Keflezighi, both of whom are African born American citizens, to explore the complexities of their lives and what it means for them to “be American.”

In distance running, an elite career of more than a decade is extraordinary. For a runner like Abdi Adbirahman to make five Olympic teams is the stuff of legend. Distance running fans will appreciate the story of someone who has been world class for a long time, has stood on the podium of prestigious races like the New York City Marathon, and who has had a lot of fun along the way.