

Rock Prints: A Collection of Rock Climbing Photographs. Greg Epperson. Rock Prints Publishing: Bishop, CA. 1998. 81 black-and-white photographs. 96 pages. \$35.00.

Greg Epperson, best known for his striking color shots of climbers in action, has produced a small but handsome volume containing black-and-white photographs of—you guessed it—climbers in action. Exquisitely printed on pricey paper, each of the 81 images contains much of interest, yet, oddly, the climbers themselves are often not the chief attraction. Rather, Epperson's composition skills and his infatuation with rock texture have combined to produce photos that sometimes reach that fabled realm called art.

It's not all photos here. Three mini-essays—by Peter Croft, John Long, and Pete Takeda—are thrown in for good measure, but these nice prose poems seem an unnecessary afterthought in such a book. Far more satisfying are the informative and witty captions (by Bob Van Belle) tucked into the back of the book so as not to interfere with the purity of the photograph—a nice decision, even though it makes for a lot of flipping back and forth.

We'll all choose favorite images, and here are four of mine. Page 7 shows a Joshua Tree climber on a dicey crossover move; dominating the left side of the photo is a colossal egg. The egg is a magically smooth boulder, the kind you want to lay hands on to see if it's real. Page 41 shows a spread-eagled climber on a route with cracks dropping toward the vanishing point. You don't need to flip to the caption to know there's only one possible locale for this one: Devils Tower. Page 60 has interest in every square inch: water streaks interlaced with rounded sills create a textured checkerboard. Finally, because it's so different, the Joshua Tree shot on page 70 appeals greatly to me. This is one of the very few images that puts the climb itself into the context of the climbing area. A tiny figure struggles up a classic-looking crack in a soulful landscape.

Although such images compelled me to return often to them, a certain sameness pervades the majority of the photos. To avoid the "butt shots" or "hair shots" we photographers are all too familiar with, Epperson took great pains to rig his ropes and scaffolding in just the right place. But too often he chooses the same point of view: 20 feet distant from his subject, looking downward at a 45° angle. Far too many images in this book follow this pattern, and far too many shots have climbers obviously coached by Epperson to grimace or to stretch unconvincingly for a hold. Another problem, perhaps unsolvable if one is to capture the feeling of exposure, is his overuse of wide-angle lenses. Thirty-foot routes, like *Pinched Rib* at Joshua Tree, appear to be three times as long and thus seem unnatural (after all, your eyes don't see it like this). Similarly, the legs of the climber in many photos look like withered appendages.

These are mild criticisms, and the book, like all works of art, is not meant to be looked at casually, or at one sitting. As mentioned, it's the texture and pattern of the rock that give these photographs their appeal. Give each image careful study and you'll discover yet again why we so much love to set fingers to stone.

STEVE ROPER

Chomolungma Sings the Blues: Travels Around Everest. Ed Douglas. Constable, England. 1997. 256 pages. \$40.00.

In *Chomolungma Sings the Blues*, Ed Douglas, editor of *Climber*, a U.K. magazine, and *The* (British) *Alpine Journal*, recounts his experiences and observations on a trek through Nepal in 1995-'96. The main theme of this book (not always easy to decipher) is the degradation of Nepalese culture brought on by Western trekkers and climbers, of whom he does not have many nice things to say:

The megalomania of the climbers is matched only by the destructiveness of the culture that they bring with them, namely materialism and over-consumption. It is this westernizing influence that lies at the root of Nepal's many present-day ills.

Douglas believes this "destructiveness" of Western culture is what lies behind pollution and overpopulation in Kathmandu, garbage and deforestation in the Khumbu, and the exploitation of porters generally. This lack of respect for Nepalese culture and the egocentricity and smug patronizing of Westerners is exemplified for Douglas in the gesture of a young British trekker "sleek in his black jacket and sunglasses" who, after a quick perusal and a yawn, tosses a pamphlet on Sherpa culture onto a pile of magazines. This horrifies Douglas, because he wants Nepal to be "a haven in the distant corner of the world where life is simpler, purer, without the constant grind of money or position, where we can be free."

Despite Douglas's brave attempts to eschew his own Western outlook in favor of a more Nepalese/Buddhist one, there lingers the scent of contradiction by virtue of his own presence as a Westerner in Nepal. This leads to a bit of hand-wringing, especially when his wallet gets stolen. "My reaction to the theft had been typically Western . . . I took it personally . . . I wanted retribution, revenge even . . . bad things to happen to a bad person in this world and not the next." Douglas reflects that his reaction was wrong, not by degree, but by cultural orientation: "For a Buddhist, the concept of merit lies at the heart of morality. . . . Sherpas don't appoint themselves moral authorities in this way."

Romanticizing about a more primitive culture has always been a big seller, and probably always will be. Literature as varied as *Paradise Lost* and *The Swiss Family Robinson*, as well as contemporary works like *The Snow Leopard* and *Black Elk Speaks*, not to mention films like *Dances with Wolves*, all imply that primitive societies are more harmonious and idyllic than ours. This search for a paradise lost is ingrained in our culture. Douglas's call for a "haven . . . where life is simpler, purer. . ." is yet another call to the Garden of Eden.

I want to make it plain that I applaud Douglas for his critique of arrogance, materialism, consumerism and the lot. And yes, no doubt, Western culture is partly to blame. But it is more complicated than that. All cultures teach good things and bad things. And often these are internally contradictory.

Douglas seems to put on a new culture with all of its attendant morality just like we would put on a new set of clothes, simply because there are parts of the old culture he finds morally questionable or wrong. It may work for him, but I don't think it will work for most of us. Attempts to adopt another culture usually come off as hackneyed as photographs of yourself spinning a prayer wheel in Nepal or bringing back prayer flags to hang over the backyard grill. Nepalese culture has no shortage of problems, its attitudes toward women and marriage among them (as Douglas alludes to in Chapter 10). We must pick and choose among good and bad in any culture. And therein lies the key to morality: choice, as opposed to cultural indoctrination, whether it be Nepalese or Western. Jerks are jerks, and we shouldn't let them off the hook by blaming their culture instead of them.

DAVE HALE

The Quotable Climber: Literary, Humorous, Inspirational, and Fearful Moments in Climbing. Edited by Jonathan Waterman. The Lyons Press: New York, 1998. 20 Photos. 253 pages. \$20.00.