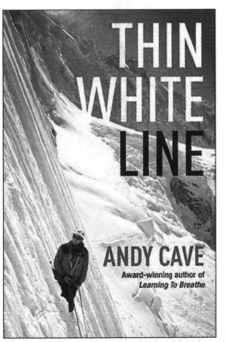
straightforward and indicative of the understated tone of the whole book. Hall then recounts his rescue, including shocking verbal and physical abuse from two Sherpas who were unwilling participants.

Hall places his story within the wider controversies of Everest in 2006, especially the death of David Sharp, the British climber who was also thought to be dead, then seen alive, but was not rescued and did not survive. Instead, as Hall writes, "forty people had walked past David Sharp ... as he lay alive but unmoving on the trail," and the circumstances of his death prompted a media outcry. Sharp's story becomes an affecting background to Hall's, and Hall explores the two very different outcomes, the "simplistic" attitude of the media to these events, and the bigger question of why some live, but others die. Another touchstone here is the death of Sue Fear, another well-known Australian alpinist and a good friend of Hall's, who died on Manaslu while Hall was on his way down to base camp. The first thing Hall does after arriving home in Australia is to attend her memorial service.

Dead Lucky is in many ways as much a story of tragedy as it is of survival. Indeed, "It is the tragedies more than the triumphs that maintain Everest's aura," writes Hall. This is certainly true of Everest publishing, but it is a credit to Hall's talents as a writer that *Dead Lucky* contributes to that aura of Everest in such a singular and arresting way.

CLARE CHESHER

THIN WHITE LINE. ANDY CAVE. *London: Hutchinson, 2008. 230 pages. Hardcover. $48.50.*



In 1997, during his descent from the north face of Changabang, in the Garwhal Himalaya, Andy Cave heard a quiet sound. High above, a series of snow slides merged into a single flood, surging toward him and his climbing partners. Initially "the whiteness," he wrote in his first, award-winning memoir, *Learning to Breathe*, seemed to take "an eternity." Then time began again, and with it, "so quietly and softly [the avalanche] took Brendan away."

That same sense of a muted blast, stilled time, and erased presence suffuses Cave's second book, *Thin White Line*. Near the opening Cave arrives at the Piolet d'Or award ceremony in Chamonix; their Changabang ascent has just been nominated for the prize. Still in shock, months after the avalanche and Brendan Murphy's death, Cave depicts the town with words that fall like eerie, muffled echoes: "All day snow fell like feathers, until the only colour left... was white, milk white, over pavements, cars, trees, hats and hair. In the evening it continued, a slow descent, graceful and noiseless, so that with closed eyes the only sensation was a gentle trickle and burn as the flakes slid from your cheeks. It was as if the snow normally reserved for high summits had become lost and decided to rest here on the street."

Throughout the book, his descriptive passages possess a ghostly, poignant beauty—alluding to loss, separation, disconnection—as if the invisible and the unspoken are what matter most, as if the author is searching to express an idea that lies just beyond the edges of his vision. Indeed, like many introspective climbing writers, Cave attempts to resolve that familiar existential question in its risk-heightened form: How do we accept a world that includes suffering and violent death?

At times that quest appears almost contrived, as though Cave is trying to force form and resolution onto subject matter most defined by its elusiveness and inexpressibility. Now and then his more explicit statements—explaining to readers the value of committing to the unknown—lack the emotional conviction of his oblique, poetic evocations of that same lifestyle.

Ultimately the book becomes most powerful in its hints and glimpses, rather than in its moments of willed clarity. For his first expedition after Murphy's death, Cave goes with Dave Hesleden to attempt the West Face of Fitzroy. They bring Andy Parkin's hand-drawn, deliberately incomplete map: "He [Parkin] openly questioned authorities or organizations that made access to the mountains too easy, arguing that individuals should use imagination to travel in wild places and take responsibility for their actions. I glanced at his treasure map again, wondering what he had left out."

Gradually that blank space transforms from a memento of absence into a field of endless imaginative possibilities. Cave wanders from Patagonia to Norway to Scotland to Alaska, encountering again and again that "the thin line between here and darkness," those threshold states from which the most intense creativity arises. Such as on Fitzroy, where, about to fall from precarious axe placements, he stabs his crampon points against the rock and makes a rapid knee jam in a blank corner, delighting in a desperation-induced inventiveness, "I had never done it before, but the manoeuvre worked.... [S]kill, luck, madness."

By the end of the book, the reader begins to feel that, for Cave, the activity is, on its deepest level, about its peripheries. During the approach with Hesleden to pioneer a wildly tenuous Scottish winter climb, Genesis on Beinn Bhàn, they pause below the 800-foot Der Riesenwand: "Alone beneath one of the most dramatically steep winter walls in Scotland, I thought: These are the moments that make a climber's life.... I felt it inside: timeless, enduring beauty. A light so special and tender that it stunned you and you almost forgot why you were here, that you had vertical things to perform."

