

To climb the Eiger in homage to one's lost father, with IMAX filmmakers in attendance and a book contract in hand, could have amounted to little more than a stunt. Neither book nor film would have been produced to celebrate what would have been merely the umpteenth ascent of the 1938 route without that connection—even though the climber was a man in his late forties. But it turns out that *The Eiger Obsession* is a moving, surprising, deeply introspective, and altogether splendid work. In our vast literature of mountaineering, there is no other memoir quite like it.

John Harlin III was only nine years old when his father's fixed rope broke and he plunged to his death in 1966. With disarming honesty, the son writes, "I wish I knew my father. All my life people have asked me how much I remember him, and the answer is that I really don't know." (I guess other friends were less reticent than I about asking the key question.) Because of that distance and uncertainty, *Obsession* is as much a work of biographical research as it is a memoir. Yet the personal strands of the story add a trenchant testimony to a kind of mountain writing that is just beginning to be explored, most notably by Maria Coffey: the impact of death on the loved ones left behind.

Harlin's book goes deepest when he plumbs the sorrows of his long-suffering mother and of his devastated younger sister. The book becomes almost shocking as Harlin unblinkingly recounts the less-than-admirable behavior of some of his father's closest but most difficult partners, especially Gary Hemming and Dougal Haston. (With role models like that, who came to the ends they did, it is a wonder that the younger Harlin climbed at all!)

Finally, as Harlin does battle with his mountain nemesis, freely acknowledging the spasms of fear and doubt that climbing writers all too often suppress, the book becomes a rattling good adventure tale.

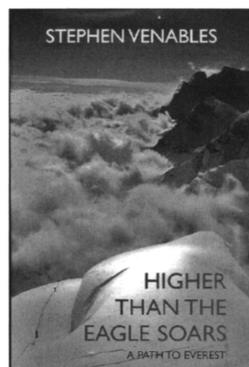
When John Harlin III won the AAC Literary Award last year, the honor was long overdue. Year after year, as chairman of the selection committee, Harlin refused to allow his name to be put in nomination, despite the ardent pleas of his colleagues. When he finally stepped down, the committee could pin the medal to his jacket lapel. And if anyone in the climbing world still wonders why Harlin so richly deserves the award, the answer is simple: read this powerful and utterly genuine book.

DAVID ROBERTS

Higher than the Eagle Soars: A Path to Everest. STEPHEN VENABLES. LONDON: HUTCHINSON, 2007. 370 PAGES. HARDCOVER. \$49.95.

Don't be scared by the clunky title—*Higher than the Eagle Soars* manages to be both thrilling and introspective. It is a rare climbing retrospective that can hold my interest from first to last, but this one did. The retrospective is a daunting genre, because it draws lines of connection from youth's telling impulses—the tree that needed climbing in the front yard—to adulthood's raging struggles—that ice-choked crack in the Karakoram. But Venables pulls it off, engaging the reader from early music lessons, through the mountaineering club at Oxford, all the way to Everest.

Stephen Venables is a familiar name to most climbers, first thanks to his resumé of hard,



lightweight ascents in the big mountains of Asia, and second because of the award-fetching books documenting those climbs. *Higher* offers an overview of this one climbing life, and delves deeper into the man behind the frostbite. Venables is an accomplished writer, and readers warm to his affable, understated style. For instance, before a hard first ascent in Peru he observes, "Some basic climbing ability is always helpful when pioneering new routes in the world's greater ranges, but what really counts is making yourself comfortable and having a good night's sleep." He proceeds to sketch this climb, like the others in this book, with a satisfying portrait of physical risk and emotional response. It is Venables' ability to put the reader in his own quaking boots that makes him a master of the climbing narrative.

The book's climbing tales rub elbows with lions of the British 80's scene—Dick Renshaw and Lindsay Griffin, Alex MacIntyre and Peter Boardman—and takes us from the Lake District to the Highlands, from the Alps to Pakistan, to Nepal and back. Throughout, Venables dramatizes the joy of exploring other countries when climbing is your entrée—you meet another culture in the intense focus of the trip, and thereby break through to something more than a tourist's jaded comfort.

One psychological dynamic most of us can identify with is the rat whose gnawing Venables can't help but feed. Climb, no matter the cost in comfort, relationships, career, or digits. He captures that familiar agony that drives an otherwise sane person to take beautiful scenery on a beautiful day and focus it all into one line's grim contest with gravity. "I cursed the immaculate weather, and wished there were some way of avoiding my self-imposed destiny.... Fear of future regret outweighed fear of the risks." This is vintage Venables: honest, accurate, and bold, without being proud. On a lighter note, the book's color photographs offer a minatory lesson in the history of British glasses, from bad rectangular frames, to worse round peepers.

In sum, the climbing stories are engaging, and in many cases able retellings of epics familiar from his eight previous books. What distinguishes *Higher* is what distinguishes Venables himself—the range of interests. For example, these thoughts on Yorkminster Cathedral: "entranced by the pale gleam of its Tadcaster stone and the eclectic mishmash of styles, from the restrained lancets of the north transept to the floral exuberance of the great west window, all of it somehow adding up organically, in the way that those great Gothic cathedrals do, to something huge and timeless and emotionally uplifting." We don't generally get architectural rhapsodizing in climbing books. But like Ruskin before him, Venables brings the alpine aesthetic back to the city. Moreover, he is always keen to talk about classical music and opera, offers anecdotes from his days as thespian and set-designer, and slides references to canonical literature into his stories, in a humble, welcome manner.

This book ends in 1988 on Everest's Kangshung Face. This brilliant ascent is the conclusion to *Higher* and the culmination of Venables' many alpine adventures. The action of a four-man team pushing a new route up Everest without oxygen is powerful and engaging. What is more, the final ascent offers hallucinations that bring back many of the characters and experiences from his earlier life. Thus the narrative comes full circle, and the final chapters function like one of Venables' beloved symphonic codas—this conclusion restates the major theme, prolongs it enjoyably, and finally pushes it to a vigorous end. So, to mountain readers I say, get out your reading glasses, don your symphony frock, and enjoy the grand narrative Venables orchestrates on these pages.