Reviews

EDITED BY DAVID STEVENSON

Into Thin Air. Jon Krakauer. Villard: New York, 1997. 293 pages. Black-and-white photos, woodcut illustrations. $24.95.

I approached *Into Thin Air* warily. I think it was all the hype, all the people insisting, "you must read it," all the talk of million-dollar advances. What, I wondered, is so special about this book? The answer, of course, is the uniquely compelling human drama of its subject matter. It requires a skilled writer to do justice to that material, and *Into Thin Air* has been praised as great "literature," but to my mind this is not so much literature as a highly competent piece of journalism.

Even the best journalism runs the risk of oversimplification. Krakauer's slickly sketched pen portraits do not always quite convince and the shorthand historical summaries sometimes trample on subtlety. The 1953 expedition, for instance, is dismissed as "a large British team organized with the righteous zeal and overpowering resources of a military campaign." It was, in fact, a very modest, understated affair in comparison to the type of expeditions surrounding Krakauer in 1996. South African climber Cathy O'Dowd, who reached the summit two weeks after Krakauer, is described as having virtually no mountaineering experience. This simply is not true. Why dismiss her so perfunctorily, while bending over backwards, in the early pages at least, to find something tactful to say about the appalling Ms. Pittman?

Perhaps I am being pedantic, but I think one should be suspicious of a book that claims to be "the definitive account" of the 1996 tragedy. The more one looks into such complex events, the more obvious it becomes that there are any number of different versions of the same story—and there is no such thing as a definitive account. Despite these reservations, however, I was enthralled by the book. For the first time, I was able to get a coherent view of what really happened in 1996. Krakauer handles complex events and a huge cast of diverse characters with great skill. And, even if there are moments of glib oversimplification, the historical background is grafted seamlessly into the narrative, giving the layman a clear, compelling view of the Everest tradition. All the little details familiar to a seasoned Himalayan climber, like the chortens at base camp, or the symptoms of pulmonary edema, are introduced gradually, enticing the lay reader into a world that we already know for ourselves. The approach is deliberately popular, but unlike, say, James Ramsay Ullman, Krakauer actually is there himself, with all the experience of a seasoned mountaineer, at the center of events, fully, emotionally involved. So, as well as being investigative journalism, *Into Thin Air* is a deeply moving personal account.

One of the many non-climbing friends who exhorted me to read the book said that it left her with the impression of "one really screwed up guy." Right from the dramatic opening pages, as storm clouds gather on the summit, there is a sense of doom and guilt. Krakauer is engagingly honest about his feelings and agonizes about what he sees as a failure to help others in distress. I think he is unnecessarily hard on himself, but he is right to explain his mistake over Andy Harris's disappearance. I remember well, that week in 1996, sitting at my

desk, trying to make sense of garbled reports for my own newspaper article, reiterating the news that Andy Harris had been seen disappearing over the edge of the South Col. Only months later did Krakauer discover that he had not seen Harris at all—that Harris actually had been up near the South Summit, trying heroically to help Doug Hansen and Rob Hall. In the book, this incident of mistaken identity takes on a chilling, ghostly quality, suffused with remorse, that epitomizes the whole horror of that terrible night on Everest.

As a climber with little experience of large-scale commercial and nationalistic expeditions, I was fascinated by Krakauer's description of the bizarre drama that Everest has become. What struck me most was the amount of suffering that goes on. I know that it can be tough at high altitude, but do people really feel that ill, even at base camp? What happened to all the fun and joy and laughter that I remember? I was intrigued and amazed to read about people carrying emergency syringes full of dexamethazone, incredulous that Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa should have to exhaust himself lugging Pittman's 30 pounds of telephone equipment all the way to the South Col, appalled yet fascinated by the prevailing mood of brash arrogance. I also was amazed at the sheer quantity of fixed rope employed by modern commercial expeditions, even above the South Col, where, ten years ago, there was just one short piece on the Hillary Step. It seems that the jumar has replaced the ice axe as the basic item of mountaineering equipment.

As the drama builds on summit day, Krakauer reveals how far this game has diverged from real mountaineering, where "the emphasis on self-reliance, on making critical decisions and dealing with the consequences, on personal responsibility" are paramount. As a guinea-pig client, he had to learn passivity and "felt at times as if I wasn't really climbing the mountain—that surrogates were doing it for me." He had to bite his lip and resist commenting about the obvious contradictions and inconsistencies that became ever more apparent as the assembled masses crawled inexorably toward disaster. Only afterward, in his articles and his book, could he speak his mind—and by so doing angered a lot of people.

Was the anger justified? Was Krakauer unduly critical about the various expedition leaders and guides? Probably not. His analysis of events seems to me to ring true. There are, however, points of emphasis some people are bound to question. Read Colin Monteath's excellent overview in his book *Hall and Ball*, and you will detect significant differences. I think Krakauer is unduly harsh on Anatoli Boukreev, failing to give credit to Boukreev's extraordinary strength and courage, struggling repeatedly into the storm to bring in the survivors on the South Col. I also sympathize with those who were angry at Krakauer's reporting of Rob Hall's achingly poignant last conversation with Jan Arnold. Of course it is deeply, deeply moving, but was Krakauer right, even in the dirty world of journalism, to ignore pleas for privacy?

One of the refreshing things about the book is the absence of glossy color photographs. The publishers settled instead for Randy Rackliff's stark woodcuts, two pages of informative black and white photographs, the author's excellently selected chapter-heading quotations and attractive typography. Cynics might suggest that Villard was just trying to maximize its megadollar profits by keeping down printing costs. I, on the other hand, suspect that the publisher realized that in this image-obsessed age, the words should be left, for once, to speak for themselves; for this is a powerful piece of writing. It does not describe mountaineering as I know it or as Krakauer knew it before he went to Everest, but that is not the point. This is an evocation of human tragedy that goes beyond everyday climbing. The mountain is merely a focal point for the universal elements of fate, risk, pride, greed, weakness, muddle, confusion—and rare moments of supreme heroism—that amount to an irresistibly compelling story.

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