

If you are the least bit intrigued by the 1924 disappearance of George Leigh Mallory and Andrew “Sandy” Irvine on the upper reaches of Everest’s Northeast Ridge, you will savor every word and be utterly astonished by this superbly researched, brilliant first novel by Canadian poet and author J.A. Wainwright. This book (a novel of fiction, lest you forget) is impressively detailed in its outrageous yet believable story line that is intimately and passionately told. You may never again think of mountaineering’s most famous unsolved mystery quite the same. Did Odell really see Mallory and Irvine going “strong for the top” above the Second Step on June 8, 1924? And how did the famous ice axe (identified as Irvine’s by its three short parallel nicks carved into the wooden shaft; I’ve seen it) come to rest near the First Step? And most entrancing of all: did Mallory actually reach the summit? The novel’s only-at-first incredulous premise demands that I don’t tell you more. Secrecy is absolute, “till death do we part,” and a gentlemen’s honourable pact. In this year of Everest and the Titanic, even the great ship gets a couple of pages! (Quite logically, I might add.) Read this book and delight in reconsidering the myriad riddles of the intertwined mythology of George Mallory and Mt. Everest. This profound investigation of the mountaineering psyche, of the climber’s life, blinding ambition, and high-altitude death—succinctly rationalized by Mallory’s infamous quote “because it’s there”—will leave you reeling.

ED WEBSTER

In the Zone: Epic Survival Stories From the Mountaineering World. Peter Potterfield. The Mountaineers: Seattle, 1996. Photographs. 270 pages. \$22.95.

Two of the three tales from *In the Zone* are of a most compelling kind—the sagas of those victims of catastrophic events in the mountains who, against great odds, live to tell their stories. What makes this kind of story especially rare is the balance of circumstances that allow it even to exist and yet not be common. These are solitary ordeals where if the protagonist were more hurt or in a more remote setting there would be no one to tell the tale. Conversely, if they were less hurt in a less exotic situation, their story may not be so interesting.

Author Peter Potterfield relates these two tales along with a third story that falls into a different and more familiar category of mountaineering story: epic endurance, survival, and heroism in a hostile environment, but ultimately under more voluntary circumstances. The fact that one of the three stories is Potterfield’s own helps to overcome the loss of visceral punch that might be expected when someone tells someone else’s story. There is a certain credibility that comes through in Potterfield’s words at times—particularly when he’s describing pain—that would be very difficult to conjure straight out of imagination.

The first story takes place in June of 1992, when Colby Coombs, Ritt Kellogg, and Tom Walter begin climbing up a hard route on Mt. Foraker. Nine days later, Colby Coombs returns alone. His is a moving story with haunting images that are hard to shake. I finished this story with a great respect for Coombs. His survival is a testament to a combination of fine mountain skills and a self-knowledge that allowed him to escape a situation that might well have killed the rest of us.

The second epic, Potterfield’s own, takes place on remote Chimney Rock in the North Cascades. What should have been a short roped fall becomes a 150-foot body-shattering tumble leaving Potterfield marooned on a small ledge with terrible injuries. His partner (luckily a marathon runner) goes for help as Potterfield does what he can to keep the life force from

leaving his body until he is rescued 30 hours later. The clock was ticking very fast for Potterfield and the rescue itself was a monumental effort.

Potterfield's rendering of his story, as well as of Coombs', which was based on extensive interviews, both are clean effective narratives. The power in these types of stories ultimately resides in the events that actually transpire, and it's easy to overwrite and overwhelm them. When I read Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void*, which has become a de facto touchstone for mountaineering epic survival stories, I found myself burning out on his super-descriptive style in the second half of the book. Additionally, as his book wore on, Simpson, as I perceived it, began more and more to recreate the finer details of his ordeal in lieu of actual recollections, essentially writing a novel based on a true story. Some authenticity was lost and, to a large degree, I lost interest in whether Simpson survived or not. Coombs' and Potterfield's own story, told more simply and truthfully, rang deeper chords in me, and I was intensely invested in their survival.

Irony suffuses the third story. Set on the slopes of K2 in 1992, climbers fight their way up, then down the mountain. Now, both the protagonist and one of the survivors of this story—friends and professional rivals who became fellow victims in the events of May 1996, mountaineering's most infamous episode in the public eye—lie dead on Mt. Everest.

The story ostensibly belongs to Scott Fischer (it's told from his point of view), but, with the exception of one element, belongs equally to his partner, Ed Viesturs. Fischer and Viesturs buy spots on an ad-hoc-style Russian/American expedition to K2's Abruzzi Ridge. Early on, Fischer dislocates his shoulder, yet stubbornly stays on in the nearly vain hope that his shoulder will heal enough to climb K2. In time, he mends sufficiently to give it a go—twice—and not only eventually succeeds with Viesturs, but in the process, the two of them, at no small risk and sacrifice of their own energy reserves, rescue other climbers seemingly left and right, including Rob Hall and his desperately ill partner, Gary Ball.

