



Research Paper

## Mountain Biking as Adventure Therapy: A Psychological Reading of Jill Homer's *Be Brave, Be Strong: A Journey across the Great Divide*

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper attempts a thematic study of Jill Homer's nonfiction *Be Brave, Be Strong: A Journey across the Great Divide* in the light of the theoretical tool from psychotherapy called adventure therapy. It examines how the physical exertion and exhaustion results in gaining better understanding of one's inner self as well as one's immediate surroundings. It evaluates how physical suffering cleanses and heals the emotional anguish of the author and how she emerges victorious breaking the chains of her self-imposed subjectivity and dependency along with the withering of the author's adherence to the societal norms that tie her.

**KEYWORDS:** adventure therapy, mountain biking, extreme adventure

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Adventure therapy can be considered as a form of psychotherapy aimed at improving one's cognitive, social and emotional functioning with adventure activities as tools to achieve the end. Adventure therapy as a theory includes the theoretical formulations of Albert Bandura, John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Kurt Hahn and others. Encyclopedia of Theory and Practice in Psychotherapy and Counselling gives a definition for adventure therapy as follows: "Adventure therapy is a cognitive-behavioral-affective approach which utilizes a humanistic existential base to strategically enact change through direct experience through challenge" (22).

In the article titled "Outdoor Experiential Therapies: Implications for TR Practice", Alan W. Ewert, Bryan P. McCormick, and Alison E. Voight notes: "Adventure therapy refers to therapeutic interventions that utilize experiential and risk-taking activities, that are both physically and emotionally challenging, and usually involve an outdoor setting" (Ewert et al. 108). Adventure therapy demands active participation rather than mere spectatorship. They further note: "Clients are often required to take action rather than simply serve as spectators. This action is often holistic in the sense of involving physical, social and cognitive personal resources" (Ewert et al. 109). The outdoor, physical and adventurous activities act as "metaphors for life and as such, allow the participant to learn how to contend with them" (Ewert et al. 110). It educates the participants on "how to cope with anxiety and fear, and deal with unpredictable and uncertain outcomes in order to yield specific benefits and enhance personal growth and development" (Ewert et al. 110). Self analysis and introspection are fundamental to outdoor adventure pursuits.

Jill Homer is an American writer and a freelance editor with a degree in journalism. She was an ordinary woman working in weekly and daily newspapers until she discovered an outlet for her physical and psychological challenges- endurance mountain biking. She wasn't an athlete nor a risk-loving girl until her boyfriend Geoff convinced her to move to Alaska in 2005. She has chronicled her extreme adventures around the world in her memoirs including *Ghost Trails: Journeys through a Lifetime*, *Be Brave, Be Strong: A Journey across the Great Divide*, *Becoming Frozen: Memoir of a First Year in Alaska* and *Into the North Wind: A Thousand-mile Bicycle Adventure across Frozen Alaska*. *Arctic Glass: Six Years of Adventure in Alaska and Beyond* contains thirty three essays from Jill Outside- her online outdoor adventure journal.

### II. Mountain Biking and Adventure Therapy

Jill Homer's second book *Be Brave, Be Strong: A Journey across the Great Divide* is her personal account of the author's monumental life episode on a mountain bike racing through the Continental Divide in the

two thousand seven hundred and forty miles long mountain bike race called Tour Divide. She undertakes this race at the wake of the breakup of eight years' relationship with Geoff and at the time of her pain of separation and the moment of uncertainty that follows it. Jill and Geoff were lovers and companions in adventure pursuits. She recalls: "We exhausted our youth together. We called and backpacked together. We climbed mountains together. We learned to ride bicycles long distances together. We made the giant leap to Alaska together. We discovered the world together" (41). Thus ending the deep-rooted relationship was taxing for her and she was troubled with the turbulence it had caused in her inner emotional space. She notes: "But physical safety had become unimportant to me, and discomfort helped dull my emotional anguish" (51).

The Tour Divide race that Jill Homer undertakes is a race that follows "a series of logging paths, gravel roads and trails that ceaselessly ascend and descend North America's largest mountain range" (28). The Great Divide Mountain Bike Route is established by an organization called Adventure Cycling Association. It is an annual mountain bike race from Banff, Alberta to New Mexico along the Great Divide. The race demanded "the ability to ride a bicycle all day long for three weeks straight..." (29). The race was introduced to her by Geoff and they have planned to participate in it together. But as Geoff pulled himself away, she was left to attempt it alone. For her, endurance cycling becomes a form of therapy where she purges herself of the painful elements that weigh her down. She explicitly declares: "I tried to bury the pieces of myself that I longed to leave behind—the pieces that were careless, the shards that were weak, and the remnants that were terrified of the unknown" (11). She feels: "Normal people don't risk everything for an amateur bicycle race" (27).

