have visited at one point or another, a mixture of fear, isolation, and doubt that can only be overcome by advancing or accepting the reality of a debilitating retreat. As you read on you feel the fear that gnaws at Crouch and his teammates as they endlessly wait for a break in the weather, a fear he equates to a soldier waiting for D Day. You feel the base camp blues. The terror of sitting out a storm in a tent perched precariously on a lofty ledge, not knowing what is going on in the dark outside, conscious only of the wind tearing at your tent, seeking to hurl you from the side of the mountain. To Crouch, climbing with honor and skill is life itself.

Crouch is rightfully obsessed by the winds of Patagonia, indeed scarcely a page passes without some reference to the wind and anyone coming to this place suffers some degree of anemomania (wind madness). His military training at West Point and Army Ranger School characterize his approach to all obstacles and has well prepared him for the physical and psychological challenges faced in his seven trips to the wilds of Patagonia. Each barrier or crux becomes a frontal assault ending either in victory or retreat, but never defeat. Retreats are resolved as battles to be fought again. It is no accident that on several occasions he uses the word crucible to describe the peaks and valleys, a crucible where the values he so respects are forged.

Climbers and adventure readers will enjoy this book. The technical descriptions are straightforward and detailed enough for the climber, and his thoughtful inclusion of a climbing glossary gives the casual reader a better feel for the climbing sequences.

Thankfully Crouch has avoided the current fad to overuse trendy terminology to the point of rendering most articles incomprehensible to all except the youngest and most hip readers. One thing is made very clear; success in the mountains of Patagonia cannot be bought by well-financed climbing dilettantes. These mountains make themselves accessible only through old school dedication and a long apprenticeship in the alpine trade.

Climbers should read this book, not to learn about climbing, but perhaps to learn more about themselves. Non-climbers should read it to better understand the strange lot that does climb.

JOHN BRAGG


The book begins in 1980, with the young Rick Ridgeway writing about his surviving an avalanche that killed a close friend: "I need to get this down while it's still fresh." Yet he wisely waited before expanding upon that lead. Twenty years later, Below Another Sky was published in New York, where editors cast a wary eye at writers under 40. The conventional wisdom among these publishers is that young writers lack the life experience to perform the so-called "act of literature."

Below Another Sky could not have been written with such lucidity immediately after the avalanche. It is no accident, however, that the best-selling climbing disasters rush cathartically to press from hospital rooms and funerals: Whymper spinning the Matterhorn fall, Herzog agonizing over his Annapurna frostbite, Simpson embellishing his crevasse abandonment, or Krakauer recreating the Everest tragedy. Until Ridgeway's book, there
was no climber pulling a *River Runs Through It* and taking a couple of decades to hone their defining tragedy. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve avidly devoured the aforementioned books, but *Below Another Sky* effectively asks if climbing literature is too narcissistic, or lacking in feminine perspective, as if our asexual mountaineers never face the consequences of returning home to any family or community outside the sterile ranges. (In the interest of full disclosure, as a writer, I too may be responsible for this vacuum.) Of course, Ridgeway has also written other expedition books that follow the limitations of traditional form. His *Seven Summits* for instance, became a bestseller eight years before *Into Thin Air*, recounting how wealthy clients were towed up the world’s tallest mountain—without a body count. While his other books artfully describe classic moments in mountaineering history, at the appearance of his newest and most inventive book, *Below Another Sky*, the judges for the American Alpine Club unanimously awarded Ridgeway the Literary Award. It is to the reader’s advantage that the author waited and contemplated his loss for two decades, so that he could describe a mountaineering disaster with careful hindsight.

So this thoughtful story is rare because it begins—rather than ends—with tragedy, and Ridgeway avoids exploiting Jonathan Wright’s death by celebrating his life and focusing on the survivors. Nearly two decades after the accident, Ridgeway takes Wright’s daughter, Asia, back to Tibet in order to try and show her her long-dead father. Admittedly, it is an emotional book, which less sensitive literati, equipped with overly sensitive bullshit detectors, might pronounce mawkish. But in my opinion, Ridgeway has taken great verbal risks to unveil some awkward truths. He didn’t wait this long to simply weave a tale of sentimentality. By utilizing carefully structured vignettes about past mistakes, Ridgeway’s purpose, in the time-honored tradition of a tribal elder, is to pass on wisdom and judgment. Whether he actually told all of these lessons to Asia during their journey is a moot point, because the structure works, while Ridgeway’s candidness effectively transports the reader.

