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SEP 4, 2015 : JORDAN BOWMAN

ADVICE

What "A Walk in the Woods" Gets Wrong About Thru-Hiking and the Appalachian Trail

After years of delays, the film version of Bill Bryson's bestselling 1998 novel has finally crawled into theaters, providing millions of moviegoers the opportunity to see the grandeur of the Appalachian Trail on the big screen. Yet while the film tells the story of a thru-hike attempt gone awry, that doesn't mean that it gets all of the facts straight. Whether due to dramatic license or simply getting it wrong, there are more than a few details in the film that will make A.T. thru-hikers scoff into their oatmeal.

This isn't an indictment of the movie itself—none of us at *Appalachian Trials* claim to be movie critics. We just want to set the record straight when it comes to something we *do* know: the ins-and-outs of being a thru-hiker. We don't want any aspiring thru-hikers getting the wrong idea before heading off on their own adventures.

Heads up: if you're sensitive to **movie spoilers**, we'll be discussing almost every aspect of the film here.

Whether you've seen the movie, read the book, or just want to have the facts set straight, read on: we've got a lot of trail to cover…

The Dangers of the A.T.

The film:After Bryson has announced his plan to hike the A.T. and begins gathering his gear, he returns home to find that his wife has oh-so-helpfully compiled a stack of articles and books reporting the dangers he will undoubtedly encounter. With grave seriousness, the camera lingers on headlines about bear attacks, decomposing bodies, and ritualistic sacrifices carried out by cultists with a kink for hiker blood.

Bryson studies up on the ways he might perish during his A.T. adventure. Image courtesy of Route One Films and Wildwood Enterprises.

The reality: Yes, living in the outdoors definitely comes with inherent dangers, and several of those headlines may have been pulled directly from any number of news outlets. It's an unfortunate truth—where there are people, there is the potential for crime. And yes, bears do occasionally attack human beings, though such encounters are rarely fatal. But when taking every aspect into account, life on the trail is less dangerous than almost any city in the United States: the Appalachian Trail Conservancy states that "you are likely safer on the A.T. than in an automobile on your way to the trailhead."

> ***Related reading****: 3 Very Real Threats on the Appalachian Trail*

Most of the dangers on the A.T. can be avoided entirely with adequate preparation, and the National Park Service has provided an excellent checklist to help maximize your safety on and enjoyment of the trail.

Trail Completion Numbers

The film:In an attempt to convince his father to abandon his ideas of thru-hiking, Bryson's son states that "less than 10% of hikers" actually succeed in completing their hikes.

The reality: The number of successful thru-hikes has drastically increased over just the past decade, with **26% of northbound hikes, 29% of southbound hikes, and a whopping 57% of flip-flop hikes being successful** in 2014.

Hiking Alone

The film:After experiencing the terror of the aforementioned list, Bryson's wife Catherine leaves him a short-but-decisive ultimatum: "You are not doing this alone." Bryson agrees that such an endeavor on his own would be a death wish, so he calls everyone he knows that might share in his adventure/keep the boogeymen away.

The reality: Most thru-hikers start out by themselves, though groups often form quite quickly. Those who seek solitude can find it easily, but if you fear being by yourself, take heed—close to 3,000 aspiring thru-hikers were on the trail in 2014, and those numbers have been steadily rising every year.

Not Everyone on the A.T. is a Jerk

The film:Pretty much everyone in the film, including Bryson and Katz, appears to have a social disorder of some kind, making them oblivious to others' emotions. This makes an A.T. thru-hike seem to be more about dodging other people than it is about enjoying everything the trail has to offer, including your fellow hikers.

Mary Ellen (played by Kristen Schaal) lectures Katz (Nick Nolte) and Bryson (Robert Redford) on how to be a "real" hiker. Image courtesy of IMDB.

The reality: While you can always find "that guy" when the crowd gets big enough, the majority of people on the A.T. are affable and thrilled to be sharing one of their passions with fellow outdoor enthusiasts. I can count on one *finger* the number of people who went out of their way to inform me that my gear/hiking style/food consumption/hairstyle wasn't up to their standards. Everyone else remembered one simple rule: **hike your own hike**, which means you should complete your journey in a way that is most satisfying to you *without taking away from the enjoyment of those around you*.