The telling of this story is fairly unique because Potterfield is neither a participant in the story nor an insider in the world of professional high-altitude mountaineering. He is, however, a climber who understands and appreciates what climbing is all about. The standard first-person expedition narrative that we've read so many times generally is not a particularly guileless document. The authors endlessly make a case for themselves—one eye cocked toward posterity—regardless of whether there is anything they need to make a case about or not. It's a type of insecurity.

I really liked the K2 story because not only is it exciting, it's straight. Even though Potterfield obviously is an admirer of Scott Fischer and sometimes expresses some quaint notions about the world of "big league mountaineering," the story is mercifully free of the bending and skewing found in nearly all expedition narratives and provides a refreshingly clear view into the world of climbing big mountains.

The pithy subject of Everest and the connection with this book—a book about people surviving—can't be ignored. What struck me most about the events in May 1996 on Everest was the clear dividing line between those who survived and those who succumbed. Anyone who was a seasoned climber, Sherpas and Westerners alike, survived that storm rather handily (the exceptions, of course, being Scott Fischer and Rob Hall who, in my opinion, were artificially crippled that day in both their decision-making and, ultimately, in their efforts to save themselves by the extraordinary circumstances and concerns which were, sadly or ironically, of their own contrivance). Those who died or nearly died were the under-experienced ones.

Guiding and clients dying while being guided is as old as climbing itself—it's no use even to discuss what things guides should or shouldn't attempt to take their clients up; how the

clients could be screened better beforehand, or whatever. You read about people on Everest that year giving themselves up for dead well before the gig was up and then you read about Colby Coombs on Foraker, Potterfield on his ledge, Fischer and Viesturs on K2, all of them never giving up. Maybe this book would be a good read for those people who want to be guided up the big peaks. They could read it and then ask themselves, "Have I 'been there and done that' enough to survive like this if I had to? And if so, why am I hiring a guide?"

MICHAEL BEARZI

K2: Challenging the Sky. Roberto Mantovani and Kurt Diemberger. The Mountaineers: Seattle, 1997. 144 pages. \$35.00.

Second only to Everest in height, K2 also has been subordinated in the attention it has received from writers and photographers. That may be changing, although it's doubtful it will catch up. For a wide group of climbers, K2 may be the peak of choice, but the highest mountain in the world undoubtedly will always maintain its lead.

With the publication three years ago of Jim Curran's *K2: The Story of the Savage Mountain*, the mountain received its long overdue climbing history, a stellar effort necessarily concentrated on the narrative with photographic coverage limited to a few selected shots. *K2: Challenging the Sky*, published the same year—but not previously reviewed in this journal until its republication by the Mountaineers Books—fills that gap nicely. With its large oversized format, K2's rugged grandeur can be fully displayed for the first time without the constraints of standard book size.

I thought I had seen all the photographs from our 1978 expedition, which succeeded in making the mountain's third ascent. Now I realize that John Roskelley must have tucked away a few shots that didn't find their way into the issue of *National Geographic* that chronicled the climb or *The Last Step*, Rick Ridgeway's absorbing account of the expedition. Best of all is Roskelley's stunning photograph, which appears on the dust-jacket cover. The foreground is mundane but instructive. Ridgeway is seen ploughing his way up thigh-deep snow we had to contend with each time a major storm blew through. But beyond the struggling human figure is the ferocious, knife-edged crest of the northeast ridge, and soaring above everything the colossal summit pyramid of K2. It looks close, but it took weeks of effort by our 14-member team to get anywhere near the top.

I wish I could be a bit more salutary about the book's text. The few brief sections Kurt Diemberger contributes are up to his usual high standard, but, overall, the historical treatment that accompanies the photography is decidedly inferior to Curran's well-written book. Not being able to read Italian, it may be that Roberto Mantovani's original narrative fares better than in this translated version. There are the usual number of niggling errors. For instance, it's hard to see how careful editing could not have caught misspelling—Lou Reichardt's name is spelled as "Lou Richard" on one page, after getting it correct the page before. That would have to be particularly galling to John Roskelley—a careful writer himself—in whose contribution on our summit climb the error appears. Both Reichardt and Roskelley deserve better.

This book's value, however, is primarily in its photographic coverage of K2 and its climbing history. For that reason alone, it definitely belongs on the shelf of every K2 aficionado, myself among them.

JIM WICKWIRE