For instance, although he openly admires the authenticity of Wright’s Buddhist beliefs as quoted in journals and conversations, Ridgeway shows his own skepticism about this sometimes-trendy theology in a hilarious anecdote about a Hollywood Buddhist. Or by freely sharing his and Asia’s foibles and doubts, the reader is moved by flesh and blood characters—rather than the understated male prose, the partnership conflicts, or the grieving and one-dimensional caricatures that already dominate this particular disaster genre.

Quietly, without the hoopla of other mountaineering accidents (in 1980, the media wasn’t covering deaths on unheard-of peaks such as Minya Konka), Ridgeway has created a durable adventure memoir, a cross between *The Snow Leopard* and *Moments of Doubt*. The story builds like the slow-breaking waves that Ridgeway is fond of surfing, pulling the reader through one anecdote after another, tumbling along with Asia toward the inevitable shore break.

There are also bright nuances about Ridgeway’s jail time in South America, his marriage, and his climbing partnership with the luminaries—Yvon Chouinard, Chris Chandler, Ron Fear, John Roskelly—that are at once fascinating and then enlightening for anyone who ever entertained a life of adventure.

As a gifted storyteller, it should come as no surprise that Ridgeway deftly paints the willful Asia, the iconoclastic Yvon, and the sensory aspects of an avalanche ride. To meet Rick Ridgeway is also to know that this book is sincere, because he writes as he talks, softly, describing his fiercely won friends as merely “good buddies” and avoiding, at all costs, the didactic. He is the quintessential filmmaker in this manner, deploying images instead of unnecessary
language. In *Below Another Sky* we know where Rick's story will end, with Asia at the grave of her father and his friend, but it's the stops along the way that provide resonance and make this intensely personal book a compelling act of literature.

*Above the Clouds: The Diaries of a High Altitude Mountaineer.*

When the American Alpine Club received the first invitation ever from the USSR to climb in the Pamir, in 1974, Anatoli Boukreev was 16 years old—and just beginning his high altitude training in the Tien Shan. He did some first ascents of 5,000 meter peaks even then. What he went on to accomplish would make him a gold medalist many times over if climbing and taking care of others—in and out of the mountains—were an Olympic sport. He managed despite asthma (probably brought on by coal dust), a bout of meningitis, a car accident, a bus accident, and the collapse of the USSR. The latter resulted in the privatization of sports, and thus no more financial support for Russian climbers.

In *Above the Clouds* the reader learns from a collection of Boukreev's journals and articles, edited by his companion Linda Wylie, about the life of an athlete/philosopher raised in Kazakhstan. Through several accounts of his signature climbs between 1990 and 1997, we are given great insight and much more depth on the Russian system of training and the team spirit that prevailed there than is found in his Everest book, *The Climb*.

A lengthy foreword by Galen Rowell, who had been asked to accompany Anatoli on what became his ill-fated Annapurna attempt, provides the reader with good reason to read on, to learn about this man. A sample quote: "Anatoli's fine mind was far more in tune with its body, which it rightly recognized as part of, rather than separate from the natural world...." Having set the stage with comments like this, Rowell also takes some time to put the Everest events of 1996 in perspective.

Linda Wright's 30-page introduction tells us of Anatoli's background—his formative years in the coal town Korkino (which means "the last crust of bread") and later Almaty—both in Kazakhstan—and the Russian style of training: the reliance on team climbing and comradeship.

I had turned down the corners of about 25 pages by the end of the book. When I reviewed what I had marked, I found a consistent reference to his belief that to be in the mountains to the fullest, one needs to train—to "derive pleasure from the process of physical and mental development." I found that he had gone out many times—often alone—from the safety of camp to find or to give aid to comrades late in returning. And then there was his reverence for the mountains: "It is myself that I struggle with in this life, not with the mountains. Their greatness and strength is indisputable, only man is in transit, evolving, growing, and the road that we choose to follow in life depends less on the surrounding world than on our spirit—the internal voice that pushes one to seek new challenges."