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Nonfiction review: Pretty fly -- for a cartoonist

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When you're fly-fishing, Jack Ohman, the editorial cartoonist for The Oregonian, reminds us, just about anything can go wrong. Therefore, when it all works, you can credit your superior skills. And when "it ain't happening," even though you've used the right fly, the right tippet and the right presentation, you can blame the trout.

In "**Angler Management: The Day I Died While Fly Fishing and Other Essays**," a charming collection of stories adorned with dozens of cartoons, Ohman shares his "dead-nutty-gaga-like-you-were-over-some-girl-in-the-fourth-grade-cuckoo fixation" on fly-fishing. It's infectious. Even if you prefer chess. Or "Wheel of Fortune."

"Angler Management" can be informative. Up to a point. Ohman recommends the use of "gaudy and silly" flies: the Royal Wulff, the Woolly Bugger and the Yellow Humpy. But don't ask him to reveal his favorite spots. If you chloroformed and blindfolded him, drove him 300 miles out of town, put him in the federal witness-protection program and had three CIA case officers work him over, he writes, he just might tell you that the Middle Deschutes is in Oregon and has trout in it.

Yes, "Angler Management" can be funny. In "Fly Fishing in History" Ohman reveals that the American Revolution was born in opposition to taxes on rooster feathers and bamboo; the Donner Party proceeded to eat each other when they ran out of flies; and John F. Kennedy created NASA -- the National Angling in Space Agency -- to put trout streams on the moon. Sometimes, however, Ohman misfires. "The Amazing Similarities Between Baseball and Fly Fishing," which include "A.Rod and A rod" and "a game of inches and game measured in inches," is, well, slightly less than hilarious.

Ohman is at his best, in fact, when he stops trying "to jab the tippet into an invisible force field" -- and reflects on family ties. His dad, he writes, was a laconic Korean War veteran and research scientist, uncomfortable sharing his feelings, who never got the fly-fishing bug. He tried to make a hunter out of Jack, and the two sat together in heavy brush and subfreezing temperatures in Koochiching County, Minn., waiting quietly (and in vain) "for a deer with suicidal ideation to happen by." It bothered Mr. Ohman -- a lot -- that Jack never took to the sport. And Jack, in turn, would really like one of his boys to "fish with me now, as I approach, you know, death."

Maybe that's why all of us -- every one of us -- could use some angler management.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

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