

# Book Reviews

EDITED BY JOHN THACKRAY

*Cloud Dancers, Portraits of North American Mountaineers.* Jonathan Waterman, editor. The American Alpine Club Press, Golden, Colorado, 1993. 323 pages. \$16.95.

Jonathan Waterman's editorial claim that "the most influential mountaineers, as well as some of the finest climbing writers" have been selected for inclusion in *Cloud Dancers* is certainly well-founded. The twenty-one portraits collected here are written in prose styles commensurate to the achievements of their subjects. This is no small thing. As Waterman points out, the achievements of the subjects include: "new routes and oxygen-mask free ascents of 8,000 meter peaks; the most difficult route up Everest; first female ascent of Makalu; a new route and second ascent of Gasherbrum IV; big wall climbs on Himalayan peaks; the first ascent of a 7,000 meter peak." With subjects like this, you might ask, how can a writer go wrong? Easily. There has always been a lot of flat and uninspired writing about the mountains, as if the writers had surrendered to the rationale that the climbing experience can never really be captured in language, anyway. The writers collected here push hard against that dictum, and in their collective effort raise the standards.

Waterman claims in his introduction that this anthology is "unique because it has been written for climbers and by climbers." However, he's not entirely accurate about the *for* climbers part. Two of David Roberts' three pieces first appeared in *Harvard Magazine* and *Men's Journal*. The first is classic American mountain history: Bates, Carter, Houston, Moore, and Washburn on Minya Konka, Nanda Devi, K2 and McKinley. Roberts' piece about Jeff Lowe's winter ascent of the north wall of the Eiger is harrowing stuff and good evidence that Roberts remains, as his bio here claims, "the bard of North American mountaineering."

Likewise, Jeremy Bernstein's piece on Chouinard, included here, has for years represented a high-water mark in writing about climbing. It's true that Chouinard makes a great story and Bernstein had the great good sense to let Chouinard speak for himself frequently and at length (be sure not to miss the classic Whillan's anecdote recounted here). This piece first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1977 and its presence here is remarkable, not because it's so much better than the others, but precisely because it isn't. These are all finely written pieces.

This collection announces a narrowing of the gap between climbing *reportage*, characterized by lists of ascents and macho posturing, and a kind of literary portraiture. There's much more here than *who climbed what*. These

pieces address equally the issues of why these people climb and the mysteries of personality, presenting these aspects as equally compelling and fascinating. Lou Reichardt's work in neurobiology is thought by some to be worthy of the Nobel Prize; Carlos Buhler's mother accompanies him to base camps in the Himalaya; Mugs Stumps started in two bowl games for Joe Paterno at Penn State. These kinds of humanizing details provide the reader with much more than the tick-list bio we've seen so often in the past. Besides, where else could you read of two separate people who met their spouses at the Yak and Yeti bar in Kathmandu?

John Sherman's profile of Mark Wilford includes a description of an epic on Nameless Tower with Greg Child that is as gripping as anything written in our long history of gripping epics. In his writing for *Climbing*, Sherman has devoted much energy to cultivating a "bad boy" persona, and would have us believe that he just crawled out from under a rock at some bouldering spot. While that may be true, don't be fooled—writing this good can only come from someone who spends long, hard hours at the craft.

Jon Krakauer's portrait of the Burgess twins adds a nice comic touch, but we miss his portrait of Fred Beckey. Likewise, we see Greg Child portrayed in one of four contributions by Waterman himself, but miss the thoughtful eye and sharp pen of Child's written work. One can only guess that these are among the selections missing because of conflicting rights and commitments to upcoming anthologies that Waterman acknowledges in his introduction.

In Ed Webster's touching portrait, Fritz Weissner is described as the embodiment of Elizabeth Knowlton's line, "To those men who are born for mountains, the struggle can never end, until their lives end." Webster, the only writer to also be profiled here, seems to embody those words himself. In fact, this is a collection in which all the writers might just as well be subjects, a collection in which the struggle to write has been hard fought and from which the writers have emerged successful.

Like climbing itself, writing about climbing is a labor of passion, not very well rewarded in the marketplace. Therefore it is all the more generous of these writers to have donated their royalties from this volume to help sponsor the American Alpine Club's annual literary award. *Cloud Dancers* marks the inaugural effort of the AAC Press to enlarge the scope of its work and to "reflect these changing times in an environment and a sport still mostly mysterious and misunderstood by the general public." This is an auspicious beginning.

DAVID STEVENSON

*Beyond Risk: Conversations with Climbers.* Nicholas O'Connell. Foreword by Greg Child. The Mountaineers, Seattle, 1993. 300 pages. \$19.95.

*Beyond Risk* is a collection of seventeen interviews conducted by Nicholas O'Connell with "the world's most innovative and accomplished climbers." Climbers are an opinionated lot, but it seems unlikely that readers could have