Not Everyone in the South is a Hillbilly/Confederate Soldier Wannabe

The film:Whenever Bryson and Katz step off of the trail in the South, they inevitably encounter one of the South's premier stereotypes: a 300-pound waitress in Georgia, another 300-pound adulteress and her similarly-sized redneck husband in Virginia (sensing a theme here?), and a restaurant full of Civil War reenactors adorned in Confederate soldier uniforms are just a few examples.

The reality: While examples of these walking stereotypes do exist (source: I live in Georgia), most people in the south are remarkably unremarkable—aside from the Southern "twang" and the tendency to refer to every soft drink as a "Coke," of course.

The Thru-Hiker's Wardrobe

The film:Bryson sports a wide variety of shirts, pants, pajamas, and even a bathrobe at various points throughout his hike, and they are almost always clean, wrinkle-free, and with designer labels clearly in view. The majority of his shirts also seemed to be made from cotton, usually a stylish flannel button-up.

Ruggedly stylish? Yes, but a day in the rain with cotton clothes might convince you to ditch the fashion sense. Image courtesy of Route One Films and Wildwood Enterprises.

The reality: The amount of clothes Bryson carried would have likely added over 15 pounds to his pack weight—and that isn't even including winter base layers, puffy jackets, and rain coats. The majority of thru-hikers I met carried two sets of clothes: a dirty pair for hiking, and a cleaner/dryer pair for camp. By the time a northbounder reaches Virginia, neither set will likely be in very good condition anymore.

> ***Related reading****: Our Suggested Appalachian Trail Thru-Hiker Gear List*

And if you're thinking about carrying cotton clothes, don't: cotton is almost useless when it gets wet (read: you will get wet) and takes forever to dry. Nothing says "inexperienced hiker" more clearly than someone coming up the trail in blue jeans and a flannel shirt, no matter how rugged you think it makes you look.

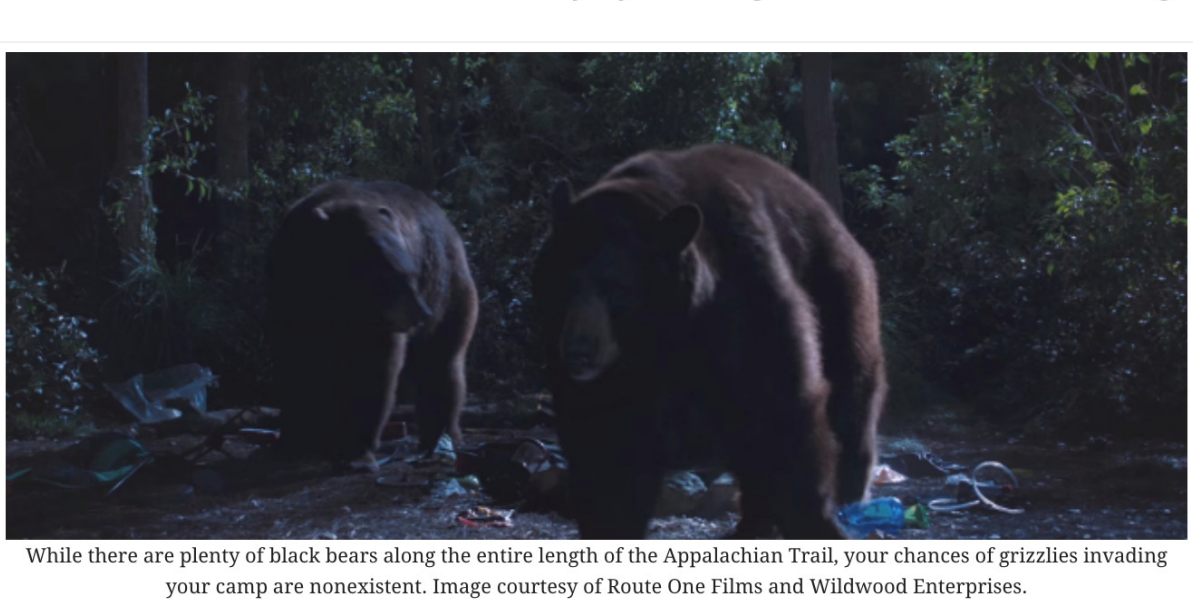
Southbounders… in April?!

The film:Before reaching the Smoky Mountains, Bryson and Katz meet up with a "southbounder," the term for a thru-hiker heading—you guessed it—from north to south.

