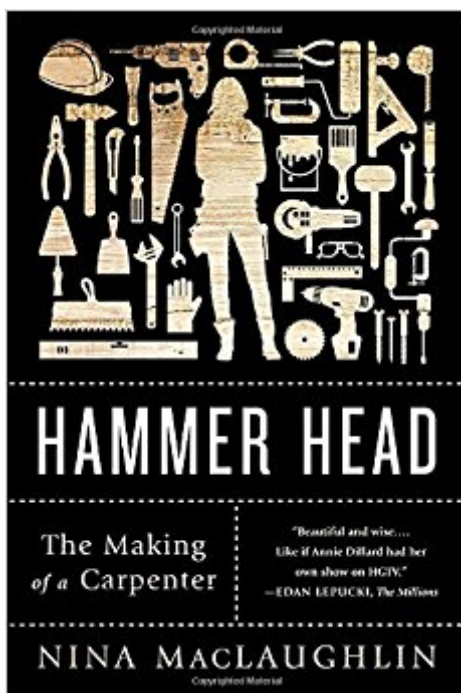


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Hammer Head: The Making Of A Carpenter



Synopsis

“Reading *Hammer Head*, like consuming Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*, feels like a crucial education.” —Isabella Biedenharn, *Entertainment Weekly*

Nina MacLaughlin spent her twenties working at a Boston newspaper, sitting behind a desk and staring at a screen. Yearning for more tangible work, she applied for a job she saw on Craigslist: Carpenter Assistant. Women strongly encouraged to apply despite being a Classics major who couldn’t tell a Phillips from a flathead screwdriver. She got the job, and in *Hammer Head* she tells the rich and entertaining story of becoming a carpenter. Writing with infectious curiosity, MacLaughlin describes the joys and frustrations of making things by hand, reveals the challenges of working as a woman in an occupation that is 99 percent male, and explains how manual labor changed the way she sees the world. We meet her unflappable mentor, Mary, a petite but tough carpenter-sage (“Be smarter than the tools!”), as well as wild demo dudes, foul-mouthed plumbers, grizzled hardware store clerks, and the colorful clients whose homes she and Mary work in. Whisking her readers from job to job—building a wall, remodeling a kitchen, gut-renovating a house—MacLaughlin examines the history of the tools she uses and the virtues and varieties of wood. Throughout, she draws on the wisdom of Ovid, Annie Dillard, Studs Terkel, and Mary Oliver to illuminate her experience of work. And, in a deeply moving climax, MacLaughlin strikes out on her own for the first time to build bookshelves for her own father. *Hammer Head* is a passionate book full of sweat, swearing, bashed thumbs, and a deep sense of finding real meaning in work and life. 8 illustrations

Book Information

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; 1 edition (March 21, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393352323

ISBN-13: 978-0393352320

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.6 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 7 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 61 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #617,298 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #61 in Books > Crafts, Hobbies & Home > Home Improvement & Design > How-to & Home Improvements > Hand Tools #324 in Books > Crafts, Hobbies & Home > Home Improvement & Design > How-to & Home

Improvements > Carpentry #779 in [Books > Crafts, Hobbies & Home > Home Improvement & Design > How-to & Home Improvements > Woodworking > Projects](#)

Customer Reviews

“Though MacLaughlin may be an apprentice carpenter, she is a master writer, with the rare combination of acute observation and astute word choice that characterizes writers like Annie Dillard or Joan Didion.” - Rebecca Steinitz, *Boston Globe*

“Beautiful and wise. . . . Like if Annie Dillard had her own show on HGTV.” - Edan Lepucki, *The Millions*

“MacLaughlin has hit the nail on the head | Stunning | You may very well read [Hammer Head] in one sitting.” - Caroline Goldstein, *Bustle*

“Inspirational . . . will have Wild fans throwing down their backpacks and picking up a hammer.” - Liberty Hardy, *Book Riot*

“An effortless blend of literary craft with woodcraft.” - Erin Shea, *Library Journal* (starred review)

“Inspiring.” - Time Out, (Critics Pick)

“Warm, wise, and authentically inspiring. No other book has made me want to re-read Ovid and retile my bathroom floor, nor given me the conviction that I can do both. I loved it.” - Rosie Schaap, author of *Drinking with Men*

“In this beautiful memoir about learning a trade, Nina MacLaughlin explores mortality, desire, the passage of time, and the meaning of work. She transcends the personal and makes us question what of our own works are built to endure. This book is a thing well-made certainly is.” - Philip Connors, author of *Fire Season*

“Nina MacLaughlin built a dream by becoming a carpenter, and transformed her life. Hammer Head is her exquisitely inspiring story. I loved it.” - Lynne Cox, author of *Swimming to Antarctica*

Nina MacLaughlin grew up in Massachusetts and lives in Cambridge, where she works as a carpenter. Formerly an editor at the *Boston Phoenix*, she has written for the *Believer*, *Bookslut*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and elsewhere.

