

to the base of the peak and then making a pair of solo attempts, the latter ending in his death. That second attempt has been a source of much speculation over the years as to whether Wilson was in fact bent on suicide. “The crux of Wilson’s tale,” Powter explains, “lies in whether his return to the mountain was truly a dedicated last shot, or more honestly a sad resignation to fate—as though he simply ended the journey by going up rather than down.” In the end, such profoundly disturbing questions must remain unanswered, and Powter’s great strength as a writer is to defer from any psychological vandalism, leaving undisturbed the inner recesses of a human heart racked with suffering.

There is no denying the pain and melancholy that seem to throb from the pages of this book. Yet, as Powter summarizes it in his epilogue, “the best way to understand how the mind and body work is to observe illness or dysfunction; the stories of what went *wrong* here might offer clues to what goes right in the best cases.” For readers who prefer stories of triumphant ascents, *Strange and Dangerous Dreams* will be a real downer. But for those who agree with Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living, this book should offer genuine hope and immense reading pleasure.

JOHN P. O’GRADY

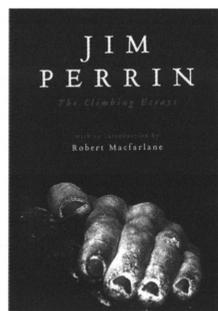
*Note: Strange and Dangerous Dreams received the Special Jury Mention Award at the Banff Mountain Book Festival 2006.*

*The Climbing Essays.* JIM PERRIN. GLASGOW: THE IN PINN, 2006. 8 PAGES OF BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOS; 6 OF COLOR. 320 PAGES. HARDCOVER. £18. \$44.95.

In *The Climbing Essays* Jim Perrin has collected nearly 40 years of essays, 60 of them in all. I cannot think of a book in our literature that can match it for depth, elegance of language, clarity of vision, or its sheer, yet somehow modest, brilliance. Robert Macfarlane contributes a fine introduction to the volume, reminding me that his *Mountains of the Mind* (2003) surely deserves another read. Perrin introduces the essays with a dozen “Autobiographical Sketches” covering about 20 pages—the effect of which is of reading a book-length memoir—it’s intimate and gorgeous, a deeply textured fabric against which the climbing will be counterpoised.

In keeping with Tim O’Brien’s dictum that great writing should be greeted with a kind of “holy silence” perhaps I should stop now before I make any noise that might distract anyone from the book itself. Another strategy might be to just extract a dozen passages from these essays and let these speak for themselves. Or just one, for example, this from “Adventuring on the Lllewn” (1991):

*“We dawdled around, drank more coffee, and towards midday sauntered out of the house. This may have been a mistake. We were setting off on a miserable December day to drive for the best part of an hour to do a 700-ft route with a complex and frightening approach, difficult route-finding, seven or eight pitches, poor belays. All this, as you know intuitively at the time, adds up to the trap closing behind you. But you carry on because to commit yourself to it brings into play a primal reliance on your own resources that’s close to the essence of why we climb.”*



This is plain writing but it has the great virtue of honesty, not to mention a stated purpose: to strike towards “the essence of why we climb.” I think all Perrin’s essays do this, sometimes overtly and sometimes slyly, wherein “climb” and “live” and “love” are either metonymic, or indistinguishable, or all one thing. In fact, this passage may not “typify” Perrin’s prose style, which often employs elevated diction, literary references, and British place names—all of which I find very appealing. I am reading, after all, to learn something of what I don’t know, not merely to have my own observations confirmed.

Having never climbed in Great Britain, I only recognize a handful of routes by name; *Cenotaph Corner* and *A Dream of White Horses* come most readily to mind (yes, they appear in these pages). Thus, Perrin mentions dozens of climbs, climbing areas, and persons that are unknown to me—it’s like some marvelous fictional world and works as a purely literary achievement.

Macfarlane astutely notes that “(Beinn A’Chaoruinn and) The Vision of Glory” is a great essay in which Perrin best articulates the transcendental moments he experiences in the mountains. Perrin tells us: “I do not know how you can adequately describe these moments and their effect on our lives.” About their effect on our lives he says: “Our essential life, the joy-life, is a sequence of these moments.” And later: “The moments seem to come more easily in the mountains.” He is equally “adequate” in describing the moments themselves. Along the way he cites Wordsworth and Shipton, and it’s a reasonably clear literary lineage that may be extrapolated. In other essays we are unsurprised to learn of his admiration for Murray and Tillman, and for his prose style, the great essayist, William Hazlitt.