Her resolve to contest in the Tour Divide was tested on varied grounds. The absence of a motivating presence like Geoff just before the start of the race, her senior's advice to sticking on to a nine-to-five job strictly binding her to the corporate system, her own physical limitation (a serious frostbite from her previous expedition), etc. were forces that were capable of pulling her away from the race. She surpasses them and notes: "My mind, so accustomed to its daily dose of endorphins, couldn't adjust to the sedentary life, and depression was starting to creep around the edge of my demeanor" (34). She was not ready to give up on the idea of the race and she feels: "My refusal to quit a job that I believed was holding me back, my failure to make my relationship work, my isolation in Juneau, and my resignation to spend the summer with a man who did not love me— I did not have to let these things define me. I was still a cyclist, and I still had the physical power to seek new places where I could leave my mistakes behind" (51).

Jill Homer's inner landscape has its reflection on the external environment as she struggles to overcome the emotional dependency she had on her boyfriend. She writes: "The road was as cold and empty as the space between Geoff and me. My emotions felt muted and barren, like the landscape, clinging to the vague if inevitable promise of spring" (53). She relied on her mountain bike races to heal her wounded inner self. She points out: "I took out my anger and hurt on a small mountain, mashing the pedals up a sandy road..." (61).

Solitude was a concern for her after their break up as they jointly ventured on adventure feats. She felt lonely on her desert drive to Fruita to hit the hundred and forty mile Kokopelli Trail. She notes: "Solitude seeped like stale rainwater into my core..." (74). She promised herself before the start of the race: "I would embrace my solitude, cycling into the deeper depressions of my thoughts that promised to haunt me on the long tour" (95).

Jill asserts that the ultimate quest in the Tour Divide is the "pursuit of that quiet place beyond solitude and suffering where I could see through my experiences and expectations into the heart of who I truly was" (132). The Tour Divide offered opportunities to form newer perspectives. She notes: "Altitude brought us an ability to see worlds that were completely new, and also remember the worlds we had nearly forgotten" (163). It is the difficulty or rather the adventure part that makes the Divide riding worth "of the soreness and fatigue and pain..." (164). She feels that vehicles not following the trail "would never see the mountains, never experience this intense downhill push, never feel the rush of thin air and hard wind and gaping gravity that threatened to tear the skin from my body" (164). She again writes: "...I longed to hold onto the deep silence that surrounded me on the open plateau. In its solitude the landscape kept me company, held me in peace, and showered me with stars" (197). She admits that she sought fear and solitude in her journey. She explicates: "I needed fear to quiet my ego, focus my mind and expose my true strengths. I needed solitude to reflect on how those strengths shaped my identity. The object has always been to unearth pieces of myself, new pieces of understanding and strength that I never realized were even out there for discovery" (339).

The trail demanded her sole focus on the track and thus her "capacity for hope was directed at maintaining the connection of rubber with dirt" (76). She comes to the understanding: "My mind understood that deeper needs trumped temporary pain. That quitting the Kokopelli trail probably meant quitting everything" (77). As she progresses on her mountain bike ride, she gets "supremely satisfied with my solitude, my slowness, and the stark simplicity of life on a bike" (78). In Jill's opinion, the race for the introspective types like her helps to "cut the challenge into workable parts and then condense the experience into something artful and enlightening" (114) and that "journey awaited in the rugged landscape of our minds" (114). She affirms the track

urges "even the most unapologetic dreamers to leave the shadowy worlds of their minds and think only in the simple absolutes of the present..." (115).

The physical hardships associated with the mountain bike race, even though difficult, had paved before her "the undeniably pleasant way to live" (97). Her physical exhaustion, loneliness and frustration were forgotten as new discoveries dawned on her. The feeling of tiredness, coldness and fear became "preferable to the disconnection and uncertainty I often wrestled with..." (96). She asserts: "The climb head reduced me to simple needs, childlike wonder and instinctual decisions" (96-97). Again she notes: "It's crazy, I thought, that people spend their lives in pursuit of complications such as love and wealth when they could enjoy a simple life of moving and existing- possibly the true path to happiness" (97). This indicates a mental shift from "vanity and desire to need and simplicity" (103).

