

In contrast, Bayers is an academic of an unamusing type. His sources are the likes of Foucault, Barthes, Terry Eagleton, Edward Said. From which anyone who has studied literature of the humanities in the last 20 years will know that we are in a country called “postmodernism.” Appropriately therefore, this is a book about texts. Seven in fact: three about climbing Denali (Cook, Browne, and Stuck); and four about Everest (Younghusband, John Hunt, Tenzing Norgay, and Krakauer). These are all critiqued for the light they shed on the tropes of masculinity and imperialism. One needs a stomach for academic prose, but I found the going worth the effort, especially the dissection of Younghusband’s chest-thumping *The Epic of Mount Everest* (1926) and the vestiges of the Empire in Hunt’s *The Ascent of Everest* (1953). Of the former he says: “Through his portrayal of Mallory and Irvine’s deaths, Younghusband’s narrative capitalizes on the public sentiment towards the now idealized body of the dead male soldier [dead in the trenches of WWI]. Their warrior bodies lying high on the slopes of Everest represent the physical courage of their lived actions . . .” Of the latter, Bayers illuminates how: “Hunt is caught between his desires to legitimate Britain’s imperial traditions while also trying to distance the expedition from the pejorative connotations of imperialism [and] in the end the narrative celebrates the masculine imperial ethos of the adventure tradition.” The weakest chapter is the last. Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air* is unconvincingly shoehorned into the argument by conflating imperialism with globalization and its Third World effects.

The message here is that there are more determinants of the climbing experience than you can shake a piton at. History, literature, culture, ideology, aesthetics—all bear on the motivation to climb. That’s worth remembering in the light of the contemporary emphasis on the psychological. Remember the next time you tie onto a rope: there are ancient ghosts in the air.

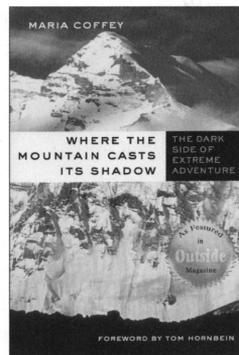
JOHN THACKRAY

Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow: The Dark Side of Extreme Adventure. MARIA COFFEY. NEW YORK: ST. MARTIN’S PRESS, 2003. 234 PAGES. HARDCOVER. \$23.95.

You expect a lot from a book that garners awards at the Banff Mountain Book Festival. And *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow* delivers. The book tackles an unusual, historically under-examined subject in mountaineering literature: What is life like as a top high altitude mountaineer? What is the impact of that life on loved ones—partner, children, and parents—during the climber’s life and after he (or she) is gone?

To get answers, Coffey interviewed many top climbers or their survivors—Conrad Anker, Chris Bonington, Anatoli Boukreev, Kitty Calhoun, John Harlin III, Lynn Hill, Alex Lowe, Joe Simpson, Ed Viesturs, and Jim Wickwire, to name but a few—and exhaustively researched the book with an impressive roster of noted sociologists, psychologists, and historians.

If Coffey’s approach sounds clinical—about as exciting as watching a belay—rest assured, it’s anything but. This book is a page-turner: Coffey’s writing style is direct and ferociously honest, while her use of emotionally gripping anecdotes infuses an engaging, novelistic feel. Hollywood couldn’t script stories more wrenching or ennobling than the death of Chris Kerrebrock in a



Denali crevasse while singing a boyhood song, or the poignant love story of New Mexican nurse practitioner Linda Wylie and Kazakhstan alpine superstar Anatoli Boukreev.

The seed for Coffey's book was planted in 1982, when Coffey's partner of two-and-a-half years, Joe Tasker, the great British mountaineer, disappeared with Pete Boardman on the unclimbed northeast ridge of Everest. Until that moment, Coffey felt she was drifting through life—30 years old, sedentary, immature, bored by her teaching job, passive, without passion or purpose. In Tasker, Coffey had found not only a boyfriend, but also, for the first time, status and direction.

When Tasker disappeared, Coffey wrote, his "death jolted me alive." In 1989 she published her first book, *Fragile Edge*, about dealing with Tasker's death. In the intervening years she completely overhauled her life: physically, in relocating from Britain to Canada; professionally, through crafting a calling as adventure guide and writer; and emotionally, by building a long marriage and discovering the zest and focus for which she admired Tasker. Coffey's impressive personal journey is reflected in the maturity and power of *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow*.

The book unfolds essentially into three sections. Initially, Coffey examines the many reasons why, despite appalling fatality rates, people do extreme climbing. These include addictive highs and hormonal rushes; cravings for extreme physical exertion and experiences; a sense of purpose; play and youthfulness; spiritual "flow"; artistic self expression; a direct connection with nature; and satisfaction from living on a heroic scale, exercising control in difficult situations, and experiencing "moments of perfection."

