

Step by Step: A Pedestrian Memoir

BY LAWRENCE BLOCK

Larry Block writes mystery novels—lots of mystery novels. Lots of mystery novel series starring a particular character: Matthew Scudder, Evan Tanner, Chip Harrison, Bernie Rhodenbarr, and more recently Keller, a contract killer. He has also written stand-alone novels, collections of short stories (Keller began as a series of short stories in *Playboy*), writing for performance, books for writers, and he's also edited some dozen anthologies. He's the poster-boy for "prolific," yet manages to maintain a high enough quality to his writing to be a 4-time winner of the prestigious Edgar and Shamus Award."

He is also a prolific pedestrian.

He started out as a prolific runner back in the first "running boom"—you know, the one that the know-it-all major media referred to as a "passing fad." He ran 10Ks and he ran marathons and he ran dozens of New York Road Runners Club road races; he lived and worked in Greenwich Village (and still does) and was prone to test his mettle against his Manhattan running mates at every possible opportunity.

Unfortunately, as often happens to enthusiastic runners, he began to develop a knee problem. But a quirky one—one that allowed him to run for a certain amount of time before it acted up. Eventually it became frustrating and in order to get around the unpredictable knee, Larry took a sideways step and began learning how to race-walk. He worked on it and became tolerably good at it.

He began entering ultras as a race-walker. He began trying 24-hour races on for size. He and his wife scheduled long vacations in Europe where they spent weeks walking across the undulating landscape.

All the ups and downs, the elation and the frustrations, the challenges and the little victories each of us has experienced while racing—primarily against ourselves and sometimes against other amateur athletes in our own age group—are here in spades.

Larry avoids the navel-gazing many amateur athletes engage in, and makes a nice mix of the practical and the philosophical, since the philosophical is so much a part of moving across the landscape under your own power, where you

spend an inordinate amount of time meeting and dealing with yourself—your strengths and your weaknesses, your goals and your disappointments, from the minor to the major.

Blisters developing during a rainy 24-hour race? Thirty minutes behind the leading guy in your age group? Darkness coming on? Another lap through the woods and no way to avoid squeeging through that damned mud puddle? My car parked over there in the lot and every six miles I'm made to walk past it and its dry interior? What the hell am I doing out here? Hell, maybe one more lap. If it goes as badly as the last one, I may bag it.

All the doubts and delirium of our crazy, social but aloneness sport are here, and presented in a manner and with an attitude that each of us can appreciate... because we are intimately familiar with it.

But the dominant theme to Larry's book is one of mortality. Every one of us knows that as we age our athletic abilities diminish. We know this intellectually, but if we've been at this long-distance stuff a long time, it takes us a long time to come to grips with and accept the reality that this slowing-down stuff is inevitable. Throughout the book, Larry wrestles with this treachery our body lays on us, and throughout he ain't a happy camper, but in the end is accepting of that which cannot be avoided. Some of his acceptance, however, is reluctant and humorous in a way that those of us who have diminished over the years can identify with. One paragraph will sum it up. Larry has traveled to Vancouver, Washington, just across the wide Columbia River from Portland, Oregon, and entered a low-key marathon:

“And it was a strange experience, a marathon but not a race, with a follow-the-directions element that gave it points in common with orienteering. I used racewalking technique, and I moved at my cruising pace, and it was humbling to note how many people who wore street clothes and carried backpacks and walked in a very ordinary nonracing fashion somehow managed to move at a faster pace than I. They were just walking, for God's sake, and they were leaving me in the dust.”

Larry's book leaves none of us in the dust; we're moving along with ya, Larry. Dammit, we're getting slow. But hey, at least we're still moving...