Touching the Void. Joe Simpson. Harper & Row, New York; Jonathan Cape, London, 1988. 174 pages, black and white and color photographs, route diagrams, glossary (US edition). $17.95.

Since there is so much to praise in this book, which won the 1988 Boardman Tasker memorial award for mountain literature, I will get my reservations over with: the photographs (the majority in color), although striking, convey little impression of the route described. An endpaper sketch is an inadequate substitute for a good photograph of the entire line. The American edition shows the descent route on the dust jacket, but the definition is poor. And the narrative is so intense and self-contained that it gives only a limited sense of the author's personality. Chris Bonington found "something abrasive in his manner"; the dust jacket of the British edition describes him as "a keen Greenpeace activist." It is hard to infer either characterization from the text. Indeed, his account is at times almost prosaic. Be warned, however: it is extremely painful to read. Joe Simpson's agonizing epic of survival virtually becomes one's own.

So astonishing is Joe's escape from death that we nearly forget the preceding accomplishment: the first ascent, clearly very hazardous and difficult, of the steep and icy West Face of Siulá Grande, in the Peruvian Andes. With his partner Simon Yates, Joe hacks his way up fierce ice gullies and over rotten rock, for two very long days and more. The account is the more hair-raising for its understatement:

> My left foot slipped and the crampon points skittered on the rocks. I hated this sort of delicate balance climbing, but I was committed to it now; no going back. . . . I knew it would take just a couple of moves to reach easier ground, and tried convincing myself that if this wasn't so terrifyingly exposed I would walk up it, hands in pockets, but I couldn't shake off the fear. I was gripped.

And when the worst seems over they still have to fight their way up frighteningly steep flutings of powder snow to an unstable mushroom of a summit. A marvellous achievement: yet this is not what *Touching the Void* is about. Its subjects, ultimately, are survival and fear. Joe has a characteristic reaction upon gaining the top:

> If you succeed with one dream, you come back to square one and it's not long before you're conjuring up another, slightly harder, a bit more ambitious—a bit more dangerous. . . . it always unsettled me, this moment of reaching the summit, this sudden stillness and quiet after the storm.

Immediately the climbers find that the descent route is far riskier than anticipated—a treacherously corniced ridge, with the risk of avalanche on both precipitous sides. They spend another night in bivouac, they nearly get lost in bad weather, they fall—and yet it still seems that they will escape to the saddle with neighboring Yerupajá and a straightforward 3000 feet down to the glacier from which they started. But when Joe falls the next time, it is not just another

bad moment. The certainty that his leg is broken produces one of the most chilling recognitions I know of in mountaineering literature:

> [Simon] had an odd air of detachment. I felt unnerved by it, felt suddenly quite different from him, alienated. His eyes had been full of thoughts. Pity. Pity and something else; a distance given to a wounded animal which could not be helped. He had tried to hide it, but I had seen in, and I looked away full of dread and worry.

Simon nearly gets Joe down those 3000 feet, lowering him two rope-lengths at a time. But then, in the stormy night, Joe's full body weight comes on the rope. Unseen and unheard by Simon, he dangles over an enormous ice cliff. And after that, just before he seems about to be torn from his deteriorating stance in the snow (he has no snow stakes left), Simon does the presumably unthinkable: he cuts the rope and Joe drops into the void.

The rest of the book is told in alternating points of views of the two men. But while some of the thoughts are Simon's—they show a difficult honesty of relation—all the language is Joe's: at the end he thanks his partner for "his trust in allowing me to write these sensitive emotions in my own words." Sometimes the device works well: a dramatic counterpoint of Simon's narrative, written in the reasonable certainty that his companion is dead in the crevasse, with Joe's own sentient account of his persistence in staying alive; Simon's grittiness versus Joe's tendency toward speculation. At other times, however, the voices slide into a single bleak lyricism, and the characters are hard to differentiate.

Joe's ordeal in the crevasse produces some of the best writing in this very well-written book. His escape, the result of his extraordinary coolness and tenacity and some equally extraordinary good luck, is fascinating to follow. But even more striking is the way he rejects a death that most of us would have supposed inevitable.

> I thought carefully of the end. It wasn't how I had imagined it. It seemed pretty sordid. I hadn't expected a blaze of glory when it came, nor had I thought it would be like this slow pathetic fade into nothing. I didn't want it to be like that.

Finally, his refusal to die so ingloriously gives him not just the strength but the canny determination to find his way out of his enormous icy grave.

Joe is still a long way from Base Camp when he emerges from the crevasse: miles of glacier and moraine intervene. Crawling and hopping, in his crippled progress he resembles no one, or nothing, so much as a Samuel Beckett character: grotesque, without hope, yet dogged. ("And in this way I moved onward in the forest," says Beckett's Molloy, "slowly, but with a certain regularity, and I covered my fifteen paces, day in, day out, without killing myself. And I even crawled on my back, plunging my crutches blindly behind me into the thickets . . . ") Propelled by an inner voice, howling like a stricken animal, Joe fights his way to Base Camp just as Simon prepares to leave for home.

The book ends happily: Joe's leg is repaired; and even if it is not as good as new, it later gets him high into the Karakoram. But the question of guilt and responsibility remains. Joe dedicates the book to Simon and emphasizes that his severing the rope in fact saved both their lives. Never is there the suggestion that he had any choice, other than to do nothing and be dragged to his death. If forgiveness is required, Joe seems more than ready to provide it. Still, one wonders. . . . When, back at Base Camp, Simon prepares to cut through clothes to get at the shattered leg, Joe protests in the voice of a fearful victim: "The last time it [his knife] had been used on me was three and a half days ago." This phrase is more vivid than any of the subsequent exchanges of conciliation.

Although the book has few digressions, there is one that embodies its entire emphasis: a brief, hair-raising account of Joe and a partner living through a night in the Alps after their bivouac ledge collapses beneath them. Their ropes are cut, their hardware and even their boots are lost. For twelve hours, they hang by a doubtful safety line until a helicopter plucks them from the face. The partner loses his desire to climb; Joe retains his. Who can say why? The book leaves us with powerful emotions of all that is most irrational, and most compelling, about climbing.

STEVEN JERVIS

Thin Air: Encounters in the Himalayas. Greg Child. Patrick Stephens Ltd., Wellingborough, England, 1988. 192 pages, map, diagrams, color photographs, appendices (including black-and-white photographs identifying routes). £12.95.

Yosemite big-wall climbers do not often become deeply involved with Himalayan climbing, but Greg Child has managed the transition very nicely. After his first season in Yosemite Valley in 1977, Child was invited by Doug Scott to accompany him on his lecture tour to Scotland that winter. On off days they climbed; thus did Child receive his introduction to Scottish ice climbing. After returning to Yosemite, Child became obsessed with El Cap routes, though he did manage a trip to Patagonia, where he failed in an attempt to climb the west face of Fitz Roy. Such was the nature of his alpine experience when the invitation came from Scott to join an expedition to Shivling, a 21,467-foot peak in the Garhwal Himalaya. Scott had correctly assessed the Himalayan climbing potential of the twenty-year-old Australian; besides, Child would make an excellent companion. "He was, for his age, remarkably self-contained and sure of himself, abrasive at times but with a twinkle in his eye and a huge disarming grin," Scott explains in his foreword.

Thin Air describes successful Alpine-style ascents of four major Himalayan summits during the course of three expeditions: the east pillar of Shivling in 1981, Lobsang Spire south buttress and Broad Peak in the Karakoram in 1983, and, again in the Karakoram, the remarkable northwest ridge of Gasherbrum IV in 1986. With the exception of Broad Peak, all were new routes.