Coffey also lays out mountaineering's secondary rewards: exciting travel, wild parties, glamorous buzz, entree into a close-knit community, acceptance by an interesting group of friends, and for the top practitioners, even fame and prestige. (Bonington was knighted; Tasker and Scott met the Queen; blind Everest summiter Eric Weihenmayer visited the White House.)

The rewards, Coffey reveals, also extend to partners of mountaineers, who bask in "reflected glory," enjoying a dramatic, passionate, exciting, intense lifestyle, and gaining acceptance into the "protective circle" of the closely knit "climbing tribe," with its own rituals and active support network.

But in life there's always a price. In the book's second section Coffey shows us how climbers' partners pay for the climbing lifestyle, and what the cost is. For partners it means long separations, loneliness, the constant specter of widowhood (even today, the bereaved partners are invariably women), disrupted family routines, difficult "re-entry time" when the climber is home, as well as the emotional and physical absences when he is home but planning the next expedition. It also means dealing with the adulation heaped on the returning "hero," plus jealousy from the intense bonds her partner forms with climbing partners, and the awareness that he is emotionally centered outside the family.

And that list doesn't even take into account having to deal with endemic mountaineering personality traits such as restlessness, huge egos, single mindedness, self-importance, self-centeredness, and disdain for values like fidelity and truthfulness. Or what Coffey calls the "emotional toll of mopping up so much tragedy." For when an expedition death occurs, it's typically the partner at home who is stuck with the awful task of contacting and comforting the dead mountaineer's next of kin.

Yet it turns out that many women, like Jenny Lowe after Alex Lowe's death, opt to be "lifers" in the mountaineering community. After the death of a mountaineer partner, it is common for the woman to become romantically involved with another mountaineer.

The book's last section focuses on children and parents of mountaineers, who, unlike the climber or his partner, don't have a choice in the situation. The result is an invariably complex relationship.

For children this means mixed emotions and messages, such as dealing with a father gone for long stretches, including routine absences during birthdays and other important childhood milestones; feeling that Dad prefers the mountains to his family; and experiencing unusual childhood situations—for example, routine attendance at memorial services. The toll can be considerable and is often expressed in wild behavior, craving for ordinariness, anger at the mountaineering parent (often anger at the surviving parent), and later on, difficulty forming stable adult relationships.

"Ordinary" climbers will be fascinated by the voyeuristic peek into the world of top mountaineers this book offers. Coffey doesn't dish gossip gratuitously, but it emerges that the much-lionized Alex Lowe, for instance, was an emotionally distant son and father. Joe Tasker, Coffey reveals, not only cheated on her, but self-righteously and indignantly lied to her about it.

My biggest criticism of the book is a certain lack of perspective. It shows us how the death of a 35-year-old on Everest is particularly painful for the climber and particularly tragic for the loved ones. But what about 35-year-olds—or anyone, for that matter—who die in car crashes? After protracted battles with AIDS? Multiple sclerosis? Breast cancer? Are these deaths "less heroic"? Less painful? Less wrenching on family and friends?

That aside, *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow* is a gripping must-read. Despite the book's grim title, it manages to reveal some elements of sun, as well as the shadow, in the lives of the top mountaineers. And it helps the rest of us better understand and appreciate what their world is about.

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The Naked Mountain. REINHOLD MESSNER. (TIM CARRUTHERS, TRANSLATOR.) SEATTLE: THE MOUNTAINEERS BOOKS, 2003. 315 PAGES. HARDCOVER. \$22.95.

The Naked Mountain is Reinhold Messner's account of the 1970 expedition to climb Nanga Parbat's Rupal Face, led by Karl Herligkoffer. In it Messner recounts his and his brother Günther's success in gaining the summit, and the tragic events surrounding Günther's death on the descent.

Finally available in English and published in America last November, this is Messner's 40th book. Intense controversy surrounding Messner's account of Günther's death has swirled around this book since its German publication in 2002. Expedition members have accused him of sacrificing his brother in an attempt to traverse the mountain, and Messner has responded vigorously—even with lawsuits. While I haven't read the contradictory accounts*, I did go back over the relevant sections in Messner's autobiography (*Reinhold Messner—Free Spirit*, 1991) and his *All 14 Eight Thousanders*, as well as a 2003 article by Greg Child in *Outside* that discusses the controversy. To say this is a somewhat incestuous and complicated tale is a huge understatement, but not at all surprising.