There are some books that you read that make you view things differently. This is one of them. For a long time I have felt that the rat race is perhaps not for me but I have had no idea about what I would enjoy doing as an alternative. This book has genuinely given me a path that I think I want to follow. Giving up a stable income to go and do something that you love is always a hard decision but this book charts Nina’s progress as she does just that. It’s a great insight into her thoughts as she gave up a secure job to work as a carpenter. I enjoyed the fact that she was simply working as

a carpenter but she was doing everything relating to construction jobs. Her mentor is fantastic and watching Nina develop her skills over time was great. I also liked the tool history lessons given throughout and found the style of writing to be relaxed, descriptive and engaging. If you see my other recent reviews you'll notice there are some woodworking books and tool reviews cropping up. This book has genuinely inspired me to plan ahead towards a career working with wood and to escape a day-to-day job which pays the bills but doesn't inspire me. I highly recommend this to anyone who works hard in an office and dreams of escaping to do something different, even if it isn't carpentry!

This made a good Book Club book. Nina McLaughlin writes well and her experience is unique. I appreciated her staying focused on the process of becoming a carpenter, not wandering off into analysis of the people, her relationships etc. At the same time she shows that learning to live with the inevitable mistakes she made, learning that botching a job then correcting it is part of the process. And she transferred that knowledge to her relationships. My Book Club jumped into a discussion of our own careers, what other careers might have appealed to us. After 10+ years of meeting we learned new things about each other. Very satisfying.

It took me three days - part time - to finish the book and when I saw that I was almost to the end, I felt a loss. I had gotten to know these two women as if they were old friends and I was going to miss them. For 3 days, whenever I picked up the book, I couldn't stop and the pages went fast. So did the time, so engrossed was I in the images and feelings I was made to experience by this wonderful writer. I now have memories of her life, as if I had lived it. Read this and find out for yourself. These are all the words that come to me. I am empty, but happy, and I have learned, about carpentry - and life.

I read Hammer Head by Nina MacLaughlin and absolutely loved it. Honest and heartfelt storytelling that provides amazing insights about going from here to there in a career change, and well beyond that. There are no overdramatics in this work -- it explores change, disillusion and disappointment and the inherent pressure of a ticking clock, and working to find what's meaningful in life, slowly and not so surely, with diligence, hard work, and a willingness to listen and learn. And it's not all about hitting you over the head with lessons learned and metaphors -- the writing is much too good for that. Just a wonderful exploration of the learning process, and all that going through it presents to us and informs how we think about how we live our lives. I'm still always looking for the board stretcher

(will make sense after you've read the book). This book inspired me to think deep about how I handle things when I can't find it.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book on several different levels. Nina MacLaughlin is a superb writer; her years in journalism clearly giving her the ability to write sparingly but descriptively, she has an excellent sense of audience as she takes the reader with her on this slice of life journey. Being a Bostonian I have read countless pages describing our city, I felt she captured the "everyday" Boston, its quirks both geographical and human, she gives Boston texture and sharp edges, not the "museum", touristy feel so many writers use. Her own story is equally compelling, making the giant leap from newspapering to carpentry might not seem so vast until you realize the context, she was an entire novice and had no experience at all in the field. MacLaughlin captures the other characters in the book with great realism and humanity, one would love to meet Mary her boss as well as fellow tradespeople, family members and clients, they all have dimension and by the end of the book they feel like old friends. Oh, and if you're a lover of tools, this book is for you. Using her reportorial skills you find yourself learning about and appreciating the tools of the trade, and it's well balanced - just enough information to hold your interest without boring you with unnecessary detail that could only be appreciated by the true tool wonk. As a reader you will enjoy this journey, and the hours you spend with Ms. MacLaughlin.

Nina is an excellent writer who does a great job of chronicling her transition from writer to carpenter. Very enjoyable read...not overly technical... she tells us enough about the job and its pitfalls that we understand that this was not an easy move to make. But then this book is about more than just the job, it's also about reinventing yourself in a time where that may be a requirement to survive. She's quick to admit when she feels vulnerable, and not too modest to brag about a job well done. I follow her on Tumblr - her blog name there is Carpentrix - and suggest you do as well.

Being a female carpenter myself, it's amazing to hear a woman describe a very similar experience to my own! This is quite rare, I only know one other female carpenter! Nina does such a great job describing her experience. Loved the book!

The carpenter parts were the most interesting. Seems like she had lots of opportunity to grow, not sure she realized it. Contains a lot of extra side analogies and historical information that distracted rather than added to the story.

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