

the words themselves seem deliberately to avoid any form of soaring beauty, fulfillment or catharsis—"I ordered a beer and the waitress who brought it to me smiled at my accent. A prostitute asked in Slovak if she could join me and I let her. She asked if I spoke German. I used a candle on the table to light a cigarette for her. In Slovak, she asked if I liked her and I said no. She crushed out the cigarette as if it were my hand and left the restaurant."

With such an emulative style, the language takes few risks; it remains as constrained by structure and rationality as the characters themselves, who, even in their sexual abandon lack convincing passion, and whose affairs, revealed one by one, fit into a far-too-elegant, almost mathematical design to be natural—just as their climbing is too perfectly heroic (particularly in the opening rescue scene) to be believable. (And here the reader makes a natural comparison to David Roberts' *Like Water and Like Wind*, an alpine-climbing novella whose author is brave enough to portray the messiness of real human emotions, the inscrutability of desires, and the failure of heroism.)

And yet near the beginning of the story, Merritt has written two extraordinary sentences, which in themselves contain the entire novel—and beyond it, a whole universe, whose every gesture and word have been hollowed out, and whose hope of presence and transcendence becomes the most inconsolably haunting and beautiful shadow of all: "Molly stood near the rock and touched it with her hands. It looked like she was praying, but actually she only warmed her hands and recalled the corn kernel texture of the rough granite."

Climbing, the novel seems to tell us, may be an illusory form of redemption and solace, and yet it is all that many of us ever find.

KATIE IVES

Mountain Rescue—Chamonix Mt. Blanc: A Season with the World's Busiest Mountain Rescue Service. ANNE SAUVY. TRANSLATED BY SUE HARPER. LONDON: BÂTON WICKS, 2005. 300 PAGES. SOFTCOVER. £14.99. \$34.95.

Anyone who has climbed very much in Chamonix recognizes the sound—the ominous thwock, thwock, thwock of a rescue helicopter. Knowing that, on average, one person dies every week in the mountains above Chamonix, you get a hollow feeling in your stomach. "Ask not for whom the helicopter thwocks...." Then you try to put it out of your mind. Focus on the route, the view, the summit, the cold beer at the bottom of the *téléphérique*, anything but what that helicopter is up to. Screw your karma down tight and keep going.

Mountain Rescue—Chamonix Mt. Blanc is the diary of a climber who took the opposite approach, spending an entire summer with the Chamonix rescue service—the Peloton de Gendarmerie de Haute Montagne, or "PGHM." The author, Anne Sauvy, is a scholar who has been climbing since she was in school. She became known in France as the author of *Nadir*, a novel (published only in French) that involves a mountain rescue. In the course of writing *Nadir* she did a lot of research on the PGHM and got interested in its operations. Ultimately, she spent the entire summer of 1997 with the PGHM, keeping the diary that became this book, translated into English in 2005.



Ms. Sauvy's life that summer consisted principally of hanging out at the PGHM's headquarters adjacent to the helipad from which the rescues—often as many as a dozen a day—are launched. Over the summer, she got to know the pilots, rescuers, doctors, and mechanics who ran the PGHM, as well as some of the rescued. Most rescues do not involve heroically snatching injured climbers off the face of the Dru or the Grandes Jorasses. The typical fare is retrieving climbers who have become exhausted on the standard route up Mt. Blanc, are stranded in bad weather, or have sprained an ankle jumping a crevasse, or hikers who have gotten lost or simply have fallen off a footpath. Virtually no one dies while being rescued. Thanks to the helicopters, rescues that would have taken a week back in the 50s (two classics of which are recounted) are now effected in an hour.

July was fun. Many were rescued, no one died, and the author helped out a few of the injured. August was not fun. As if the mountain gods had awoken from their slumber to claim their yearly tribute, the summer's body count climbed inexorably back into line with the annual average. Some days the PGHM operated more as undertaker than a rescue service. One of the rescuers himself died in a climbing accident not related to any rescue. A Russian climber was stranded on a ledge on the Dru for several days in a storm with the body of his fiancé, who had been killed by rockfall while standing next to him. While these tragedies were unfolding, tabloid photographers circled the helipad like jackals, on the lookout for cover shots. The author thought of dropping the project, but was persuaded to continue.

In addition to an interesting account of the PGHM's activities that summer and a description of some of its techniques, the book offers an insider's perspective on life in Chamonix that most climbers never glimpse. Climbers tend to pass through Chamonix on their way to a *téléphérique* and a route, the only points of contact being shops, restaurants, and bars. Extended or multiple trips simply multiply that experience. Almost all of the books on Chamonix are written from that same perspective. This book offers a different angle—Chamonix as a place where people live, work, attend funerals, and discuss not only the latest first ascent or accident, but the attendant media coverage and even some of the occasionally ensuing litigation.

Another interesting result of the difference in perspective is a look at the climbers from the vantage point of the rescue service. The rescued run the gamut from climbers with severe injuries who apologize for inconveniencing the PGHM or Eastern Europeans who offer to walk down on broken limbs because they are afraid they will be charged and can't afford to pay, to those who demand to be rescued because they are tired and then berate the rescuers for making them wait while they were inconveniently off saving some other climber's life.

In the end, the book is a tribute to the PGHM. They can't change the fact that mountain climbing is dangerous, but they emerge as a dedicated group who are pleased to shift the odds in your favor when you are in their mountains.

JOHN MCINERNEY

Into the Unknown: The Remarkable Life of Hans Kraus. SUSAN E.B. SCHWARTZ. LINCOLN (NE): IUNIVERSE: 2005. 306 PAGES. SOFTCOVER. \$21.95.

Hans Kraus lived the life most of us dream of. Few manage to balance, let alone excel at, both a professional and recreational career the way Kraus did. He was a visionary and bold climb-