

Dark Shadows Falling. Joe Simpson. The Mountaineers: Seattle, 1997. 27 color photos. 207 pages. \$24.95.

Joe Simpson's *Dark Shadows Falling* is his third non-fiction work since his mega classic *Touching the Void*. This latest book probes what Simpson sees as increased immorality amongst Everest climbers. Simpson recounts events surrounding the 1996 Everest disaster and buttresses these by additional unsavory episodes from other expeditions. All of the above can be found in Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*. Some examples of this high-altitude moral failure include the following: a Dutch expedition headed by Ronald Naar that decides not to render help to a dying climber only a few feet from their tent because they didn't want to jeopardize their chances for a summit attempt the next day; a Japanese summit team that instead of helping a dying climber simply steps around him on their way up; and the infamous Ian Woodall, who won't even lend the use of a radio desperately needed by climbers trying to call for help. In the immortal words of Eisuke Shigekawa, one of the Japanese team members, "Above 8000 meters is not a place where people can afford morality."

Simpson is rightly outraged by these actions and words. As moral philosophers have done since the time of Aristotle, he wants to find the source of such loathsome behavior. Simpson believes some of the blame may be laid at the door of exorbitant peak fees and the concomitant excesses (fixed ropes, climbing Sherpas and oxygen) of national teams and commercial guiding that those fees necessitate.

The problem with this seemingly simple solution is that Simpson has confused the ethics of access with the ethics of high-altitude rescue. The British philosopher Gilbert Ryle once called this a "category mistake." When talking about the ethics of high-altitude climbing and the ethics of turning your back on a fellow climber in mortal danger, it seems like we are talking about ethics in general. But we aren't. Both issues involve the word "ethics," so they seem related. In actuality, one issue is a matter of access and style, where access is limited to those who have money but not necessarily skill, so they must climb Everest in a different style. The other issue is a matter of compassion and respect for human life. It's like trying to compare the ethics of rap bolting to the ethics of animal rights or genetic engineering—it's too far a stretch.

While my complaint may seem a petty technicality, it has, in fact, some very practical ramifications. Even if the Nepalese government could be persuaded to cut off its financial nose by banning the use of Sherpas, ropes and oxygen, I don't see how it would make people like Ian Woodall become more compassionate, caring, selfless people. The fact of the matter is some people are just going to be assholes no matter what altitude they happen to be at, and nothing short of genetic engineering and removal of the asshole gene is going to change that. Everest is simply a microcosm of the world at large, albeit a higher, more beautiful—and, at times, a far more cruel one.

Exacerbating Simpson's confusion of style with morality is the fact that he is idealistic. This is never more apparent than when he states: "We know intuitively which is the correct way to behave. In our hearts we know what works best for everyone. To 'love thy neighbor as thyself' is a precept that everyone understands. . . ." This is coming from a guy who should know better, who in his last book, *Storms of Silence*, wrote about such disparate evils as the brutal Chinese oppression of Tibet and Nazi death camps. It seems pretty obvious that some people just don't give a damn about the "correct way to behave" or loving one another; they just want to get to the top, no matter what the cost. Wistful appeals to their 'intuition' and 'hearts' just don't cut it.

Because Simpson believes that everyone really does know in their heart the difference between right and wrong, and because their judgment is simply being clouded by all the

money involved, his book reads like a check list or a concatenation of all the things that went wrong on Everest. Ultimately, all this recounting makes Simpson violate Krakauer's most fundamental caveat, a caveat that applies not just to Everest, but all of climbing and beyond:

But to believe that dissecting the tragic events of 1996 in minute detail will actually reduce the future death rate in any meaningful way is wishful thinking. The urge to catalog the myriad blunders in order to 'learn from the mistakes' is for the most part an exercise in denial and self deception. [To] convince yourself that Rob Hall died because he made a string of stupid errors that you are too clever to repeat... is injudicious. (*Into Thin Air*, p. 274)

But this is how *Dark Shadows Falling* sometimes reads: as a categorization of mostly stylistic mistakes that Simpson hopes might lead us to some higher moral ground. Logically, this just isn't a sustainable or convincing argument (nor is it "judicious").

On another level, however, I can deeply admire what Simpson is trying to do. For what we do learn from the 1996 Everest disaster and other climbing disasters of lore, including Simpson's own, is that the human spirit can be a truly remarkable thing. While some will always choose to "cut and run," and others will choose to simply step over the dying on their way to the summit, still others will choose to stay behind and fight it out to save another despite all odds.

It is this kind of sacrifice and selflessness to which Simpson himself alludes when pushing a bold new route on Pumori. Within striking distance of the summit, and with most of the technical difficulties behind, Simpson chooses to turn back when he detects signs of illness in his partner. As for putting his partner at risk by trying to coerce him on farther, or perhaps bolting for the summit with lame promises to return, Simpson simply states that as far as his friend's life was concerned, "there was no way I was going to take the risk." Granted, Simpson is hardly the most sentimental writer, but his disappointment is palpable. Selflessness and sacrifice have always been fundamental to heroism.

Simpson has made explicit what often is implicit: that moral dilemmas have always been intertwined with the great dramas of alpinism. And this is the claim that they all make upon us: after the "string of stupid errors" have been made, then what do we do? Cut the rope as Simpson's own partner did on Siula Grande? Give up your own life trying to save your client's life, as Rob Hall did on Everest? Try and stop Maurice Herzog from going insane, or follow him up to the top of Annapurna, the first 8000-meter peak ever to be climbed, only to be horribly frostbitten? It may be 'injudicious' to think that we are too clever to repeat those "stupid mistakes," but when misfortune occurs, what happens next? Do we declare morality to be an unaffordable luxury at some predetermined altitude?

While I may disagree with some of *Dark Shadows Falling*, and I am definitely not a fan of Simpson's digression upon digression whatever-comes-to-mind writing style ("solipsistic exegesis," John Thackray called it in last year's *AAJ*), I nevertheless am always thankful when someone tries to make a thoughtful examination of this sometimes sublime and sometimes stupid sport that we pursue.

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A Deathful Ridge: A Novel of Everest. J.A. Wainwright. Mosaic Press: Ontario, Canada and Buffalo, New York, 1997. Hardback. 138 pages. \$24.95