

*The Peak Experience*, by Carroll Seghers II. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1979.

Although *The Peak Experience* is informative in parts and easy reading, this is not the book I would recommend you give your sister, wife, girl friend or daughter who has never climbed but expressed interest in learning. Mr. Seghers' basic problem is that he attempts to cover too much: as a result, he includes information which is misleading or outdated. His attempt to discuss every facet of mountaineering tends to obscure the book's focus: since it is primarily intended for the novice, a chapter on how to organize and fund a Himalayan expedition seems out of place. At the risk of being accused of female chauvinism, I think a second problem is that the book was written by a man. My third objection is one of esthetics, philosophy, and style: Mr. Seghers' and mine clearly differ and I prefer not to see his proliferate.

The novice female is most likely to be intimidated by the male bias. Although Mr. Seghers is definitely pro-female intellectually, his ignorance of what it means to *be* one is apparent. He recommends pull-ups for training: "Six in a set is ideal; if you can manage that many, you're sufficiently strong for a beginning climber." Most women can't do even one pull-up! When I began leading I couldn't; by the time Bev Johnson and I climbed El Cap, I could do one. His recommendations for running are similarly excessive. "Your goal should be to jog one hour every other day. When you're doing six miles or more in an hour, you're ready to climb above 15,000 feet." Worse yet, he suggests that "running without a bra can be very comfortable" (for him, perhaps). I find it extremely painful. He outlines a fourteen-day training program to prepare women for their first "expedition," a term which he indiscriminately uses for any overnight hike. He claims that "it is important not to miss a single day, whether rain or shine." Mr. Seghers' training schedule sounds potentially more arduous than many climbs I've done. Training is certainly beneficial, but the goals he sets for women before hiking are excessive. Most healthy young women could go on a weekend hike without any preparation and not suffer adverse consequences.

Mr. Seghers' attempt to present a comprehensive treatise on mountaineering results in several mistakes and omissions. Many subjects he includes are adequately discussed elsewhere: e.g. places to go, basic climbing, and parts of outfitting and training. There is a distinct bias toward mountaineering (as opposed to rock climbing) that he neglects to discuss, which could confuse the naïve reader. In his survey of climbing areas, he omits many rock-climbing areas, like Cathedral Ledge (New Hampshire), Zion, the Needles (both California and South Dakota), Red Rock (Nevada), Tahquitz, Domeland, and Joshua Tree (California) to mention only a few. In basic climbing, he states that "a woman or party of women climbing are very safe on a  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch rope." ( $\frac{3}{8}$  inch = 9.5 mm

and I would *not* recommend leading on that.) Regarding helmets, he suggests to “use a bicycle type if nothing else.” Why bother? Regarding oxygen (somewhat beyond the scope of this book), he recommends that “above 20,000 feet, oxygen and cylinders should be available.” Both Everest and K2 have been climbed without oxygen. His discussion of rating systems is equally dated: the UIAA ratings only go to Grade VI, although VII has been officially accepted for some time and VIII is used unofficially. His American Decimal System similarly omits 5.12 and 5.13. His compilation of voice signals includes some I’ve never used and one I can’t figure out: “Slack with tension.”

At the risk of being pedantic, I will list some errors: Homer Erectus should be *Homo erectus*; White Mt. is close to 14,500 feet high, not 14,242; the Tibetan name for Everest is not Chomo Uri but Qomolangma; the Eocene, 58 million years ago, was not characterized by the rise of mammals: mammals diversified during the early Cretaceous (136 million years ago); and last, a minor but common oversight: on several “all-woman” ascents (including Annapurna), male Sherpas were among the summit party. It would have been nice had he cited references for more of his statements so they could be checked for accuracy.

Finally, Mr. Seghers’ emphasis on massive expeditions, large groups, and every type of equipment possible is counter to the commendable current trend towards oxygen-less, clean, and free ascents. The quantities of gear he considers essential for the beginner are frightening: to begin rock climbing “you will need special hardware: carabiners, pitons, nuts, chocks, blocks, stoppers, slings, harnesses, hammock [!], ertrier [sic], and a safety helmet”! A Himalayan expedition requires “dozens of porters, 50,000 pounds of equipment, and 9,000 items.” I wonder what Habeler and Messner did. He states that “winter hiking and climbing requires . . . snowshoes, and alpine, and cross-country skis, plus the usual climbing gear.” All three? His outfitting checklist consists of eight pages and includes such necessities as rubbing alcohol, foot powder, wooden [!] bowl, *metal* soap dish and toothbrush container, and binoculars. No wonder he includes accessory straps to strap gear to the outside of the pack. Not surprisingly he discusses the logistics of getting a 40- to 60-pound pack onto your back. He also has odd equipment preferences: “Ice axes with wooden handles are outdated and unsafe.” (Watch out, Chouinard!)

My personal dislikes include the stress on beginning with groups such as NOLS and Outward Bound. The black-and-white pictures are printed on poor quality paper. It would have been nice to see pictures of women leading climbs, and to know where the pictures that were included were taken. I enjoyed the historical section and found some of the discussions of female physiology interesting but feel that they also suffered from Mr. Seghers’ attempt to discuss everything in one book.

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