

The Beckoning Silence. JOE SIMPSON. SEATTLE:
THE MOUNTAINEERS BOOKS, 2003. 315 PAGES. PAPERBACK. \$18.95.

Of course Joe Simpson would have to cap off his climbing career with an ascent of the notorious north face of the Eiger. As anyone who's followed his adventures can tell you without even checking his birth certificate, "Trouble" is Simpson's middle name. From his teeth-clenching crawl off Siula Grande (captured in the mountaineering classic *Touching the Void*); to his open air plunge from the heights of Pachermo; to any one of a bushel of other mishaps and disasters, Simpson has wallowed in a brand of high altitude mayhem that would have turned lesser men into hand-wringing Xanax-poppers.

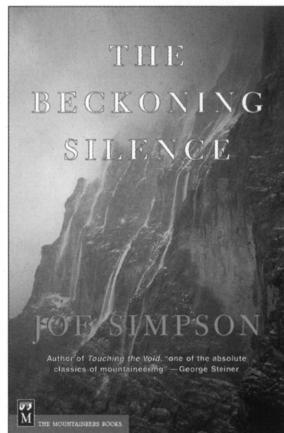
It should therefore come as no surprise that as his latest book opens our hero finds himself contemplating retirement.

The cumulative years of close calls and perished friends have left Simpson, on the threshold of middle age and feeling it daily, wondering if there isn't a more appropriate way to be spending his life. The thought crystallizes for him on Alea Jacta Est (Latin for "The Die is Cast"—some climber-classicist's idea of a grim joke), a Grade V ice climb in the French Alps. In a classic Simpson set piece, the author gives a heart-stopping description of his partner Ian Tattersal's decision to risk both their lives attempting to dry-tool over a roof with Simpson belaying him, on no more protection than two poorly placed knife blade pitons ready to pop.

Though Simpson survives this self-inflicted near miss, as well as another close shave in the Andes, a slew of lethal accidents among his colleagues in the climbing community leads him to consider hanging up his crampons. When Tattersal perishes in a freak paragliding accident and Simpson's mother dies while the author is unreachable on a climbing holiday, he finds himself ready to close the book on his thrill-seeking life.

Not, as it turns out, without a last hurrah: Simpson takes a jaunt on the American winter testpiece Bridalveil Falls with his new partner, Ray Delaney, who's also contemplating retirement. In the afterglow of this happy interlude, Delaney proposes the duo go out on the classic-to-end-all-classics: the Eiger Nordwand. The last half of the book is devoted to Simpson's attempt on the notorious vertical death trap. It includes an absorbing recitation of some of the more brutal chapters in the mountain's history, and a chance encounter with legendary first ascender Anderl Heckmair at an inn at the foot of the climb. Despite a platoon of ghosts and several operas-worth of tragedy plaguing the mountain, it quickly becomes clear that the Eiger's reputation is more ferocious than its current status. Thanks to advances in gear and a world-class mountain rescue squad, when Simpson and Delaney begin their assault of the Nordwand no one has died on the Eiger in a decade.

Naturally, with Simpson's infallibly bad timing that admirable record immediately goes sour. The two friends find themselves sharing the route with a film crew, a second pair of climbers, and a fast moving soloist. Though not unusual company on a coveted, easily accessible route, events turn lethal when a sudden thunderstorm envelops the face in pounding hail, lightning, and torrential rains. Simpson gets his nose rubbed in the famously awful Eiger weather, but he and Delaney are fortunate to be only a pitch beneath the well-sheltered Swallow's Nest belay as the storm hits, and they soon find themselves watching the bombardment from relative



safety. The storm initially verges on comic misadventure, but it soon becomes clear that others on the face have not fared so well. In an air of grim resignation, the pair beat a hasty retreat from unforgiving heights.

All this is thrillingly told in Simpson's justly celebrated prose style. The book becomes tedious only when he swaps his black leather role of existential philosopher for the tweedy jacket of the moralist. In this persona Simpson writes sanctimoniously about the controversial 1999 expedition to find the bodies of Mallory and Irvine on Everest, describing it as a desecration and freak show. His oddly inappropriate editorializing over Mallory's cairn is a jarring note in this mostly felicitous volume. Sermonizing over long dead corpses is entirely misplaced in book that includes "historical" photos of climbers dying or about to die on the Eiger Nordwand. As Simpson himself well knows, he has made a handsome living milking the public's appetite for pathos, providing detailed descriptions of the suffering and terror mountaineers visit upon themselves and, by extension, their loved ones.

Despite this unaccountable lapse, Simpson is otherwise a great armchair companion, broodingly articulate in repose, gallant and good-humored when the chips are down. He has spent his adult life in the state of engaged introspective that one longs for in the ideal adventure writer, and if *The Beckoning Silence* ranks a few grades lower than *Touching the Void*—and what doesn't?—it is still an adventure worth having, in company worth keeping. The reader is grateful for the strong hint at the volume's close that the mountains aren't finished with their famous prodigal son, despite all the talk of retirement.

RICHARD RYAN

Dougal Haston: The Philosophy of Risk. JEFF CONNOR. EDINBURGH: CANONGATE BOOKS, 2002. 225 PAGES. PAPERBACK. \$15.00.

Jeff Connor is a seasoned journalist and author whose book on wild men of the Creag Dhu was well received. In researching this book Connor interviewed me, as he did others, on his visit to Leysin. Though our talk was brief, he left me with a sense that he would write an objective and balanced account of Haston's life.

When I was approached to review this book, curiosity prompted me to take a gander at what Amazon.com readers thought. I was both surprised and dismayed to find that readers who, like Connor himself, had never met Haston, had formed such strong and hostile opinions. For one reader Haston came across as an "egocentric hedonist notable only for his immense physical strength at altitude." For another he was "a nut case," and for yet another he was "not an admirable man" but "a wild drunk."

Though I found the book a "page-turner," by its end I was all too aware why the Amazon reviewers had formed such low opinions. In page after demeaning page, one is apprised of such trivia as how Haston scrounged smokes on the Mönch; or that he smoked the "Euro-chic Disque Bleus holding the cigarette with exaggerated care between thumb and first two fingers." Or how a Leysin guide informed him that "until you ski properly, you are not a complete mountaineer," a prospect apparently so horrifying (though he had already climbed the south faces of both Everest and Annapurna!) that he forthwith became an accomplished skier.

