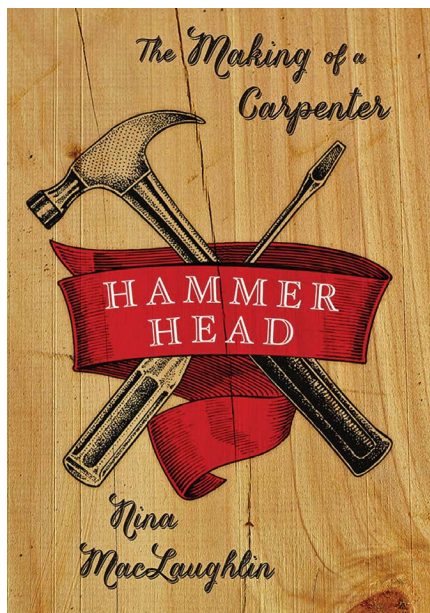


BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

What Are You Doing With Your Life?

In her recent book, *Hammer Head: The Making of a Carpenter* (W.W. Norton, 2015), Nina MacLaughlin brings the reader into the intimate details of her decision to change careers, leaving behind life as a newspaper journalist and embracing a profession in the building trades. It's a book that certainly should be handed to every aspiring carpenter. But veterans won't be disappointed.

I dove into the book with wary curiosity, half expecting an account tinged with irony, something like the *Nanny Diaries* or *Turning Tables*—two popular books that take the reader on a woman's venture into temporary work, written by educated twenty-somethings who acknowledge their dip in social status on entering a service job. Instead, I encountered in *Hammer Head* a sincere and respectful account that evokes the author's genuine awe in learning to build.



“... we bounced to the next job and the next. Each one, over some months, aided in lifting the curtain that had obscured the physical world closest to me. Now, there were doorways, shelves and walls. Wood, glass, plaster, paint. The awareness, this new noticing had an intense effect on my sense of my own body and place in the world. I wasn't just my own human sack of flesh, inhabiting mental space. There were walls around me, and thresholds. There were windows that let in light and sound ... I knew how many pieces of wood framed those windows and doorways, how they were put together ...”

This new-found understanding, which lets her see beyond the surface of things and understand how the world is put together, seeps into the reader, bringing confirmation for those already working here, and inspiration for anyone aspiring to live life fully. MacLaughlin makes it clear she's in the trade for keeps (as much as any of us can say that at any particular turn of life) and her growing awareness is no passing fancy. It's this open look—her ability to invoke the beginner's mind—that makes this a valuable read even for crusty old veterans who have chosen to, but might not remember why they do, work with hands and heart.

The book is organized around sections, each named for a tool and appropriately starting with Tape Measure, then followed by Hammer, Screwdriver, Clamp, Saw, and Level. Yet there is no rote discourse on how to use each tool. Each section is an essay that tracks MacLaughlin's evolution from helper to carpenter with riffs on a theme, such as the distance by which one mea-

sures not only boards but also one's progress, or the pressure you put on yourself when the work suddenly dries up, and you are faced with examining what you are doing with your life.

MacLaughlin is not afraid of challenging us, as when she tackles screwing up—the inevitable blunders on the job that may occur more frequently for the novice, but that we must all learn to recover from throughout our careers. Surprisingly, she also is not afraid to be provocative, as when she invokes, in the same section, screwing as it relates to sex.

It's a riff that brings in the glaring issue of gender differences on the job, as she grapples with how her choice to embrace a “dirty job,” so to speak, challenges her experience of being and wanting to be an attractive female. This is perhaps the bravest part of her book. It's a candid accounting that few may want to acknowledge, yet she addresses the issue gracefully. It's hard not to feel humbled by her honesty, and immediately we feel more comfortable for her having aired the issue, whether we are prone to be sensitive to it on the job or not. Refreshingly, though, gender is not a theme that dominates the book. Respect for the work, and acquiring skill, even finesse and fluidity, in the work, and bringing a house to life, are all more prominent themes.

When I caught up with MacLaughlin on the phone, she acknowledged that, while she expected feedback on her book to come mostly from women entering the trades, the majority of responses have actually come from seasoned tradesmen thanking her for bringing them back in time to their own experience of starting out in the trades, and reminding them why they chose this life path.

Clayton DeKorne is editor of JLC.