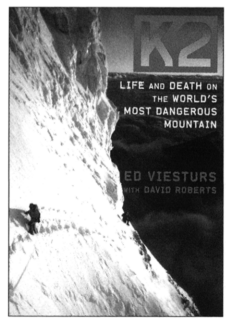
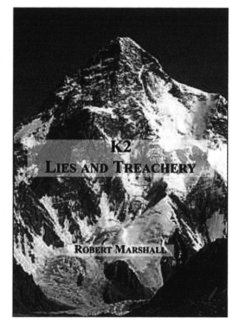
Book Reviews

Edited by David Stevenson

K2: Life and Death on the World's Most Dangerous Mountain. Ed Viesturs, with David Roberts. Broadway Books, 2009. 342 pages. Color and black & white photos. Hardcover $26.00.

K2: Lies and Treachery. Robert Marshall. Carreg Limited, 2009. 232 pages. Black & white photos. Hardcover £20.00 (in UK; U.S. price varies, $26.00 or higher).





These two books, though different in approach, enrich the K2 literature. Ed Viesturs, one of the world's most accomplished high-altitude climbers, teams with David Roberts to focus on the "six most dramatic seasons in the mountain's history." These include the classic pioneering efforts in 1938, 1939, 1953 and 1954, and the disastrous 1986 and 2008 seasons, when a total of 24 climbers lost their lives. Viesturs' aim is not merely to tell the stories of those campaigns, but to "glean their lessons." This fine book, in Viesturs' evocative phrase, is a "hymn of praise" to K2, the most difficult and dangerous of the 8,000 meter peaks. It will absorb readers from start to finish.

The springboard for Viesturs was his own 1992 climb of K2. On his summit day, he made what he calls the greatest mistake of his climbing life. Instead of retreating in the face of deteriorating weather, he kept going. This was not the result of a decision, but the opposite, his "perverse inability to make a decision." He, Scott Fischer, and Charley Mace eventually summited in sunshine, but their descent into a maelstrom of clouds became a desperate epic, complicated not only by the storm and avalanche conditions that nearly engulfed them, but their moral obligation to assist the pulmonary edema-stricken Gary Ball down the mountain. Viesturs came away from that K2 experience a changed person, making a vow that he rigidly followed for 13 more years, in completing his quest of the remaining 8,000-meter peaks: *Your instincts are telling you something. Trust them and listen to them.*

Most readers will be familiar with the two American attempts on K2 in the late 1930s and the most storied of them all—the 1953 "Brotherhood of the Rope" saga—but Viesturs and Roberts add to our knowledge with their combined perspective. What makes this book so compelling, though, is how ably Viesturs uses his own K2 experience to assess, measure, and reflect on what his predecessors went through. We gain renewed appreciation of those magnificent efforts. His inclusion of entries from Dee Molenaar's expedition diary illuminates prior accounts of the 1953 expedition and shows his true grit. Clearly homesick, Molenaar felt the pull of his family, but refused to succumb to the "crumping" that lets the hardship and danger of expedition life drain a climber of ambition.

This book also provides a needed corrective to Putnam and Kauffman's *K2: The 1939 Trag-*

edy on the subject of Fritz Wiessner's leadership of that ill-fated expedition. The fact that Wiessner led from the front is consistent with other pioneering Himalayan expeditions, such as Maurice Herzog on Annapurna. In Viesturs' view, Wiessner not only made the right decision to turn back at 27,500 feet when his Sherpa companion, Pasang Dawa Lama, refused to go higher, but the morally responsible one. For this he rightly admires Wiessner more than if he had reached the summit. Finally, Viesturs powerfully describes the role of Sherpas on K2, both in 1939, when three of them did not return from a heroic effort to save the life of the stranded Dudley Wolfe, and in 2008, when Pemba Gyalje and his compatriots acted similarly to rescue climbers after tons of debris fell from the huge ice cliff above the Bottleneck, obliterating the fixed ropes. Two of the Sherpas died in the process. Their acts of heroism deserve to be as hallowed in K2's history as the 1953 expedition's valiant attempt to bring Art Gilkey down the Abruzzi Ridge.

