

*A Night on the Ground, a Day in the Open.* Doug Robinson. Mountain N' Air Books. La Crescenta, California, 1996. Black and white photos. 255 pages. \$19.00.

This book is a collection of 31 essays, divided into five chapters, written between 1968 and the present. The majority of the essays are reprinted from publications where they first appeared in print: *Mountain* magazine (now defunct), *Outside* magazine, old *Chouinard Equipment* catalogs, *Powder* magazine, Chouinard's book *Climbing Ice* (which Robinson helped write), a few other minor publications, and *Ascent*. *Ascent* helped launch Robinson's writing career when it published "Tuesday Morning on the Lyell Fork with Eliot's Shadow" in 1968, and "The Climber as Visionary" in 1969, both of which appear in this collection. A recurrent theme through the collection is the author's passion for California's Range of Light, the Sierra Nevada. "What can I say about the Sierra Nevada," writes Robinson,

where I have lived the clearest hours of my life for as long as I can remember? . . . [I]t laid hold of my senses and compelled me years ago to live at its feet, in sight of its very blue-edged crest . . .

Robinson became a climbing guide with Don Jensen and Bob Swift at the Palisade School of Mountaineering in the Palisade region near Bishop. Soon was living year-round on the east side of the Sierra, spending the winters in a cabin on Rock Creek, near Tom's Place on US 395. His essay, "Mountaineering Just Means Glad to be Here," covers several seasons at the Palisade School, and Robinson's profiles of the people working there, such as Smoke Blanchard, Don Jensen, and others, are very nicely done.

I don't know anyone who writes about the mountain experience quite like Doug Robinson does. Lyrical, visionary (to use one of his favorite words), casual, poetic, elegant, unpretentious, mystical are a few adjectives that come to mind when I think of his prose. Here, the quintessential Alpine vagabond sketches the delights of sublime indolence one day in his beloved Palisades:

. . . there I was: reading and writing, stretching and sweating, gazing, staring and spacing out, even startling the silence with shudders of delight, with whoops of laughter, and all the while risking total sunburn, when the morning would reach its significant juncture, the point at which my legs were numb and eyes had fondled an entire horizon of terrain in sixteen shades of light, and sweat had pooled in my navel.

His essay on talus running is a gem, one of several superlative essays written for the *Chouinard Equipment Catalog*. Start your mountaineering on a talus field, he suggests. We've all done this to various degrees; it's an exhilarating, supreme test of one's footwork. "There are but two essentials," he offers,

friction and balance . . . both will be pushed to unexpected limits in awkward and improbable combinations . . . You will occasionally miss a step, which can be dangerous. But instead of reverting to caution, think recovery . . . Hesitation can land you instead in one of the holes between the boulders.

And, he might have added, in the hospital.

Robinson does occasionally leave the Sierra Nevada, and his stories cover such topics as extreme skiing on Mt. Rainier, hiking in the Wind River Range, guiding in Oklahoma, skiing the Haute Route in the Alps, and making the second ascent (with an expedition headed by Tom Frost) of Nepal's Ama Dablam in 1979, one of the few stories written specifically for this book.

Robinson's work in progress, a book titled *The Alchemy of Action*, is growing out of two of the essays in this text: "The Climber as Visionary" and "Forgetfulness and Bliss." Robinson explains:

In outline, it begins with the strong experiences of runner's high and climber's euphoria, and the question of where they come from. It explores the volatile world of adrenaline and then goes on to an updated view of beta endorphin . . . . It brings in clinical information from physiology and biochemistry, from the brains of lab rats and the blood of finishers in the Western States 100 trail run, but only when that data can be anchored to the reality of strong, human experience.

The title of the book may cause some raised eyebrows: alchemy implies some magical or mystical component to his assertions, which does not have much linkage with brain chemistry. Robinson was criticized, and rightly so, by a professional researcher for an incorrect premise after the publication of "Climber as Visionary." Let us hope that a professional neurobiologist has a look at *The Alchemy of Action* before it is cast in print.

ALLEN STECK

*Storms of Silence*. Joe Simpson. The Mountaineers: Seattle, 1996. Color, and black-and-white photographs, 240 pages. \$19.95.

Joe Simpson's third book is an account of three expeditions: one to Gangchempo in the Langtang region of Nepal, where he retired early because of a damaged knee, a second to Cho Oyu in Tibet, which he left because of poor acclimatization, and a third—and successful—venture in the Cordillera Blanca of Peru.

One night in Tom and Jerry's Bar in Kathmandu, after Gangchempo, Joe meets an English school teacher, Lorna, chaperoning an unruly group of London kids. Lorna is intrigued to discover Joe is a writer, albeit one who squirms at the admission. The following day Lorna buys a copy of Joe's classic *Touching the Void* and shows up at his hotel room, clutching a paperback edition, "a grim expression on her face and her eyes were moist and red." With her is one of the worst of her scamps, Darren, who suggests Joe, who has been surprised with a towel around his waist, shag the lady. He chases off the kid and slams the door and listens to Lorna's tremulous reaction to *Void*: "What you went through, I mean, the pain, and the loneliness." He fidgets while she sobs and then speaks of some private anguish. "I'm alone. I can't tell anyone and I can't cope with it. I don't know what to do." Meanwhile out in the hotel courtyard the kid is shouting up indecent suggestions. Joe rushes out the room in pursuit of the kid, ready to smash his face in, but the boy vanishes. Lorna is dry-eyed upon his return, smooths her hair, says she's better now and leaves. Joe writes, "I was angry at my uncontrolled reaction to Darren's infuriating behavior, and even more frustrated over my helpless inadequacy in the face of Lorna's despair. Why did some people expect me to have special psychological and emotional insights just because I'd had a bad time in the mountains?"

It is a question I pondered often while trudging through the remaining 250 pages of *Storms of Silence*. Simpson's claim on us is precisely that he had a harrowing experience on Suila Grande,