Robinson does occasionally leave the Sierra Nevada, and his stories cover such topics as extreme skiing on Mt. Rainier, hiking in the Wind River Range, guiding in Oklahoma, skiing the Haute Route in the Alps, and making the second ascent (with an expedition headed by Tom Frost) of Nepal's Ama Dablam in 1979, one of the few stories written specifically for this book.

Robinson's work in progress, a book titled *The Alchemy of Action*, is growing out of two of the essays in this text: "The Climber as Visionary" and "Forgetfulness and Bliss." Robinson explains:

> In outline, it begins with the strong experiences of runner's high and climber's euphoria, and the question of where they come from. It explores the volatile world of adrenaline and then goes on to an updated view of beta endorphin . . . . It brings in clinical information from physiology and biochemistry, from the brains of lab rats and the blood of finishers in the Western States 100 trail run, but only when that data can be anchored to the reality of strong, human experience.

The title of the book may cause some raised eyebrows: alchemy implies some magical or mystical component to his assertions, which does not have much linkage with brain chemistry. Robinson was criticized, and rightly so, by a professional researcher for an incorrect premise after the publication of "Climber as Visionary." Let us hope that a professional neurobiologist has a look at *The Alchemy of Action* before it is cast in print.

ALLEN STECK

Storms of Silence. Joe Simpson. The Mountaineers: Seattle, 1996. Color, and black-and-white photographs, 240 pages. $19.95.

Joe Simpson's third book is an account of three expeditions: one to Gangchempo in the Langtang region of Nepal, where he retired early because of a damaged knee, a second to Cho Oyu in Tibet, which he left because of poor acclimatization, and a third—and successful—venture in the Cordillera Blanca of Peru.

One night in Tom and Jerry's Bar in Kathmandu, after Gangchempo, Joe meets an English school teacher, Lorna, chaperoning an unruly group of London kids. Lorna is intrigued to discover Joe is a writer, albeit one who squirms at the admission. The following day Lorna buys a copy of Joe's classic *Touching the Void* and shows up at his hotel room, clutching a paperback edition, "a grim expression on her face and her eyes were moist and red." With her is one of the worst of her scamps, Darren, who suggests Joe, who has been surprised with a towel around his waist, shag the lady. He chases off the kid and slams the door and listens to Lorna's tremulous reaction to *Void*: "What you went through, I mean, the pain, and the loneliness." He fidgets while she sobs and then speaks of some private anguish. "I'm alone. I can't tell anyone and I can't cope with it. I don't know what to do." Meanwhile out in the hotel courtyard the kid is shouting up indecent suggestions. Joe rushes out the room in pursuit of the kid, ready to smash his face in, but the boy vanishes. Lorna is dry-eyed upon his return, smoothes her hair, says she's better now and leaves. Joe writes, "I was angry at my uncontrolled reaction to Darren's infuriating behavior, and even more frustrated over my helpless inadequacy in the face of Lorna's despair. Why did some people expect me to have special psychological and emotional insights just because I'd had a bad time in the mountains?"

It is a question I pondered often while trudging through the remaining 250 pages of *Storms of Silence*. Simpson's claim on us is precisely that he had a harrowing experience on Suila Grande,

survived and wrote it up brilliantly. But the problem lies not with the "some people's" expectation, and the authority granted him therein, but with Joe's presumption in this book that he has an authorial entitlement to vast, sweeping and ill-expressed cogitations on a wide array of subjects—the Holocaust, China's oppression of Tibet, the 1970 Peruvian quake that destroyed Yungay. And because it is these subjects, alas, that predominate the text, we have the unpleasant duty to examine Simpson's thoughts, ruminations on these tragedies, and how he bears witness to them.

Simpson writes as if these subjects were items on a restaurant menu, and shamelessly eases himself into the stream of other people's history. For example, after walking around the cemetery at Yungay, where 80,000 died, he is "overwhelmed by the impermanence of things." The "enormity of it stunned me, [and] reminded me of a time, nearly twenty years before, when I had been overwhelmed by the same numbing emotions" when he visited Bergen Belsen. Whereupon he segues without rope or belay into reflections on the Nazi's massacre of Jews.

I suppose that Simpson must feel that his small parade of moral sentiments will make the world a better place, that the Tibetan cause is helped by his solipsistic exegesis of their suffering. Or perhaps the truth is that on those long tedious marches in the mountains, a body has to think of something, no? And so why not the Tibetan agony when Tibet lies only a few miles over a ridge on the walk in to Cho Oyu and your mind is blank and your chest has pains from high-altitude sickness?

Joe Simpson's work has a resemblance to good primitive painting: he can do one thing very well. When finally on page 271 we start up the north ridge of Ranrapalca the prose is crisp, the action vivid. But outside the alpine environment he lacks narrative gift. (It's that "I" that keeps getting in the way). It is often unclear what he hopes to accomplish with a scene, as at the Kathmandu hotel with Lorna and the kid shouting outside. Does he have erotic feelings for the teacher? Why isn't he curious to hear her story? These questions are not explored. Nor are the possibilities of farce developed.

On page 217 we discover the existence of a Sheffield live-in girl friend who has packed up and left while Simpson was attempting Cho Oyu. He finds her note and keys on the table.

> "Ah, well, that's seven years down the drain," I said with feigned bravado.
>
> "Look, I'm sorry it was like this, Joe," says a friend.
>
> "It's okay. It's not your fault, mate." I re-read the letter and then crumpled it up. I tried to be angry but only succeeded in feeling sad and ashamed of myself. "I can't blame her really. I was pretty stupid, I suppose."
>
> "Yeah, well maybe if. . . ."
>
> "No, it's okay, don't worry about it." I stopped Tom from getting into embarrassing analysis. "I thought this might happen. I mean, not like this, but it was going that way. I just wish I could have been more honest about it and not hurt her so badly. I never wanted that to happen."

That's a sample of 1) Simpson's tin ear for dialogue, and 2) his irritating emotional reticence, a counter-productive trait in an autobiographer. What's more, like many of us, he is a poor observer and reporter of detail. The immediate scene around him (be it a bar or the expedition cook tent) comes to us fuzzy, filtered by lugubriousness. Even his closest friends are one-dimensional.

Though clearly likable and intelligent, the shy, uneasy Simpson lacks engagement, something he'll have to develop if he is to continue learning the writer's trade. In this book he was ill-served by his editor at Jonathan Cape, who should have leveled:

"Joe, about bleeding Tibet and the Holocaust, let's just stuff it, eh?"

JOHN THACKRAY