The reality: It is *highly* unlikely that a northbound hiker starting in April would run into any southbound thru-hikers before at least the halfway point—most southbounders start sometime between May and August. Judging by the hiker's clean clothes and lack of the telltale thru-hiker scruff/deterioration, my guess is that this hiker is actually a misnamed section hiker.

There are No Grizzly Bears on the A.T.

The film:While camping in Shenandoah National Park, Bryson and Katz are awoken in the middle of the night when two bears invade their campsite (note: Bryson and Katz apparently just left all of their garbage and cooking equipment out on the ground, a *big* no-no when it comes to Leave No Trace Principles). The know-it-all Bryson quickly identifies these bears as "grizzlies" before he and Katz scare them away by shaking their tents and screaming.



While there are plenty of black bears along the entire length of the Appalachian Trail, your chances of grizzlies invading your camp are nonexistent. Image courtesy of Route One Films and Wildwood Enterprises.

The reality: Unless you find one in a zoo, your probability of finding a grizzly bear on the A.T. rests somewhere between 0% and not a chance. Black bears, on the other hand, are active along the entire length of the A.T. In order to minimize your chances of a bear encounter—and what to do should it happen—check out this article for some helpful hints.

Contacting Home

The film:While Bryson is on the trail for at least two months, we only see him contacting his wife once via a hotel landline. Later he comments on how much he misses his wife, indicating that he has not spoken with her since beginning his endeavor. Couldn't a successful writer afford, I don't know, a Nokia flip phone or something?

The reality: This detail was likely overlooked when the screenwriter adapted the novel, which was published back in 1998—a time when cell phones weren't an everyday part of life, and mobile signal was virtually nonexistent in the Appalachians. That is absolutely not an issue in the modern era, when it is more surprising when someone *doesn't* have a mobile phone somewhere in their pack. And aside from a few secluded areas—northern Maine, the Smoky Mountains, and a few others—phone reception is present for almost the entire length of the trail. If you don't contact home during your thru-hike, it won't be because you can't: it will be because you don't want to.

That puts a new spin on Bryson's character, doesn't it?

McAfee Knob Has Been Relocated, Apparently

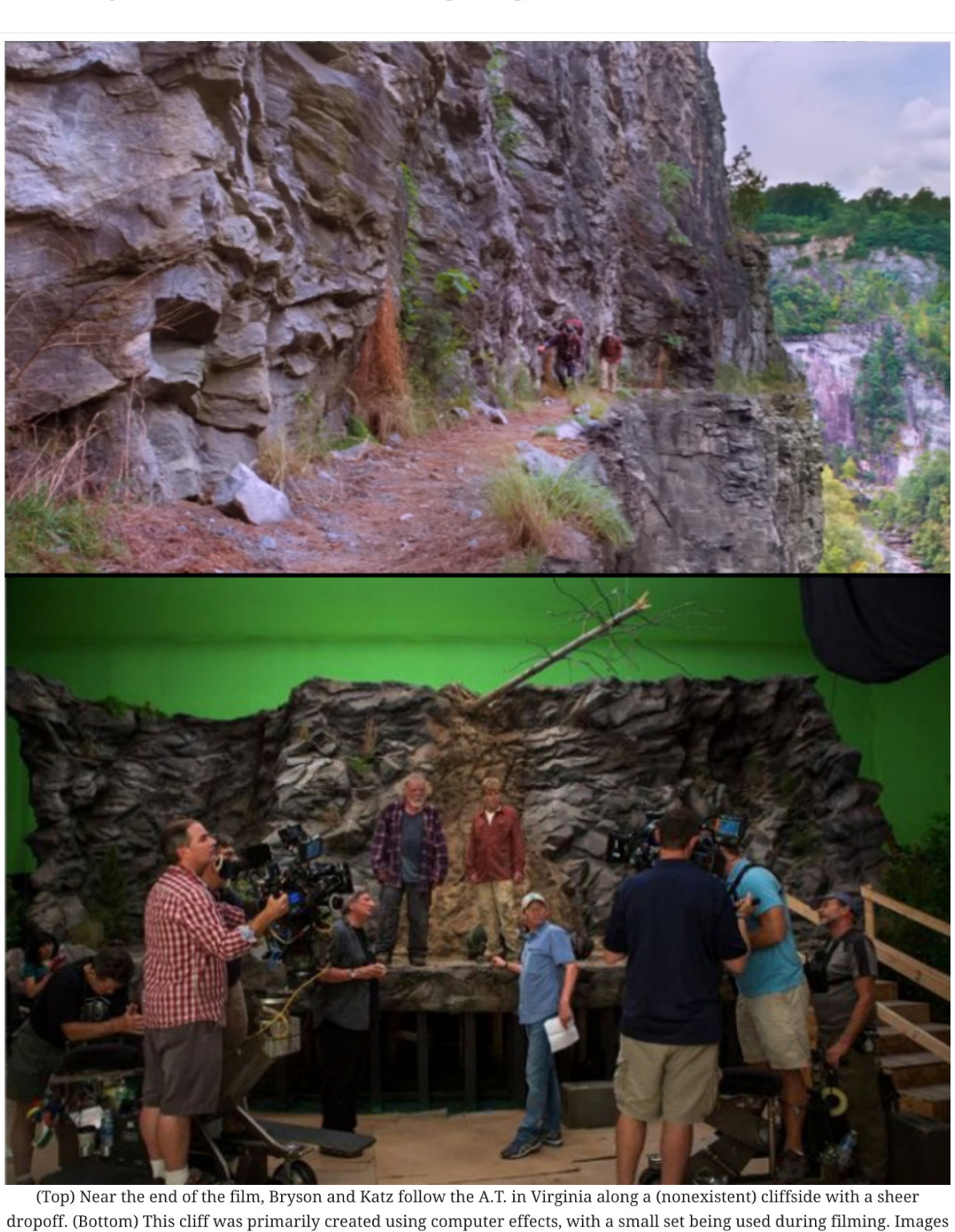
The film:Sometime after exiting Shenandoah, Bryson and Katz stumble upon McAfee Knob, the most photographed location on the entire trail.

