

mirror here reflecting the Irish soul? There are few other shortcomings. Messner is called “an Austrian mountaineer,” and unfortunately the Spanish photographic reproduction is sometimes blurry. Four photos are also printed backwards. The best reasons for tracking down this book, however, are Dermot Somers’ excellent writings, and the array of fascinating closeup photographs of the upper section of Everest’s North Ridge, including the Second Step—a route I, too, would one day like to climb.

ED WEBSTER

*At the Rising of the Moon.* Dermot Somers. Baton Wicks, London. 208 pages. Paperback.

Most climbing literature comes from climbers who write. Dermot Somers, however, sounds like a writer who also happens to climb. The distinction turns on two factors, both of them easy to find in this collection of ten short stories. One is his relation to language. Of course, fiction allows for a freer play of language than non-fiction. But Somers displays such relish for the surprising metaphor, the vivid but unusual image, and the right word that the genre seems to matter. Even when this delight, this urge to *write*, leads Somers to risk excess, it seems more a foible than a fault. Perhaps one example from the longest story, “Lightning in the Dark,” will serve to make both points.

Tony woke to the sound of Kathmandu rasping like a glass-cutter at the hotel window. The last traces of darkness were being scraped from the city releasing the exact cacophony sleep had drowned the night before, as if day were a nonstop affair in the street which never actually ceased, but was subdued by bouts of darkness. . . . The torn window-mesh was designed to let mosquitoes in and sieve sanity out.

This sense of playing with the materials at hand frequently extends beyond the words themselves to the level of the scene. In “A Tale of Spendthrift Innocence,” the narrator and his partner are following an independent (and marginally competent) French duo up the north face of the Dru. When Henri is on the verge of a giant uncontrolled pendulum into the side of a pillar, Somers momentarily sees

Laurel and Hardy mullocking the piano up the thousand steps all over again. There was something simultaneously disastrous and invincible about this pair—the rubber-bones of roughhouse comedy. I felt that if Henri took his hundred-foot swing and pancaked onto a rock he would simply raise his little bowler hat of a helmet, measure the lump on his head, stalk up the rope, and punch Jacques on the nose, who would promptly somersault a hundred feet down the north face only to spring back like a Jacques-in-the-box, and . . .

The second factor which sets Somers' work off from the bulk of climbing literature is the role of climbing. In fact, three of these stories have nothing to do with climbing at all, and in several of the others climbing is only something that happens in the background. When climbing plays a larger role, the stories remain primarily about the characters—their perceptions, feelings, failings, and interactions with others. Somers' climbers climb the way Smith runs in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* or the way Eddie Felson plays pool in *The Hustler*. Even so, Somers can vividly portray both the way climbing feels and the way climbers feel. Standard climbing literature, on the other hand, even the fiction that has sprouted up in recent years, is more grounded in action and drama with comparatively little suggestion of the complexity of life outside of climbing.

Somers has a considerable range. "Kumari's House" is a story as dark as an Alpine hut. "John Paul II" is hilarious. "Stone Boat" constructs a myth. "The Singer" is a song the singer could have sung. Given this range and Somers' approach to writing, it is not surprising, or even disappointing, that some of the stories are quite a bit better than others. It's like climbing. If a particular route does not offer all one had hoped, the next one probably will. And like climbing, although I do not know exactly what to expect, I look forward to more encounters with Somers' work.

JOE FITSCHEN

*This Game of Ghosts*. Joe Simpson. The Mountaineers, Seattle, 1994. 320 pages, black-and-white photographs. \$24.95.

Joe Simpson's second volume of autobiography is just as exciting and impressively written as its predecessor, *Touching the Void*, his amazing account of survival on the Peruvian peak Siulá Grande. Simpson's life has been composed of risk, achievement and calamity—his own, and those of many mountaineering friends. At least five of those pictured in the book's many photographs subsequently died in the mountains, not to mention the two killed in a plane crash near Kathmandu.

"Another accident, another life;" Simpson's tone is weary, laden with doom. His own life has been immersed in violent action, and not only in the mountains. In Wales he crashed a car into a slate wall. He once gashed his head tricycling down a flight of steps. That was a week after he had leapt over a pile of brushwood and tumbled fifteen feet onto sharp stone. He was five years old. Even his social engagements are hazardous: a cocktail party in Sheffield ends in a razor attack and robbery.

It is tempting to regard Simpson as the maker of his own misfortunes. But that's only sometimes true. Many of his mountain disasters could have happened to anyone who ventures repeatedly into the Himalaya and other high ranges. The last one, on the steep Nepalese peak Pachermo, was caused by his partner's fall, in turn due to a badly manufactured crampon. The partner,