

February winter day on Franconia Ridge to die of exposure. Choosing that forlorn ridgeline in the frozen dead of winter is a kicker. It just doesn't let go. Maybe it goes against everything we are taught. There will certainly be other Guy Waterman narratives forthcoming, since Laura Waterman likens herself to Ishmael. Until then, we can seek comfort in the five books the two produced. The most recent one, *A Fine Kind of Madness*, is the subject of this review.

There are here a succession of switches from nonfiction to fiction to nonfiction, while brief introductions set the tone for each of the 23 collected pieces. These intros tend to work as texts of their own, outlining the publication history of the piece and at times warning the reader about how best to understand a particular essay or story. With "Education in Verticality: A Short Comedy or Farce in Four Scenes," the introduction is the funniest part. One such caution begins, "For the benefit of those readers who did not have time to read Milton's *Paradise Lost* within the last year..." What follows is a fiercely funny send-up of climbing at the Gates of Paradise called "The First Ascent: A Story." Laura Waterman crafts the most effective fiction, particularly in "Staircase to Starland." She carefully evokes the world of climbing as seen through the eyes of a neophyte. The story is enigmatic and wonderfully inconclusive.

In the last section, the act of entering the mountains is secondary to land ethics. In "The Death of Passaconaway," Tufts University professor Charles Ernest Fay questions who controls access to wild places. After cutting a trail to the summit of Mount Passaconaway in 1891 and building a modest shelter, Fay opts to bushwhack down Wonalancet Ridge instead of hiking the just-built trail. It is a choice the writers interpret as advocacy for the fragile wildness that is left. In quoting Jack Turner and Roderick Nash, this book advocates taking one's mountain ethics and acting on them responsibly to preserve the precious wild. The sprawling little essay that concludes the book, "Why the Lorax Lost," attempts "to stir thinking that might go beyond the simplistic politics and fallacious economics of early environmentalism." Ultimately, the Watermans succeed with a curmudgeonly anger reminiscent of Edward Abbey's best work.

DAVE BEAN

*A Slender Thread: Escaping Disaster in the Himalaya*. Stephen Venables. London: Hutchinson, 2000. Hardcover. 208 pages (copy reviewed). And New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001. Paperback. 256 pages. \$14.95.

Stephen Venables' *A Slender Thread: Escaping Disaster in the Himalaya* is an old-fashioned expedition narrative in the British Himalayan tradition. It features a remote, little-known objective in Panch Chuli V, a very well-known cast of characters including Chris Bonington, and the ubiquitous disaster referred to in the subtitle: a rappelling accident high on the mountain and the author's miraculous survival and harrowing evacuation.

To clarify what I mean by old-fashioned, the book is not about an 8000-meter peak, not about a death (true: a near-death), not about a controversy, not about a commercial enterprise of any kind (unless writing a book eight years after the climb counts as such). It is about a small group of people going together into an unknown place in the spirit of exploration and adventure. Of the 20 or so titles reviewed this year in the *AAJ*, this is the only one of its kind—the single volume with a single expedition focus.

Venables admits to being a professional climber, but he is a sufficiently accomplished writer that this book never reads as if its *raison d'être* is merely cashing in on his own near-tragedy. One does wonder if this book would have been written were it not for the accident.

It's a shame to think it might not have been.

In David Roberts' seminal essay, "Slouching Toward Everest: A Critique of Expedition Narratives," published in *Ascent* (1980), he argues that what interests us in the genre are "the variations and nuances possible within the formula." I have already implied much of the formulaic in the first sentence of this review. The trip itself, to the seldom-visited Kumaun Himalaya, west of Nepal in northern India, was exploratory. The objectives were several peaks in the 6000-meter range, some that were unclimbed. The British climbers included Bonington, as well as familiar names Dick Renshaw, Steve Sustad (U.S. ex-pat), and Victor Saunders, whose own account of the trip is contained in his book, *No Place to Fall*. They were joined by an Indian contingent led by Harish Kapadia, whose knowledge of the area is exhaustive and whose organizational talents are legendary.

Venables does not try to exalt these climbs to either cutting-edge or epic status; of his first climb, a new route on Rajrambha (6537m) accomplished with Renshaw, he says: "True, we had all done tougher climbs at much higher altitudes ... but five days' hard work, with relentless early starts, little sleep and not much food, all at around 6000 meters...."

The accident itself, a 300-foot fall, after a rap anchor fails, that results in two broken legs, is described first in the Prologue. It is next described about 100 pages later, as seen through Bonington's eyes from a lower camp, and from the eyes (and ears) of his climbing partners and from his own perspective once again—but not repeating the description in the prologue. Sounds like overkill as I describe it here, but the effect is artful and painstakingly rendered, both in detail and introspection. In Roberts' description of the expedition formula, he warns that base camp may not be reached until page 100, but this volume is much briefer and to the point: the accident occurs on page 113 of a book that ends on 204.