The reality: McAfee Knob is over 150 miles *south* of Shenandoah National Park's border. The filmmakers seemed to have relocated it for dramatic impact, though those familiar with this landmark will probably have a good laugh—that would have meant that Bryson and Katz had accidentally been hiking south for around two weeks.

A Walk on the (Imaginary) Cliffside

The film:Somewhere in northern Virginia, the A.T. skirts the edge of a perilous cliff with a sheer drop-off of around 100 feet or more. Bryson and Katz have to hug the cliffside in order to keep from falling to instant death in the ravine. They do eventually (and predictably) fall off of the cliff, but land on a smaller outcropping approximately 20 feet below them. Stranded, they spend the next day calling for help and pondering life's cruelties.

The reality: While there are certainly several steep drops on the A.T.—the majority of which being in the White Mountains and Maine—I can't think of any that were as openly perilous as the one presented here. At the very least, there was nothing like this on the A.T. in northern Virginia, where the hills become much lower and rounder until the trail meanders into New England. This cliff was placed here for dramatic purposes, and much of it was created via special effects (as you can see in the following image).



(Top) Near the end of the film, Bryson and Katz follow the A.T. in Virginia along a (nonexistent) cliffside with a sheer dropoff. (Bottom) This cliff was primarily created using computer effects, with a small set being used during filming. Images courtesy of Route One Films and Wildwood Enterprises.

The Physical vs. the Mental - The Real Reason Why People End Their Thru-Hikes

The film: Bryson and Katz eventually abandon their hopes of thru-hiking the trail due to complete physical and mental exhaustion, defeated by the A.T.'s meandering journey over hundreds of "Pointless Ups and Downs" (affectionately known by thru-hikers as "PUDS"). The excuses abound: "I'm too old!" "You're too fat!" The film seems to argue that the A.T. just isn't accessible to those who are over the age of 35 and haven't spent years building up their hiking muscles. Bryson also admits that he misses his home and family—which is appropriate, since he only tried calling home once.

The reality: Anyone who says that the A.T. is easy suffers from a case of disillusionment the size of Mount Washington. Yet there is an old adage among A.T. hikers: if you can physically hike the first 30 miles, you can hike the entire trail. And for those of you who *still* think an A.T. thru-hike is a youngster's game, try telling that to Lee Berry, who completed his thru-hike in 2004 **at the age of 81**!

> ***Related reading****: 13 Unlikely Appalachian Trail Hikers (If They Can, You Can)*

But the film did nail one important fact: the majority of potential thru-hikers end their journey prematurely not because of physical wear and tear: **it's because the trail is a mental marathon**.