Along his journey Cave encounters other aesthetic wanderers, from the injured climbing artist Parkin, who crafts his sculptures from glacier detritus; to the 19-year-old prodigy Leo Houlding, who yells at Cave during a delicate traverse on their first free ascent of Norway's Shield to stop and smell a white buddleia flower; to the relentless humorist Mick Fowler, who declaims after a strenuous mixed pitch on the first alpine-style ascent of Mt. Kennedy's North Buttress, Alaska, "Excellent challenging exercise, Andrew. Nothing better." It's such rich portraits of unexpected characters and experiences that turn what could have been cliché—the search for the meaning of climbing—into something profoundly personal and original.

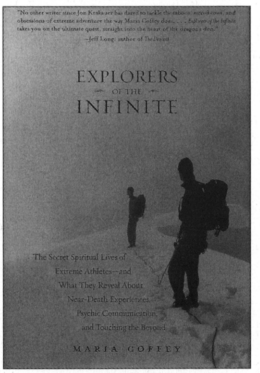
For above all else, Cave's prose generates the reader's delighted sympathy toward a protagonist who actually stops, mid-pitch and mid-narrative, to remember "the poetry from the control of crampons" or to compare "fragile slivers of ice" to "half promises." Or who, facing the potential of a death fall on Genesis, stares "at the green of the moss and the clear veneers of water" and calls them "miniature works of art."

In such instances *Thin White Line* conjures up the essential numinousness of climbing as few other books have: portraying those successive revelations of inscapes, beneath our hands and feet, that seem at times to glow with reflected, metaphysical longings. Our vertical pursuits, as Cave explains them, ignite "fire" within us because they convey "the flicker of romance and the visual suggestion of a world unknown."

And in response to the avalanche that sets off the writer's travels, in the gaps and in half-

spoken silences of the text, the reader hears another, far quieter sound: within this wild and uncertain life, beauty is the only answer we can know.

KATIE IVES



EXPLORERS OF THE INFINITE: THE SECRET SPIRITUAL LIVES OF EXTREME ATHLETES—AND WHAT THEY REVEAL ABOUT NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES, PSYCHIC COMMUNICATION, AND TOUCHING THE BEYOND. *Maria Coffey. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008. Hardcover 288 pages. $26.95.*

One of the tragic aspects of being human is that our most vital experiences often happen long before our conscious mind takes notice. A premonition, a hunch, a prophetic dream, a curious "coincidence"—how easily such wayward occurrences are dismissed as mere figments or superstitions, only later to be recognized as genuine omens—and thus we suffer from the familiar lament: "Oh, if only I had listened...." That extreme athletes—mountaineers, kayakers, surfers, BASE jumpers, and others—should exhibit no immunity to this all-too-human foible comes as no surprise. What is surprising is that it took this long for a book to come along that investigates the matter.

The subtitle of *Explorers of the Infinite* aptly describes its subject matter, though I'm not sure how secret the spiritual lives of these people actually are. Maria Coffey begins with an interesting question: What drives these extreme athletes to risk their lives in order to push past human limits, and what do they discover when they do so? Well, they discover the same thing that ordinary people discover when they have a profound spiritual experience: mystery and wonder.

In ascending the spiritual heights, Coffey leads her reader along a well-established route. More than a century ago the venerable American philosopher and psychologist William James—himself somewhat of a mountaineer—took up the same question regarding the nature of these extraordinary moments. In fact, the inspiration for his greatest work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, came to him one night while camping high on Mt. Marcy in the Adirondacks. Like James, Coffey approaches her numinous subject by taking a look at an assortment of curious episodes drawn from various lives.

One of the more fascinating cases reported in *Explorers of the Infinite* is that of Diane Perry, an English woman born in 1943 who changed her name to Tenzin Palmo and spent 13 years living by herself in a cave at 13,200 feet in the Himalayas. "Tenzin Palmo believes we're not on this earth to be comfortable," Coffey writes. "We're here to learn and grow, she says, and facing problems and challenges is an essential part of growth and knowledge." As Coffey deftly concludes, this "is essentially what every extreme athlete would say about their sport." The other stories in this book certainly support this claim. Consider the case of John Porter, whose dreams of falling rocks at Annapurna Base Camp in 1982 seemed to have presaged the death of Alex Macintyre. When asked what he made of such spookiness, Porter replied: "I think the starting point for any sort of weirdness is life itself.... If we're here, then it seems to me that anything is possible." No philosopher has stated it more clearly or more accurately. And perhaps the most