Where do the rest of the pages go? Well, there's the waiting, the return home and recovery; there's even another climb. All part of the formula, and to be honest we should all be thankful that no one has yet truly documented the reality of the waiting facet of expeditionary life.

Venables is a skilled historian. His secret is in a sense of proportion, giving us just enough. While the area is rarely visited, the list of travelers is distinguished and familiar: Longstaff, Frank Smythe, Shipton and Tilman, Charles Houston, Odell, Bill Murray, and Heinrich Harrer. Indeed, this expedition is probably what Smythe had in mind in the passage Venables cites: Everest is far removed from "pleasurable mountaineering." This expedition is pleasurable mountaineering, at least until the accident.

Venables begins by acknowledging that each climber might write a different account of the trip and claim Venables' to be deliberately subjective, going so far as to worry that he might be underplaying the achievements and contributions of his fellows. But it seems that quite the opposite was true: an immense appreciation for his friends comes through, particularly of Bonington, of whose fame he admits being wary. In fact, the penultimate line of the book acknowledges that he had seen his companions "at their very best." Venables is humble and grateful, particularly to Bonington and Kapadia, upon whose strength of reputation a helicopter evacuation was effected.

The single most noteworthy nuance (Roberts' dictum) of this book may not necessarily be expeditionary. Throughout the trip, Venables experiences a longing for home from which he never quite recovers. This is further developed by Venables' description of the severe illness suffered by his young son after he returns home. Nietzsche once described literature as "the desire to be elsewhere." It's a feeling climbers know well, both when we're in the mountains and in our non-climbing lives. Venables has a light touch with regard to his doubts: he doesn't let them overwhelm the book, but never lets them go, either.

Venables is not, of course, an average climber, nor were any of his companions on this trip. But in many ways this book speaks to the aspects of climbing that I value, more so than those espoused in other climbing narratives, which of late seem to require some desperate sensational scheme or tragedy. Here we have, as Bob Bates said so well in the title of his book, "Mystery, Beauty, Danger." Added to the mix are capable companions and a little luck and humility. What more could one want from a book, or a climb?

DAVID STEVENSON

#### IN BRIEF

*Regions of the Heart: The Triumph and Tragedy of Alison Hargreaves*, by David Rose and Ed Douglas (National Geographic Press, \$25), is an important biography that seeks to set the record straight about Hargreaves—her drive, her status as a professional, and her responsibility as a parent. Rose and Douglas are simultaneously objective and sympathetic in their telling of her complex life's story.

*Left for Dead: My Journey Home from Everest*, by Beck Weathers (Villard, \$24.95). The story of Weathers' survival on Everest in 1996 is already well-known; this is more the story of his life, and Weathers casts a cool eye on himself: depression, dysfunction, and obsession.

*The Eiger: Vertical Arena*. Edited by Daniel Anker (Mountaineers Books, \$32.95). Anker has collected 17 climbers' views in this profusely illustrated history.

*Everest: Alone at the Summit*. Stephen Venables (Thunders Mouth Press, \$14.95). First American edition of Venables' climb of the Kangshung Face of Everest (see Ed Webster's *Snow in the Kingdom*, reviewed above). Tom Holzel called it an intensely told epic described with "great realism" in these pages in 1990.

*Across the Frozen Himalaya*, by Harish Kohli (Indus Publishing, New Delhi) describes a 2000-kilometer ski traverse from the Karakoram Pass to the Lipu Lekh Pass through the coldest winter in two decades. It is a remarkable adventure by Kohli, who, in 1981-'82, traversed the Himalaya on foot—8000 kilometers in 475 days.

*Denali: A Literary Anthology*, edited by Bill Sherwonit (Mountaineers Books, \$18.95), is a new volume that collects a variety of literary works. Although the mountaineering accounts collected here will be familiar to most readers of this journal, the "Native Sacred Stories" and natural history sections make a valuable contribution. A great book for readers new to the area. Sherwonit's *To the Top of Denali: Climbing Adventures on North America's Highest Peak* (Alaska Northwest Books, \$14.95) has been reissued in a tenth anniversary edition. Sherwonit has added salient chapters on the tragedies of the 1992 season and guiding on the mountain to an already indispensable history of climbing on Denali.

*Shishapangma: The Alpine-Style Ascent of the South-West Face*, by Doug Scott and Alex MacIntyre (Mountaineers Books, \$19.95), was the winner of the first Boardman Tasker Award in 1984 when it was published as *The Shishapangma Expedition*. This new edition has additional photographs and several pages of new historical data.