

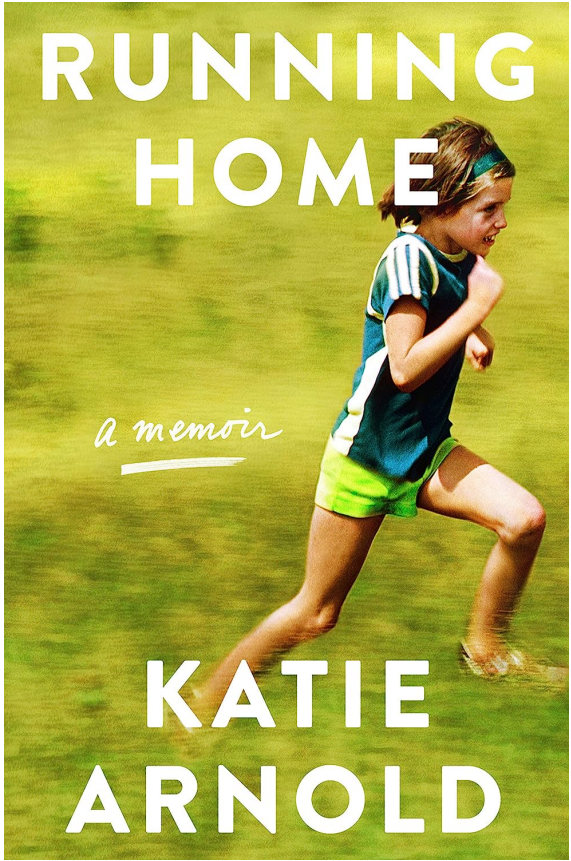
BOOK REVIEWS

Running Home

About the Book

- **Author:** Katie Arnold
- **Reviewed By:** Elizabeth Boyle
- **Genre:** [Nonfiction](#)
- **Publisher:** [Random House](#)
- **Published:** 2019
- **Pages:** 384

Book Review



In August of 2018, Katie Arnold finished the iconic Leadville Trail 100 Run in a time of 19:53:40. She was the first female across the line that day, nearly ninety minutes ahead of the second female finisher, and eleventh overall—and this after breaking her leg in a white-water rafting accident in Idaho in 2016. The day after the Leadville Trail 100 Run, *Runner’s World* published a brief article on the race, naming both Rob Krar, the top male finisher, and Arnold as winners in the headline, but covering Arnold’s accomplishment in what readers, in the comments section, were quick to call out as an “also-ran” style mention. Of the thirty-two comments posted, twenty-six were critical of the minimal coverage of Arnold. “Where is the story on Katie Arnold?! More please!” one reader commented. “Runner’s world, if there are two winners, why only the picture and history of the guys?”

another reader wrote.

In fact, before winning Leadville, Arnold would also have finished writing *Running Home*, her memoir about running, her relationship with her father, and her identity as a mother. In March of 2019, the memoir was published by Random House. *Where is the story on Katie Arnold?* Here it is, told in Arnold’s own words, in a voice she’s had years to develop as a managing editor and contributor for *Outside* magazine. A reflective look into both Arnold’s life and the world of ultrarunning, *Running Home* comes as close to answering the almost embarrassingly simple yet difficult question *why do we run?* as any story seemingly can.

At 384 pages, *Running Home*, itself, unfolds much like a long run. “Running is linear, almost tiringly so,” Arnold writes in the prologue. Structurally, the book also follows a linear route through time—its three parts, “Leavings,” “Shadows,” and “Upward,” take readers through Arnold’s childhood, early career, marriage and motherhood, and her entrance into the world of ultrarunning. At the same time, the trajectory of *Running Home* often mimics the train of thought of a distance athlete mid-run. The runner’s mind, Arnold clarifies, “takes a more circuitous route: jumping from the past to the future and back again, like a movie reel or a time machine. Sometimes it projects a whirring jumble of memories and impressions, zooming in on minute details. Other times it pans out and makes cinematic leaps.”

Repeatedly, Arnold, too, circles back to her past, often to memories related to her father—contemplating his presence and absence in her life, his influence on decisions she’s made, both personally and professionally, and his death from kidney cancer in 2010. A photographer for *National Geographic*, David Arnold left behind an abundance of family photographs, a select number of which are included throughout *Running Home*. Fused together, the words, images, and motion in this memoir work to create a parallel not only between Arnold and her father, but between the artistry of the runner and the writer—or the photographer.

Constructing such a parallel, at least well, can be difficult, precisely because running is one of those endeavors that lends itself almost too easily to metaphor. Without constraint, all of the roads taken (or not), mountains climbed, walls hit, etc. edge toward cliché. But readers want some metaphor. And as do runners, who of course run, among hundreds of other reasons, for the metaphor of it. But we don’t want too much. Arnold walks (case in point), this line well, writing about the act of running as she, herself, knows it, which is poetic enough. While she does sometimes overstate the lessons the narrative offers on its own, her honest, lively prose captures the spirit of the sport in a way that will feel like companionship to fellow runners of any distance. “But I’m always more here after I have been there,” Arnold writes, and even though “there” for her, most often, means the trails in Santa Fe, trails far from those in southeast Michigan where I run these days, I like to think I know what she means.

What Arnold’s memoir is really about, however, is family. The running is secondary, an access point into the more complicated, contradictory details of her personal life. For Arnold, running both stifles and releases the grief that consumes her after losing her father, and the uncertainty, love, and regret that thump through her family’s history and the pages of this book. What hiking the Pacific Crest Trail is to Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*, ultrarunning is to Arnold’s *Running Home*.

“Overlong,” a *Kirkus* review called the book, a criticism I also found myself entertaining while reading. But the pacing and length feel appropriate for the subject matter. Moreover, I imagine the pages that would get cut in a compressed version of the memoir would come from its more unwieldy middle section, pages where Arnold candidly covers her postpartum anxiety, the guilt that accompanies the feat of balancing the roles of mother/wife/writer/ultrarunner, and the answer to the “one question that people always ask [her] about running alone . . . *Aren’t you scared?*” Considering that the first ten books Google Search lists as “best running books” are all written by men, I’m grateful these pages are there.

Regardless, one gets the sense Arnold wouldn’t care, at least not too much, if someone called her book “overlong”—or anything else for that matter. Her memoir reads as if she has written it for herself—to discover who she is, who her father was, and how their two stories keep “coming together and separating, like mirror images of the same parabola, two lines approaching and then diverging over and over.” Only when Arnold takes the time to explain running jargon, such as getting “chicked” or how, among ultrarunners, finishing “DFL” or “dead fucking last” is a point of pride, does the reader remember that Arnold is aware of their presence. By the same token, the last lines of *Running Home* read less like conclusion and more like assurance that Arnold will go on searching, writing, and running no matter who else is along for the ride. With a first-place finish at Leadville and two other 2018 wins—the Angel Fire Endurance and Jemez Mountains Trail Run—this certainly appears to be the case.



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