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Hell-Bent: Obsession, Pain, And The Search For Something Like Transcendence In Competitive Yoga

HELL-BENT

OBSESSION, PAIN, AND THE SEARCH FOR
SOMETHING LIKE TRANSCENDENCE
IN COMPETITIVE YOGA



"This extraordinarily thoughtful book stretches and reaches and bends in several startlingly impossible directions at the same time... A wonderful, inspiring, maddening, complicated, edifying journey."
—Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*

BENJAMIN LORR



Synopsis

Author Benjamin Lorr wandered into a yoga studio-and fell down a rabbit hole. Hell-Bent explores a fascinating, often surreal world at the extremes of American yoga. Benjamin Lorr walked into his first yoga studio on a whim, overweight and curious, and quickly found the yoga reinventing his life. He was studying Bikram Yoga (or "hot yoga") when a run-in with a master and competitive yoga champion led him into an obsessive subculture-a group of yogis for whom eight hours of practice a day in 110- degree heat was just the beginning. So begins a journey. Populated by athletic prodigies, wide-eyed celebrities, legitimate medical miracles, and predatory hucksters, it's a nation-spanning trip-from the jam-packed studios of New York to the athletic performance labs of the University of Oregon to the stage at the National Yoga Asana Championship, where Lorr competes for glory. The culmination of two years of research, and featuring hundreds of interviews with yogis, scientists, doctors, and scholars, Hell-Bent is a wild exploration. A look at the science behind a controversial practice, a story of greed, narcissism, and corruption, and a mind-bending tale of personal transformation, it is a book that will not only challenge your conception of yoga, but will change the way you view the fragile, inspirational limits of the human body itself.

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Customer Reviews

This is a very fair examination of Bikram yoga, the people who practice it, the people who teach it, and the man who popularized it. Neither a hatchet job that shares every piece of dirt to be found, nor an obeisant recital of Bikram's hyperbole laden claims. Just a smart, insightful, and grounded perspective on the yoga, the people who practice it, the people who teach it, and the man whose

name it bears.

Not being a yoga devotee, I was unsure of what this book would have to offer to the uninitiated, but a few snippets I've heard about Bikram from friends who practice intrigued me enough to pick it up. It reads like some of the best New Yorker articles - an esoteric subject that you'd normally shrug off becomes truly engrossing when Lorr takes the time to deconstruct it in many ways. The author's voice walks the line between insider & outsider in terms of respect for his subject (and actual immersion), while maintaining a skepticism that allows him to write very honestly about the good, bad, and bizarre aspects of the practice & the man Bikram. All in all, a really fascinating read.

I started practicing Bikram yoga in 2006. Within a year or two I was practicing 5-6 days a week and considered going to the teacher training. I went to see what it was like in 2009, in Las Vegas, I got to take a couple of classes (one with the man himself) and easily decided that this was not for me. I later trained with Jimmy Barkan, who is quoted a few times in this book. I still go to my local Bikram studio, but it is not the be all and end all. The author puts his finger on something I'd never quite articulated. Bikram doesn't churn out hundreds of good teachers at these trainings. He churns out people who can lead a good yoga sequence. There are good teachers out there, but they came to it by doing more than regurgitating the "dialogue." I enjoyed reading this, knowing what I do about Bikram, the yoga, and lots of yoga "die-hards" and it validates my decision to train elsewhere.

My teacher often reminds us that yoga is not a competitive practice, which has me wondering now if he has a history with Bikram yoga... A practice I have never and will never pursue. This book blew my mind! I think anyone who practices or is interested in yoga will enjoy this tome on the topic. The author applies several staple yogic traits to his writing: clarity, flow, honesty, humor, and insight. While sharing his lurid story into competitive yoga, you sympathize with his path because anyone motivated to "better themselves" has battled narcissism in some way. Thankfully, he found a way out of the bad and back to a grounded place for reflection and sharing. I have always been intrigued by the power of the mind and body - may it be its tolerance for pain, ability to defy reason, and the power to head itself. He explores this all and more! I highly recommend this book! A great read to follow is Human Movement Potential: Its Ideokinetic Facilitation.

This is the best available evaluation of Bikram Yoga by a gifted young writer. Somehow during the "jump" down the rabbit hole, Lorr managed to retain his sense of self. The message -- dump the

guru, keep the practice -- has undoubtedly liberated many yogis and studio owners to date. One of Lorr's many talents lies in stripping away the inflated rhetoric. This includes contextualizing the practice, evaluating benefits and naming sexual harassment for what it is despite Bikram Choudhury's Michael Jackson-like presentation (I'm cute, I'm a child, give me what I want NOW or I will obliterate you! "His followers BEG him for sex. What's the man to do?"). The latter is particularly creepy given that most of his trainees are women. Bottom line: There are many things to criticize about Bikram Yoga -- the heat, the expense, the guru, the seeming unstructured flow of knowledge, the extremism -- but there are no unhealthy people in the room. (OK, perhaps 1 1/2 exercise anorexics in the studio where I practice). Working in the mirror takes cojones. Turning inward is difficult, unpredictable and immensely rewarding. This is more than an entertaining take on extreme yoga from a young author, however. "That's my mother-in-law!" exclaimed a non-yogi friend upon reading the really excellent section on narcissism. "No! No! It's my ex-husband ..."

I used to do a lot of Bikram but when I left that practice (i.e. stopped doing it), I left it feeling a good deal of animosity towards the method. I can't stand the way the teachers parrot the Bikram dialogue even when it MAKES NO SENSE. I also attended a class that was 120 degrees and the teacher physically barred the door when a new student tried to leave the room. This is not "yoga" to me. Anyway, I tell you this so you will know I'm predisposed NOT to like Bikram and therefore to enjoy any criticism of the method and the man. That said, this book explores both the good and the bad sides of the practice and the man and was very interesting. It explained a lot about why the practice is the way it is (for eg why the teachers mindlessly parrot the dialogue even though it was created by someone whose first language is not english and at times it makes no sense). A very entertaining and informative book.

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