Perrin’s own favorite among his work is “Vision and Virians” about climbing on the sea cliffs of west Britain with his son Will, then 15 years old. This is the essay he chose for inclusion in Pat Ament’s excellent and undervalued *Climber’s Choice* (2002). At the time, both 1995 when he wrote it and when he selected it, he could not have known that Will would live only a few more years. Nonetheless, Perrin observes near the end of the essay: “For me, it is both a pleasure and painful responsibility to see him habituating to this environment of deadly beauty in which so many of my friends have died.” Its companion piece, “Will” (2004) is Perrin’s funeral address for his son, an expression of love and broken-heartedness that is miraculously free of self-pity and sentimentality. I felt honored its author would share it with me.

In “For Arnold Pines,” an essay first written in 1979 and revised for broadcast in 1993, Perrin invokes Montaigne: “ever since I can remember nothing has occupied my imagination more than death....” Yet, his is not a morbid fascination. “You can scarcely disagree,” he says, “that the risk of death is indissociable from the thrill of climbing.” It’s not so much that climbers would disagree, rather, many would pretend it were otherwise. What Perrin understands is that “In great danger, there is great joy.” Two sides of a single coin spinning on a tabletop.

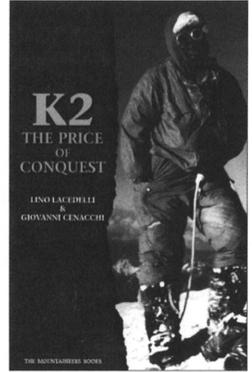
After the “Autobiographical Sketches” the book is separated into three sections: “Climbs,” “The Climbers,” and “On Climbing.” Each section is imbued with elements of the other two. Add to this that the pieces are not ordered chronologically, but rather “plotted.” The effect is recursive—I felt like I was always being returned back into the book, which felt to me like an inexhaustible universe.

Although *The Climbing Essays* was awarded the Jon White Award for Mountain Literature at the Banff Mountain Book Festival in 2006 it has, as of this moment, yet to find a North American publisher. This seems a shameful commentary on the state of publishing here, where the market rules and editors pander to the reading public’s lowest common denominator. The

climbing world is small and somewhat insular, given to value what may ultimately lack significance. We need Perrin's vision—expansively human and literate—to awaken us to what climbing, love, and life might be.

DAVID STEVENSON

***K2: The Price of Conquest.* LINO LACEDELLI & GIOVANNI CENACCHI. SEATTLE: THE MOUNTAINEERS BOOKS, 2006. 124 PAGES. 30 BLACK & WHITE PHOTOS. \$16.95.**



Was there ever a large climbing expedition that did not spew out rancor, *ressentiment* and the whine of wounded pride in its wake? Perhaps, but damn few. For a display of the very worst in human nature that mountaineering can bring out, surely none tops the Italian first ascent of K2 in 1954, whose summiters were Achille Compagnoni and Lino Lacedelli. The chief whiner in this sordid opera has been the much-calumnied Walter Bonatti. From his efforts to clear his name, and correct a false official narrative, the climbing community has learnt something of this climb's internal politics. And now there is more, much more—courtesy of the US publication of *K2: The Price of Conquest* (first published in Italy in 2004 to mark the 50th anniversary) in which Lacedelli now purports to tell all.

One cannot get very far into this book before questioning Lacedelli's credentials as a truth teller. In the half century since his climb, he has not merely stuck his head in the sand. He mutely supported many untruths promulgated by the late Compagnoni and Ardito Desio, the martinet leader, even in joint press appearances. But the trouble is that mani pulliti (dirty hands) cannot be washed clean with the assertion that "I went along to get along." Even on the mountain, out of range of the universally hated Desio, where Lacedelli was the stronger and more talented, on the pre-summit day he uncomplainingly deferred to Compagnoni's decision to locate their tent where they were at needless risk.

Of his long history of lacunae and evasions, he says "Sometimes I confirmed things even when I knew they hadn't happened exactly like that" in the first minute of the interview with Cenecchi that is the heart of the book. Why? That is the enigma. Here is a sport that is supposed to build character, and what we have is a gentle giant who tolerated scores of others' falsehoods by making himself invisible when truth cried out to be heard—not a morally edifying sight.

In the end he is of some help to Bonatti's version of the metanarrative. He confirms Bonatti's picture of the events on the pre-summit day, but insists, *contra* Bonatti, that the summiters ran out of oxygen before topping out. (Sorting out this and other domains of conflict, agreement, and speculative reenactment is beyond the scope of this review.)

"Ripeness is all," declaims one of Shakespeare's heroes. Alas, Lacedelli's chronic lack of it cannot, as he doubtless now imagines, be compensated for at this late date. Nor by the character assassination of Desio and Compagnoni. As Bad Guys they are worse than I'd imagined, real villains. But Lacedelli is a bad guy of a different, yet no more savory kind, the empty suit.

JOHN THACKRAY