

Marathon: A novel

BY HAL HIGDON

Hal Higdon has used the megacharacter behind-the-scenes novel format originally developed by Arthur Hailey in *Airport* and other comprehensive novels to fashion a story—a really *big* story—of what goes on during the weekend of a big-city marathon.

Relying on both his decades of covering long-distance running and his expertise as a journalist, Higdon has assembled a cast of characters from every stratum of the marathon game and mixed them together in a tornado of time-sensitive schedules and flying feet.

The setting is Lake City, which has a striking similarity in all ways to Chicago, where a fall big-time marathon is also held and in which Hal Higdon has been intimately involved for decades. Higdon's plot takes place during the 72 hours leading up to the start of the race and continues for eight hours into the race—and beyond. There is also an epilogue in which Higdon explains what subsequently happens to each of the characters; more on that a little later.

Higdon did an enormous amount of research to make this novel come together and to make it as accurate as any single volume on this topic could be. He also called upon his decades inside the running game to come up with his characters, many of whom are based on real walking—and running—around people. Half the fun of the novel was trying to attach real-life people to the fictional characters. It becomes confusing, however, when he mixes and matches several real-life characters to make one imagined person.

As a veteran of novel writing earlier in his career (including the children's book *The Horse That Played Center Field*), Higdon does a credible job of telling a wide-ranging story. He uses the device of a countdown clock to keep his readers aware of just where we are in real time relative to the upcoming race start.

The character-rich plot nearly coalesces in creating an additional character—the race itself. And the race itself is where Higdon's storytelling talent shines. From the time the gun goes off to the incredibly fantastic finishes on both the men's and the women's side of the race, he moves the story along at a pace that rivets the reader. He takes us back and forth between different characters we've

come to know over the many pages leading to the race start and throws in plot twists that seem reasonable, at least until we approach the finish line. On both sides of the race, the finish sequences are something Hollywood producers would shake their heads over as being pretty outrageous. And the additional plot twist (Sorry; I couldn't resist.) as the four-hour marathoners approach the finish is sort of possible, but highly unlikely.

If the novel has one major distraction/drawback, it is the silly "romance" between 30-year-old virgin TV reporter Christine Ferrara and marathon director Peter McDonald. Several decades ago, curious as to what all the fuss was about over romance novelist Danielle Steel, I read two of her books. My conclusion was that they were juvenile novels with adult characters . . . a sort of continuation of teen-romance novels for girls who were now women. They were teen characters whose bodies had moved on to adulthood but whose emotions had stayed behind.

In much the same way, Higdon's love-at-first-sight-over-race-weekend romance interrupts two perfectly reasonable characters and turns them into the worst possible goofy lovebirds. They joust back and forth like preteens, reading into each others' actions motives that are better suited to middle school. The cringe factor grows in proportion to their burgeoning love.

But back to the race. If you ever wanted to know just what goes into a big-city, big-sponsor, big-press race behind the scenes as well as in front of them, Higdon has assembled the pieces into one huge structure. He has also managed to create some very interesting plot twists between characters and even throws in the world's biggest celebrity first-time marathoner ever: even bigger than Oprah, bigger even than Lance. It's a neat enough twist to the plot, although stringing the reader along for many pages by using the descriptor "Celebrity X" seems unnecessarily cryptic.

And back to the epilogue: In films like *Animal House*, the epilogue where we are let in on what happened later in life to each of the characters is amusing, perhaps the best part of the whole damned film. There is a similar sense of satisfaction in Higdon's epilogue, except for the fact that many of the runners we've been following through the whole thing never run another marathon. Fiona Flynn, Meghan Allison, Aba Andersson, and Joseph Nduku ended their marathon careers at Lake City. Most distressing. And certainly not the kind of plot twists that leads to a sequel. —*Rich Benyo*