
George Mallory’s simple answer, “Because it is there,” is both the most famous and intriguing statement on the subject of why men climb mountains. But why should such a simple, innocuous quote generate such interest and speculation? In Sacred Mountains of the World, Edwin Bernbaum suggests that perhaps the answer lies in the zen-like nature of Mallory’s response. The enigmatic simplicity of Mallory’s response does in fact, as Bernbaum suggests, tease the imagination and hint at a deeper significance. What, in other words, is the “it” that is there? Mount Everest or something else? What is it that captures the human imagination and compels one to seek the heights?

While many of us may not be consciously aware of it, Bernbaum feels that mountaineers view mountains in many of the same ways that people of traditional cultures regard the mountains that they worship. Despite dangers, hardships and fears, mountaineers, like people of traditional cultures, return again and again to mountains, seeking something they cannot put into words. Bernbaum suggests that part of the desire to climb is based on encounters where our intuition tells us that we are experiencing a reality that extends beyond the limits of our knowledge.

Mountaineers as a group are, if anything, an opinionated lot. Each of us certainly has his own base of experience from which either to accept or reject Bernbaum’s thesis. What few can disagree with, however, is that the sheer
volume of spiritual beliefs which have become associated with mountains is remarkable.

In part I of *Sacred Mountains of the World*, the author presents the stories, ideas and beliefs that have become associated with the mountains of North America, Europe, Africa, Latin America, Oceania, the Middle East and Asia. A reader cannot fail to be impressed with Bernbaum's exhaustive research. The spiritual beliefs which are tied to the mountains span virtually every culture, religion and continent on Earth.

In Part II, titled "The Power and Mystery of the Mountains," he discusses the symbolism of sacred mountains, their role in literature and art and includes a separate chapter on the spiritual dimensions of mountaineering. His well written text on these subjects is accompanied by lavish color photographs of the sacred mountains of the world and the shrines, temples and monasteries that lie on their flanks.

*Sacred Mountains of the World* was written for a broad readership and will appeal as much to a scholar studying the history of religions as to mountaineers. Not all climbers will, however, have the desire to explore an issue that is so difficult to articulate and fathom. Those that do will find that Bernbaum has written the definitive work on the subject.

ROBERT F. ROSEBROUGH


The compilers of this enormous volume seek to refute "the idea that most climbing fiction has failed"; "it simply is not true!" they exclaim. To prove it, they give us 31 short stories, four novels, two novellas and a one-act play, as well as a lengthy introduction and a lengthier bibliography.

By their own account, Salkeld and Smith used "very few" guidelines of inclusion—"the main thing . . . was that we had to have really enjoyed reading the stories that finally went in." There is something to fit each descriptive category in the Introduction: "Aspiring Women," "Age and the loss of climbing powers," "Humour," and a number of others. The contributions are diverse in style, theme and quality. The range is so great—from whimsy to portentousness, from fantasy to literalism—that few readers will admire all of it. But more important: almost everyone will find plenty to like.

The longest of the novels, and the only previously unpublished one, is *Vortex*, by the Canadian, David Harris. It was short-listed for the Boardman/Tasker Prize and praised (in *High*) as "a cracking thriller." It is crammed with action and it does move along, but I found it the major disappointment of the collection. Its triggering event is the discovery, by climbers, of a crashed airplane full of drugs. Sounds like Jeff Long's *Angels of Light*—a comparison that *Vortex* both invites and suffers from. For all its extravagance, Long's novel