
The Horizontal Everest shows that a consummate adventurer can also aspire to illuminated historical writing. Jerry Kobalenko, a talented storyteller, is no stranger to epic sufferfests, breaking over 4,000 miles of trail on Ellesmere Island while retracing the routes of explorers or famous Mounties.

Three caveats: 1) Don’t be led astray by the title of the book. Whatever marketing chutzpah or lack of poetry are created by The Horizontal Everest: Extreme Journeys on Ellesmere Island, the title works once you pick up the author’s tongue-in-cheek-glance askance at the world’s highest mountain.

2) The cover photograph has an unusual, almost familiar beauty that often speaks of high art—but it was inspired by a more famous photograph. Some readers will recognize the mimicry of the author jumping ice floes with Jim Brandenburg’s famous 1991 photograph, from the cover of his book, White Wolf: showing that animal jumping ice floes alongside Ellesmere Island. Kobalenko even briefly introduces the reader to that wolf photographer within Horizontal Everest. But once you get to know Kobalenko, whose wry personality fills his book, you can imagine him chuckling in his sled’s slipstream about his spoofed photo, which shows that the book is about the human—rather than the wolf—stories of Ellesmere Island. Although he has underwritten his trips to Canada’s northern-most island by exposing the carefully posed photographs that appear in the book’s color insert, to my eye, this adventurer’s writing is his real talent. And isn’t it true that most artists stand on the shoulders of giants?

3) This is an Arctic exploration rather than a climbing book. Many alpinists will agree with the author’s statement that pulling a sled for weeks on end takes a different sort of athleticism than a several day push in the mountains. Historians within the 101-year-old American Alpine Club will remind us that the early membership cut their teeth in Arctic exploration, through some of the very epics that Kobalenko describes in his alluring narrative. The equipment we now accept as de rigueur, or derived from Europe’s Golden Age alpinists—crampons, snow goggles, igloos, or snowshoes—actually came from the Inuit dwellers of the Arctic. The techniques and food and sponsorship campaigns of modern climbing were also refined from 19th century polar expeditions.

Even if you’ll never pull a sled in the Arctic, Kobalenko’s self-deprecating narrative has a way of pulling you along for a ride. Rather than focusing upon his considerable Ellesmere Island journeys, his experiences are merely jumping off points for rich tales about other northern adventurers. In what outwardly appears to be an expedition book, there is a refreshing lack of chronologically structured itinerary or first person narrative. He has an ability to cut through the macro-history hyperbole that less experienced Arctic adventurers create whole books out of, and by using his skeptical investigative eye, Kobalenko paints one of the most convincing and entertaining portraits of northern exploration that I’ve ever read.

In compressed chapters, he candidly shows the reader his troubles with partners lacking motivation, unveils his polar bear encounters with refreshing and respectful candor, recounts
the techniques and over-the-top sponsorships involved in North Pole expeditions (started by the lying Cook and the racist Peary), follows Krüger’s disappearing trail across Ellesmere, lionizes Hattersley-Smith and the Inuit, and deftly analyzes other forgotten players of Arctic exploration. This is original ground here, and all the more stimulating because Kobalenko is no stranger to adventure.

However, the author mentions but does not properly credit the Reinhold Messner of polar travel, Børge Ousland. Kobalenko also strangely avoids using the kites that are revolutionizing sled travel in Polar regions, but his miles logged behind the sled harness against the wind probably gives him more empathy for the explorers he’s following. And while the Selected Reading appendix leaves out several Arctic gems related to his stories, he lists more than a few books that could be arcane classics.

Without equivocation, Kobalenko’s book deserves to be read because of its playful, yet compulsive curiosity about a landscape inhabited with rabbit herds and sailor ghosts. Through subtle turn of phrase and seamless transitions, he transports the reader to old explorers’ homes, dusty Arctic museums, and back to the radiant island. “I needed the wild landscape under my feet,” he writes in the beginning of the book from an icebreaker. While others “stalked about the ship with the all-consumed air of those for whom every second has meaning, I gazed through binoculars at the distant coast of Ellesmere and recalled the many times its extremes had gripped me with similar magnificent obsession.”

JONATHAN WATERMAN, AAC


Anthologies are like families. You never know how the essays, all bound as one, will go. *Extreme Landscape* is a surprisingly strong collection. The subtitle of the book contains the words “mountain spaces,” but the collection is a lot broader than that, encompassing everything from urban architecture to the Internet. Like most families, if you look hard enough you might discern the common threads that tie this family of essays together: spiritual quests, stories, community, and projects for the planet.

Toward the end of the last century the United Nations declared 2002 the International Year of Mountains. The Banff Centre for Mountain Culture held a summit, “Extreme Landscape: Challenge and Celebration.” This book is the result of that gathering.

With climbers like Dermot Somers, Reinhold Messner, Ed Douglas, Rick Ridgeway, and Yvon Chouinard included you might expect a “we climbed—we conquered—we came back” kind of thing. Happily, there isn’t a trace of that approach. To be precise, th—s is a book of ideas. And, as the ideas take hold, it becomes something more. Start with the introduction by the lyric Earth Mother of the West, Terry Tempest Williams. Mountains are inspiration and revelation. Tempest Williams insists that “we are in transition from a non-sustainable world to a sustainable one.” We must honor the wild or we stand to lose it.