Many hikers start the trail with visions of sunny skies, stunning vistas, and fireside choruses of "Kumbaya" every night before a comfy nap under the stars. And while those moments will almost certainly occur (maybe not the "Kumbaya" part), these hikers don't take into account the amount of frustration, pain, and boredom that will become commonplace throughout the hike. And then there's the mud, sharp rocks, slips and falls, bumps and scrapes, mosquitos, spiders, sweat-soaked clothes, sore muscles, chafing, blisters, never-ending hunger, days—sometimes weeks—of constant rain, the "green tunnel effect," eating oatmeal for the fiftieth time, homesickness, waiting for hours for a hitch into town, and the smell (my god, *the smell!*).

Many people can take these discomforts for a while. But when the weeks turn into months and you're *still* getting blisters on your big toe (plus a little of everything else listed above), the sane person's mind may start to wonder: *why am I out here again? I have family, friends, and indoor plumbing waiting for me, and they're all just a phone call and a bus trip away.*

That temptation is why most hikers leave behind their thru-hikes, Bryson and Katz included.

And I am willing to bet that every aspiring thru-hiker experiences those thoughts at one point or another. I know I did, on a day when the temperatures dropped below zero, three feet of snow had fallen overnight, and I had just slid down a mountainside into a tree trunk.

So why did I, and hundreds of other successful thru-hikers, keep going? It's all about your **frame of mind**.

Of course, keeping a positive frame of mind during your tenth thunderstorm in five days may be a challenge, so for tips on training your mind for a thru-hike, check out Zach Davis' book *Appalachian Trials* (where have I heard that title before?).

Believe it or Not, A Thru-Hike is Actually Fun!

The film:Bryson and Katz grumble and moan their way all the way to Northern Virginia, never seeming to enjoy any of the time they actually spend in the woods. Both of them seem to be hiking the trail for a single reason: to prove that they can.

Bryson and Katz make an A.T. thru-hike look like a miserable experience, which is mostly due to their attitude toward the trail itself. Image courtesy of Dallas Observer.

The reality: Yes, hiking the A.T. is a physically and mentally exhausting endeavor, but the rewards are equally worth the effort you expend. You will encounter unparalleled beauty, develop lifelong friendships, and push yourself beyond any limits you thought you had. As mentioned before, it's all about your frame of mind. You must expect the hardships along with the pleasures, the ugliness along with the beauty, the failures along with the triumphs.

If you treat the A.T. as an obstacle to conquer, you may only be focusing on the next challenge rather than the experiences around you. That's a recipe for burn-out. Yet if you remember one simple fact—for every defeat, there will be a victory—you may just find yourself standing by that last white blaze.

What do you think? Did you notice any other details that the movie got absolutely right or skull-crushingly wrong? Did it live up to your expectations, or would you rather bury it in the woods with an orange poop trowel? Let us know in the comments below.

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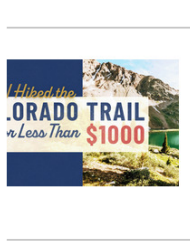

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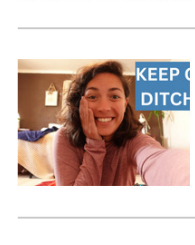

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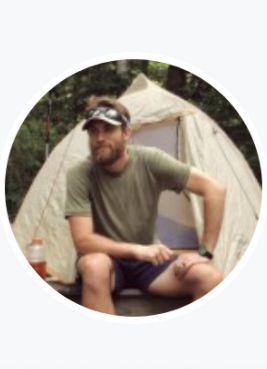

Jordan Bowman's Bio

If you yelled "Yo Teach!" on the A.T. in 2014, it wasn't long before I showed up to give a lesson. As a writer, teacher, hiker, and general know-it-all, I'm happy to talk your ear off about movies, books, running, Star Wars and, of course, hiking the A.T. I enjoy writing almost as much as a brisk mountainside afternoon and have professional experience writing for websites, magazines, and old-fashioned newspapers.

SEP 4TH : JORDAN BOWMAN

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KATINA : SEP 4TH

Not so much an error as much as a "huh?" They carried their trekking poles on their packs throughout the entire movie. You'd think that Katz, at least, would have found them handy at some point.

