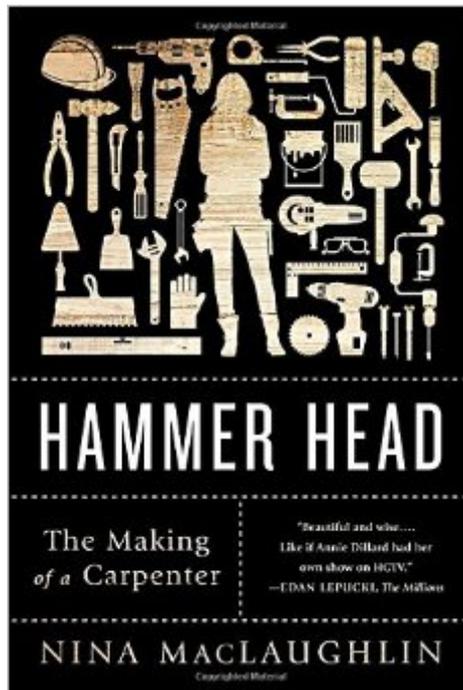


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# Hammer Head: The Making Of A Carpenter



## 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's 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

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## Customer Reviews

I loved reading this book. Ms. MacLaughlin was able to weave together the story of her work life, the meanings of the carpenter's tools, and also literature even though she's a carpenter into a beautiful meditation on all three. I think people in Boston will love this book for all of its scenes are set around the city. I think people whose hearts beat and minds purr to this quote of Virginia Woolf's will love this book for its heart beats woman manly : "It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple: one must be a woman manly, or a man womanly." And of course I think anyone who loves memoir or good writing or essays or creative nonfiction will love this book as well. I remember quotes from Woolf, Ovid, Joseph Conrad, and Rebecca Solnit appearing throughout. Ms. MacLaughlin is well-read, thoughtful, and astute. The ending is well-felt, and well-earned, as well. I teared up at the final scene between the carpenter Mary and the apprentice Nina. That's the power of the mentor-apprentice relationship. And those who have never had it, can feel the lack of it in their lives when they read this book. I certainly did.

I loved this. Wise and thoughtful, moving, and even inspiring. It's about becoming a carpenterâ but more so about work, and messing up and failing, and learning how to do something new. Like if Rebecca Solnit or Annie Dillard had written a book about carpentry, work, and family instead of getting lost or going outside.

This is a beautiful, thoughtful account of giving up a keyboard and a cubicle for a tool belt. It has shrewd things to say about life's big questions, vividly describes both the frustrations and triumphs of manual labor, offers lots of sweat and dust and groovy tools, paints a lovingly candid portrait of a one-of-a-kind mentor, and practically teaches you a trade by the exactitude of the prose, which matches the exactitude required of a carpenter. If you're looking for a book to inspire you in your own work, this is it.

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.

Ms. MacLaughlin is a fine writer when it comes to phrasing, etc., but to call this novel "riveting" as one other reviewer did, was questionable....unless it was a veiled reference to the elongated passages of how to hammer a nail into a piece of wood. It felt more like a how-to book than a memoir. I kept waiting to learn about her experiences and relationships after a hard day of tiling and grouting, etc., but it seemed that all she did was work, go home (wherever that was) and work some more. Even during her first six-month hiatus from carpentry work, there was little to describe what her life at the time was all about except waiting for the next job. The many quotes from Greek mythology seemed like padding after awhile. I would not recommend this book unless one has a serious interest in learning about carpentry.

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.

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