

AT LEISURE MAIN

Rescue by Recipe

Julie & Julia By Julie Powell Little, Brown, 307 pages, \$23.95

By Cameron Stracher Special to The Wall Street Journal

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The idea of changing one's life by committing oneself to a grueling endeavor is understandably seductive -- the siren song of athletes, astronauts and poets. If only I could complete the Ironman, walk on the moon or write an epic in verse -- so the thinking goes -- all would become luminous and clear. It is such determination that has made men climb Everest or eat more hot dogs in five minutes than any other living human being.

Julie Powell found a different sort of Everest for herself: Julia Child's classic 1961 cookbook, "Mastering the Art of French Cooking." She decided to cook her way through it.

Like the weekend runner who attempts a marathon, Ms. Powell was a decent cook but no chef. Her familiarity with Ms. Child's book came from skimming through it in her mother's kitchen. "A year ago," she writes in "Julie & Julia," "Julia [Child] meant even less to me than Dan Aykroyd." She was a temp at a government agency living in a small apartment with her husband, some cats and a snake. Soul-sick and nearly 30, she feared that her life had reached a dead end.

Enter Julia Child. Flipping through the cookbook, Ms. Powell could sense "sustenance bound up with anticipation and want." She makes Ms. Child's first recipe, for potato soup, which leads her husband to casually suggest that she go to cooking school. Why go to school, Ms. Powell sarcastically retorts, when she can cook her way through the book? Suddenly, in a burst of lunacy, all becomes clear: "The Julie/Julia Project....365 days. 524 recipes. One girl and a crappy outer borough kitchen. How far it will go, no one can say."

Far indeed. At her husband's suggestion, Ms. Powell began describing her experience, day by day, on a Web log. Soon enough her readers are urging her on, helping her to find the inner strength to keep cooking despite her struggles with bone marrow, brains, livers, kidneys and other tidbits of French cuisine. Her confidence builds until, like Rocky chugging down the streets of Philadelphia after swallowing raw eggs, she seems poised for culinary victory and even fame: She is interviewed by CNN and CBS and eventually lands a book deal.

You don't have to like cooking or French food to enjoy the zippiness of Ms. Powell's prose or to admire the purpose of her project. If our own grueling endeavors rarely bring the insight we imagined, or the transformation for which we hoped, "Julie & Julia" at least affords us the pleasure of cheering for Ms. Powell as she attempts her own. And she really did change her life. Now she's a writer. A good one.

Mr. Stracher, the publisher of the New York Law School Law Review, has a Web log at www.dinnerwithdad.com.

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