Going to Dolpo by Timothy Doyle

Timothy Doyle and Kali Sherpa walk from the green lowland valleys of Nepal to the snowbound, treeless canyons of Dolpo, an area just south of the Tibetan border. The author explores human psychology and destiny within a Buddhist framework while on the ground Kali and he wade through snow and encounter the dangers of high overland travel during the Himalayan winter. Going to Dolpo is simultaneously a travel book, an essay, a pilgrimage account, and an adventure story. Combining elegant prose with multi-layered originality the pages encompass several genres to form a decisive and inspired narrative that challenges traditional classification.

Reviews of the Going to Dolpo by Timothy Doyle

Bloodfire

Going to Dolpo is an bold and original account of the author's journey into the Himalayas. It has a cinematic feel with beautiful tracking shots high above the mountains and then zooming in to the close-ups of real people eloquently drawn.

A friend recommended this book to me. He said that it is the literary equivalent of an espresso! I think
what he means is that it is small, but powerful and unadulterated. I would recommend it to anyone who appreciates originality and doesn't like to be treated like an idiot.

Kefym

Going to Dolpo reads as a travelogue set in a space that is at once introspective and mindful of the Outside. The relationship between narrator and companion (Kali) serves to evoke the complexities of difference in a meditative spirit. The book is an exercise in measured calm. Its aesthetic is that of the ‘ordinary' transformed by the author's or traveller's seasoned eye.

Vaua

Described variously as a travel journal, an epic adventure and an essay on Buddhism, first-time author Timothy Doyle's book Going to Dolpo has much to live up to. The tale of his journey from lowland Nepal to the snowy peaks of mountainous Dolpo follows the daily trials of the author and his native guide Kali as they pass through tiny villages, weather wintery storms in mountain caves with other Nepali travellers, and survive all manner of physical stresses on their way to their ultimate destination, the snowy passes of Dolpo.

A photographer and writer, Doyle has spent much of his adult life in and around India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. His photos of the area and its people decorate the book's covers, their spare elegance seeming to indicate the beholder is one who does not seek to popularize or glamorize the life these people live, but simply to record it. I looked forward to getting a glimpse into what daily life entailed in this hidden, mysterious area of the world. What I found was something entirely different; those seeking a "Lonely Planet" style guide to trekking in Nepal or even a chatty confessional about the rigors of travelling in this largely inhospitable terrain should turn back now because Doyle will not oblige. Going to Dolpo is disappointing in its lack of description and narration; I wanted to know more about what he saw and felt, but other than griping about his guide, the lack of food and how cold he is, Doyle steadfastly refuses to give any details.

Doyle begins his journey on the outskirts of Pokhara with Kali. They talk of different things along the way, sometimes a local custom or two, sometimes briefly about Kali's life in his home village, but it seems most often that they say little. Doyle writes and thinks about Buddhism as he travels, giving readers a basic run down of the belief system and the importance of reaching a place where ego and self are no longer factors. He quotes extensively from books of Buddhist teachings as well as historical and philosophical studies primarily in an attempt to learn about his own struggle to understand the Buddhist path to the state of "condition-less-ness". It is however, this essaying that jars with the flow of the book; these lessons levered into the journey sit uncomfortably both because they feel tacked on to the narrative and because they are delivered in a manner that feels a lot like a university reading assignment. They feel disconnected from Doyle's professed desire to understand them and explicate their meaning in his life.

This feeling of disconnection was something that I struggled with throughout the book; many times Doyle seems rude to Kali, demanding and petulant when staying overnight in small villages, and full of disdain for the people he sees along the way. I kept feeling that I must be misunderstanding their relationship, not seeing the nuances of trust and distance that were being maintained, but by the end of the book I was convinced that Doyle saw Kali as his very much socially disadvantaged employee and nothing more. It is never clear what Kali thinks of Doyle, but he spends a great deal of time fetching food, carrying Doyle's packs, securing shelter and smoothing things out with the native Nepalese they encounter. It was the description of their interactions and relationship that gave me the most trouble in the book; I felt little connection to Doyle and his great trek, so his musings on the world rang hollow. I was however, interested in what might motivate Kali to work as a guide and in his thoughts on helping foreign adventure/enlightenment seekers travel where, by all Nepalese accounts it was folly to go. These questions are not answered and by the end of the book all Doyle can say of his guide is that they drifted apart after the trek; "He had much greater concerns and the gap in our class status was something I think he had difficulty accepting". It seems a disingenuous
statement from one who has benefited from the guiding system so greatly, but also seemed somehow to sum up how Doyle saw the Nepali people in general.

Going to Dolpo is not a book without merit; there are many scenes in which Doyle brings a photographer’s eye to describing a particularly bleak mountain pass or the starry night sky above their small tents, but it is a difficult book to like and enjoy reading. It demands that the reader dispense with expectations about how it will unfold and it makes no conciliatory moves toward the reader who perseveres. I frequently felt like putting it down, but upon finishing it felt a grudging respect for the story and its author. Going to Dolpo is an ambitious book, but it is ultimately unsuccessful because Doyle is unable to bring together the diverse threads of the story. The travel journal, epic adventure and Buddhist treatise all trail along parallel to each other, never really intersecting. Reading the book feels like the act of taking the strings and weaving them together; the reader is forced to guess at what Doyle must have been feeling and thinking and what the surroundings looked like which makes for a generally unsatisfying read

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