REPLY

SNEV : JUN 11TH

That was the first thing I observed….

REPLY

GREG : SEP 5TH

I appreciated the movie simply because it's a movie about the AT but I was disappointed that so many details were dismissed. Some of the best movies are ones where the little details are accounted for. It's what makes it believable. Another detail was that I'm pretty sure Kelty had not fielded the Kelty Trekker 65 External Frame Pack in 1998 which is what Katz was carrying. They could have also put just a little weight in the packs as they were slinging them around like there were air bags in them. It's definitely a movie to see for sheer fun, just don't go expecting accuracy.

REPLY

BAMBOOBOB : SEP 5TH

A lot of the gear was wrong. But I don't think they said the movies was set in 1998.

REPLY

MARK ROTHENHAUSER : JAN 13TH

Greg, I am going to pick on you, because I have too many choices, but please feel free to pass this on.

I am a legally blind individual who has probably logged over 5000 miles on the A.T. since 1999, mostly in large sections at a time. I have gone from Katahdin to Harpers Ferry, gone from Springer Mountain to HF, been through Virginia five times, and have done other various repeat sections. So , to say "been there, done that" would suffice. I am not the final authority on hiking the A.T., but I think I can render a qualified opinion.

First of all, I think that there are way too many people who are taking exceptions with inaccuracies that the movie presents. This is the same type of flak that happened when Bryson came out with book. FOLKS, THIS IS A FLIPPIN' MOVIE! YOU KNOW – ENTERTAINMENT? Big "@##!$" deal if they were inaccurate with things. Personally, I thoroughly enjoyed the movie! I thought Nolte made a great Katz! The movie did have educational value: it taught me a new word – "pantyologist"! I also found the sound-track to be very good. And regarding the omissions, hey, there is only so much you can do in a two hour time frame. The movie, and the book for that matter, was never meant to be a documentary or "how to" guide. If you want that, go to the ATC! They have many fine publications that will satisfy your "purists" minds and attitudes!

I'll get off my soapbox now. Sorry if I was rambling, but I felt this issue needed to be addressed. Thanks for putting up with me. Rock On!

Mark Rothenhauser
e-mail: markrothenhauser@hotmail.com
phone: 816-806-0537

REPLY

WEATHERMAN 2000 : JUL 24TH

Well said

REPLY

JEFF NICHOLSON : SEP 5TH

The book made me angry and I think I'll pass on the movie too. I might take a hike instead.

REPLY

MARK ROTHENHAUSER : JAN 13TH

Get a "@##$!!" life, mister. IT WAS A FLIPPIN' MOVIE, YOU KNOW – ENTERTAINMENT? Big deal if there were inaccuracies or omissions! Just like the book, I found it highly enjoyable! Come to think of it, you may have anger issues that need to be dealt with. A 2,000 mile hike on the A.T., with beer and pizza stops in every town along the way, may be in order. Rock On!

REPLY

CASTAWAY : APR 14TH

Hey bill…dont take it so personally buddy…..opinions are going to vary …ive hiked over 1500 miles on the AT and loved it….to me the book is great…the movie was subpar too say the least……shoulda let spielberg give it a good ol "goonie" makeover….woulda been much better…

"Not all who wonder are lost" 😉

REPLY

BUTCH : SEP 5TH

This is a movie..not a documentary. I am assuming it was made to entertain and make millions of people who will never take a step on the AT aware that there is an AT. I am sure the AT, to some, is like living on a desert island is to others…a goal that might not ever been achieved for whatever reason. I found the book entertaining and fun. My sons and I have been section hiking the AT for years. We don't approach it as some vision quest or searching for our chi, or some interstellar connection…as the book says, we enjoy our "walk in the woods". My sons are grown with their own children but we still go out and enjoy our 2-3 week adventures. As we say in the news business, any exposure is good exposure. To have Robert Redford and Nick Nolte chose to be a part of the movie, says something about the content. I am pretty sure Robert Redford didn't do it for the money. Want a documentary, go to National Geographic…want to laugh and enjoy a movie, see the movie.

REPLY

MARK ROTHENHAUSER : JAN 13TH

Amen, Brother!

REPLY

RYAN "HOPPER" GALE : OCT 19TH

The movie was a wonderful movie. It hit on many points and missed on a few, that really did not take away from the enjoyment of the movie. I loved Redford and