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## Book Review: Has Comfort Made Us Weak?

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# BOOK REVIEWS

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Scott Carney, *What Doesn't Kill Us: How Freezing Water, Extreme Altitude, and Environmental Conditioning Will Renew our Lost Evolutionary Strength* (New York: Rodale Press, 2017).

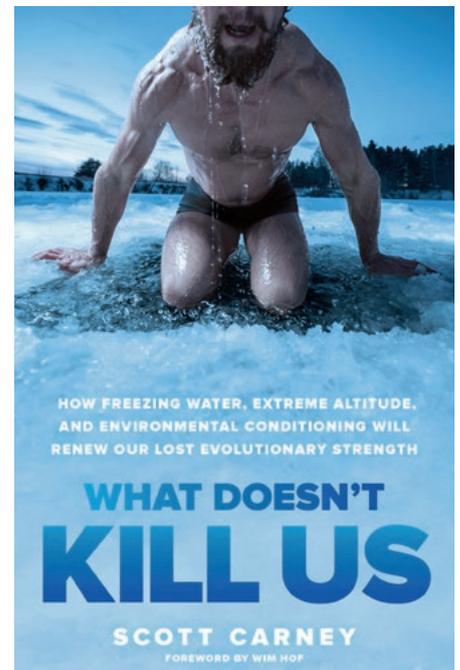
**H**ow was it possible for our ancestors to wander out of Africa “across frozen mountains and over parched deserts with only a whisper of technology?” (xv). What made it possible for Samoset, on a freezing March day in 1621, to walk into the Plymouth colony dressed only in a loincloth and moccasins? Do you ever wonder whether humans have lost some of our useful evolutionarily developed mechanisms for survival and endurance? Dutch adventurer Wim Hof thinks so, but claims to have developed ways to regain our lost resilience. His techniques include swimming in ice water, meditating in snow, intense breathing exercises and climbing Mount Everest in shorts. Hof says that he can teach people to consciously control their autonomic nervous and immune systems, contrary to traditional modern science, which has declared this impossible.

In his book, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, author Scott Carney sets out to debunk Hof's claims. Carney has built his investigative career discrediting false prophets, exposing fake regimens and chronicling tragic frauds such as the Diamond Mountain cult. After his first meeting with Hof, Carney remarks that Hof “speaks in a familiar creole of New Age mumbo jumbo” (3) and that Hof’s “grandiose and self-congratulatory claims” made it easier to “ponder the charlatan idea” (3). However, Carney felt that he owed Hof the courtesy of actually trying part of the program.

After a week of training, Carney could hold his breath much longer and do many more pushups, lost weight quickly and built his endurance. He was able to hike up a snowy hillside shirtless and in shorts while staying warm. Carney decided to investigate more deeply. He studied Hof and his strange story. As a teenager, on a lark, Hof jumped through a thin layer of ice into a frigid river. The exhilaration of that experience, along with 20 years of studying Vedic and Buddhist texts, motivated him to develop his own techniques.

For Carney, one key to understanding Hof's exploits is the idea of hijacking or *hacking* the body's autonomic nervous system. We use drugs to hack our bodies every day, short-circuiting some systems to stimulate others beyond their current capacities. We do skydiving or, more modestly, carnival rides, to hack our fear responses. We hack the body's programs the way a computer whiz redesigns the intentions on a microchip.

Beyond the ordinary, the author investigates a number of extreme hacks, such as the Extreme Pool Training (XPT) of the legendary super surfer Laird Hamilton (85), a hack technique that short-circuits an autonomic reflex (50) and allows him to stay warm in cold ocean waters. Carney also gives us a view into the startling world of suffer-fests (captured in the recently released movie “Rise of the Sufferfests”) and “tough” competitions. These obstacle marathons are races that usually include at least one leg of swimming through muddy ice water, often under barbed wire, in a course designed to plumb the body's limits and act as a transformative



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experience. “The race isn’t only about overcoming barriers; it’s about emerging a totally different person” (179). Although often sold as tests of masculinity, currently up to 40% of the participants in these obstacle course races are women.

Another Hof-like movement that attracts the author is the free fitness November Project started in Boston in 2011, where people do exercise routines year-round, in public places and often

than the typical 20 year old” (14). BAT causes the body to burn white fat, which the body normally stores for later emergencies. BAT’s ability to trigger the burning of white fat on command allows followers of Hof’s regime to stay warm in cold temperatures and lose weight. The “on command” part, is what Hof teaches.

Hof asserts that “our bodies have grown weaker as a result of clinging to comfort” (217). Carney interviews several

Carney observes: “Despite my experiences with the Hof method, it still seems too good to be true and the skeptic in me still wonders if perhaps it is ...I want my own ... impossible feat that I can overcome for myself” (109–10). And so the book culminates in the author’s expedition—in shorts and often shirtless—up Mount Kilimanjaro, in record time.

More convincing for most readers, however, will be the scientific evidence accumulated from the repeated experiments on Hof, his followers and mice, which shows that Hof’s techniques actually work. “Hitherto,” one recent article in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (May 2014) starts, “both the autonomic nervous system and innate immune system were regarded as systems that cannot be voluntarily influenced. The present study demonstrates that, through practicing techniques learned in a short-term training program, the sympathetic nervous system and immune system can indeed be voluntarily influenced” (104).

Hof’s method takes us one more step away from the mind/body dualism that dominated much of western philosophy for so long and closer to Dutch philosopher Spinoza’s assertion of the oneness of the material that makes up the human mind and body.



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on snowy steps and paths. As one of the founders, Bojan Mandaric, declares: “The entire human race has been conditioned to think that the outdoors is dangerous. Or that working out in the cold is lunacy. But guess what? This is something that people have been doing for hundreds of thousands of years. We were made for it” (153).

Or, perhaps, we can remake ourselves for it. One result of Hof’s training program that has been intensely studied is the buildup of “mitochondria-rich brown adipose tissue” (13) (BAT), or “brown fat.” Researchers discovered that Hof had developed so much BAT, apparently due to his repeated exposure to cold, that he could, on command, “produce five times more heat energy

seriously ill people who have come to Hof as a last resort. They provide startling testimonials of the changes Hof’s techniques have brought about. Patients with Parkinson’s, Crohn’s Disease, rheumatoid arthritis, and Type-II diabetes describe using the Hof method to “strengthen environmental signals to override failing neurology” (128). His exercises seem especially effective on autoimmune diseases. Hof’s philosophy suggests that the parts of ourselves that are not under our conscious control fail, get weak, or even attack us: “without something to fight against, the body will fight itself” (114).

Still, amidst all this evidence, Carney maintains a healthy skepticism. After trying the program for a long time,