

Born to Run Discussion Prompts

by Janet Beck for Hubbard Center Workshops, August, 2011

These opening gambits are meant to be starting points with some obvious intentional overstatements and false dichotomies to encourage discussion and a variety of opinions to flourish. Enjoy!

Starting to think about Born to Run as:

- A Quest: "And all because in January 2001 I asked my doctor this: 'How come my foot hurts?'" (p. 8) Where does this simple question lead McDougall? What does he discover along the way? Have you ever been enticed by a question that led you on a journey of discovery? What do you hope to explore at ASU? What question do you hope ASU will answer for you?
- A Manipulation: Re: Nike's policy of "yanking best-selling shoes from the shelves every ten months": "Nike's aim is to triple sales by enticing runners to buy two, three, five pairs at a time, stockpiling in case they never see their favorites again." (p. 207n) Why and how does Nike manipulate the running shoe market? Name other ways in which the American consumer is manipulated?
- A Passion: "That was the real secret of the Tarahumara: they'd never forgotten what it felt like to love running." (p. 92) Discuss the passion some of the characters have for running. What is your passion? Will college help you find it?
- An Obsession?: "Fifty-five miles in one day. Her friends had to wonder, and worry. Did Ann have an eating disorder? An exercise obsession? Was she fleeing some subconscious Freudian demon by literally running away?" (p. 68) McDougall tells us that as many as "eight out of every ten runners are hurt every year." (p. 9) Is ultra running a healthy, almost spiritual exercise, or is it an obsession? Would you want to participate in extreme sports? Why do you think televised sporting events have evolved to "extremes"?
- A Morality Tale: "'The Raramuri have no money, but nobody is poor,' Caballo said. 'In the States, you ask for a glass of water and they take you to a homeless shelter. Here, they take you in and feed you. You ask to camp out, and they say, 'Sure, but wouldn't you rather sleep inside with us?'" (p. 109) McDougall draws sharp contrasts between the Tarahumara culture and ours. How does America fare in this comparison? What does McDougall seem to suggest we might learn from the Tarahumara?
- A Romp: "It was a five-word puzzle that led me to a photo of a very fast man in a very short skirt, and from there it only got stranger." (p. 7) McDougall has a great time telling this story. What strategies does he use as a writer to draw us into his tale? (i.e., quirky characters, quick stops and starts, lots of humor and a roundabout style that mirrors an ultra running course). Give some examples of these strategies. Talk about McDougall's tone. Does he pass judgment on any of the wilder activities of the runners or the Tarahumara? What role does a sense of humor play in your enjoyment of a book in general?
- A Paradox: "In Tarahumara Land, there was no crime, war, or theft. There was no corruption, obesity, drug addiction, greed, wife-beating, child abuse, heart disease, high blood pressure or carbon emissions. They didn't get diabetes, or depressed, or even old . . . Their cancer rates were barely detectable." (p. 14) And yet, one runner is killed by drug lords. Can you find other instances in the book of contradictions? What good would it be to have the healthiest society on earth if your life can be lost in a moment by roaming drug lords?
- A Cliff Hanger: The book's complete title is Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World has Never Seen." Would you pour your heart and soul into preparing and/or planning for a race that no one would see? What is the value in having such a race? In a market economy like ours is the simple joy of doing something reason enough to devote a great deal of time/energy to it? Is something devalued if it has little or no commercial value? Should it be?
- A Dream: ". . . this ninety-five-year-old man came hiking twenty-five miles over the mountain. Know why he could do it? Because no one ever told him he couldn't." (p. 50) What have you done in your life against all odds simply because no one told you couldn't do it?
- A Lifestyle: "Living on the edge wasn't about danger, he realized. It was about curiosity; audacious curiosity, like the kind Lance had when he was chalked off for good and still decided to see if he could build a wasted body into a world-beater. The way Kerouac did, when he set off on the road and then wrote about it in a mad, carefree burst he never thought would see the light of print. Looking at it that way, Jenn and Billy could trace a direct line of descent . . . to a pair of Pabst Blue-Ribbon-chugging Virginia Beach lifeguards. They were expected to accomplish nothing, so they could try anything. Audacity beckoned." (p. 144) What role does curiosity play in becoming an exceptional student? Would you work harder for a grade (the payoff) or the idea of having learned something even if it "wasn't on the test"?

Suggestions to practice a little of what Mc Dougall's book refuses to preach.

- Take advantage of the many ways Appalachian offers to get moving! Here are just a few:
- Volunteer to walk a dog at the Watauga County Humane Society
- Play intramural sports
- Climb a wall – UREC
- Take a class – (snowboarding, skiing, jogging, backpacking, mountain biking)
- Play Frisbee on Sanford Mall
- Hike trails on the Parkway (Moses Cone Park, Sims Pond)
- Work out at the Quinn or the Student Union or UREC
- Raft a river or climb a mountain with Outdoor Programs
- Swim in the pool or Jog on the indoor track at UREC
- UREC Yosef 5K – Registration Sept. 12 – 23, urec.appstate.edu under intramural sports