The terrain, lack of shade, dehydration, fatigue, adverse environmental conditions, insects (flies, mosquitoes) and animals (dogs, bears) and the like are potential struggles and challenges that puzzle a long distance endurance cyclist. Sleep, shower, rest, etc. are also concerns of no less magnitude. Jill feels more connected with the outside space than her bodily space as she ponders beyond the known. She notes: "Therefore, the world and everything in it was nothing more than infinitely smaller particles of energy and empty space" (89). She continues: "The hardness of the world has stripped my needs down to the barest of essentials" (89). She again writes: "I became acutely aware that I was a small person in a big, mostly empty world" (94).

Jill Homer differentiates between experiences gained in places of comfort and on "a tight narrow trail" (115). She opines: "In places of comfort, everything people do is a result of everything they've been through. Perspectives are colored and blurred by past experiences" (115). She feels that "a moment is simply a moment, and a movement simply a movement" (115) and that there is "no room for vague indecision.... Either you swerve around a tree, or slam into it. Everything you did before that moment simply does not matter" (115).

As the struggles prompted Jill Homer to introspect the core of her existence, social conventions and personal appearance mattered little to her when she says: "... the intensely self-absorbed focus of the Tour Divide had a way of stripping away social norms and niceties" (174). She further adds: "I descended from not caring to not even understanding how the people around me might interpret that I smelled bad, or think I look like a hobo on wheels, or even possibly find me attractive" (174). Exposure to the outdoor adventures has the power to challenge pre-established norms of the society. When she had to answer the call of Nature, she runs to a sagebrush bush just five feet away from the road. Even though a truck passed by, she disregarded her need for privacy. She admits: "...I felt no sense of embarrassment. I was too deeply immersed in stress and struggle to care in the least about social propriety and image" (210).

As Jill rides the bike continuously, she becomes one with the bicycle. She writes: "The mechanicals in my bicycle and the injuries on my body felt deeply connected, as though the two weren't even fully separated from each other...I felt as useless without my bicycle as it would be without me" (211). About the adventurous endurance cycling, she opines: "It was the simplest kind of joy, born of raw freedom, blocked from interpersonal clashes and wanted with well-earned fatigue. It was joy free of analysis, free of consequence and free of guilt. It was the joy of being, the joy that all animals know, and the joy that self-aware humans only seem to find propped up against the boundaries of fear and turmoil" (82).

Jill Homer comes to the understanding that human kindness is the most luxurious comfort that anyone who toils could get and that it could not be bought with money. On the trail when her bicycle fails, five bike mechanics who are strangers fixed the bicycle and they charged far less than the work demanded. Kirsten at the Brush Mountain Lodge provided her food and accommodation. Jill learns that the kindness shown by strangers to her on the trail reflect "the far-reaching love that all people share, ultimately, and these threads of connection ensure that no one is truly alone" (339). But she successfully overcomes her dependency and attachment on Geoff, her ex-boyfriend. He had quit the Great Divide race the previous year at Kremmling. She promised herself that she "would not drop out in Kremmling" (237). She traversed the entire length of the course and completed the trail with a female course record without the support from Geoff. She openly admits: "I had officially ridden farther on the Great Divide than Geoff did, and it hit me as an enormous victory" (241).

### III. CONCLUSION

Jill Homer summarizes her Tour Divide as follows: "For all of the difficulties, the struggle, the pain and grief and occasional hopelessness, my life on the Tour Divide was a very good life. It was a full life, and every pedal stroke I made was a small decision to leave it behind" (335). The undertaking of the mountain bike race has helped her to come in terms with her past. She notes: "...my past was something that could never be taken away from me. It had happened, it had existed, and it had made me who I was - the kind of person who could ride my bicycle across more than 2,700 miles of rough and rugged terrain in twenty-four days. It was a beautiful past, sparked by adventure and surrounded by the most spectacular colors" (338). Even when Jill was unsure of herself and was battling the odds in her life, she was courageous enough to attempt it and complete it.

She proudly declares that the most wonderful gift that she gifted herself was "a preview of the brave and strong person waiting to emerge from my shattered identity" (340).

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