Robert Marshall's *K2: Lies and Treachery* is concerned with a single K2 expedition, the Italian ascent in 1954, when Achille Compagnoni and Lino Lacedelli became the first persons to stand on the summit. What happened high on K2 the last two days of July stirred up a bitter controversy lasting over five decades. At the center of the storm was Walter Bonatti, in Ed Viestur's estimation "one of the most phenomenally gifted climbers of all time." The trouble started with a selfless act of Bonatti and his Hunza companion, Mahdi, that made success possible. They carried up two 42-pound loads of bottled oxygen 2,300 feet to where it had been agreed the two summit climbers would place their highest camp. But when Compagnoni and Lacedelli moved the campsite just far enough away to prevent Bonatti from reaching it, he and Mahdi were forced to endure an open bivouac at 26,568 feet before descending the next morning. Both men survived the bitterly cold night, Bonatti remarkably unscathed but Mahdi with severely frostbitten extremities.

Then the lies started, with Compagnoni's dubious claim that he and Lacedelli had run out of oxygen 650 feet below the summit because Bonatti had used the precious gas during his bivouac, intending to go to the summit himself. In leader Ardito Desio's official account, the summit pair are described as yelling to Bonatti to "leave the masks" with the oxygen bottles, falsely asserting that this vital equipment was in Bonatti's possession, when in fact Compagnoni and Lacedelli had them. They also falsely claimed an earlier start time to fit the bogus oxygenless finish to the climb. Bonatti became the sacrificial victim of what amounted to a cover-up to assuage the consternation of Pakistani authorities about the permanent injuries Mahdi suffered. With astonishing dedication, Bonatti spent the next 50 years clearing his name and establishing the facts, finally officially accepted in 2007 by the CAI (Club Alpino Italiano).

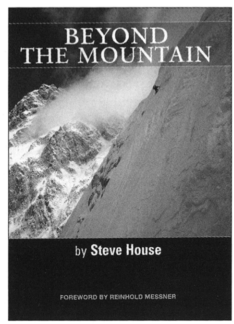
This long battle was mostly fought alone, but Bonatti was fortunate that Marshall, an Australian surgeon who had never climbed a mountain, took up his cause. Marshall became so proficient in Italian that he was able to produce a better English translation of Bonatti's two prior autobiographical volumes and combine them, in 2001, as *The Mountains of My Life*, adding an important new section on Bonatti's writings in response to the attack on his character. It was Marshall's careful analysis of photos of Compagnoni and Lacedelli on the summit that buttressed Bonatti's contention that the pair had lied not only about their oxygen running out below the summit but also their placement of the highest camp and the start time for the summit. In this book, Marshall brings the story up to date with an exhaustive, comprehensive account, including the remarkable denouement.

After maintaining silence for all those years, Lacedelli startlingly revealed his own version in 2004 (published in English as *K2: The Price of Conquest*, 2006). Although he still claimed that the oxygen had run out below the summit, he conceded this had happened at a

point above which "the climb was less steep," much higher than where he and Compagnoni had always claimed. This is a significant admission, because the final slope becomes less steep only after the low-angle summit ridge is attained, a few easy steps from the top. Aside from the oxygen issue, Lacedelli—unlike Compagnoni, who went to his grave in 2009 still proclaiming his innocence (Lacedelli also died last year)—confirmed Bonatti's account in all respects. As inexcusably late as it came, no longer was it one person's word against another. If this sounds like an arcane debate, it is not. It is much more, something that goes to the very core of mountaineering. Walter Bonatti should—and will—be remembered as much for his unyielding commitment to historic truth as his unparalleled genius as a climber.

JIM WICKWIRE

Beyond the Mountain. **STEVE HOUSE. FOREWORD BY REINHOLD MESSNER. PATAGONIA BOOKS: 2009. HARDCOVER. 285 PAGES. $29.95.**



Beyond the Mountain is Steve House's self-described tale of "Commitment on Steroids," with selected insights into one of alpinism's most accomplished characters. Why am I compelled to be such a smart ass and think of the book as "Beyond the Image"? Am I envious for short-changing my own commitment to alpinism, or am I just too far out of The Show to discern fact from fiction? So who is House House *beyond the image*? Is he our pop-culture icon, a self-created hero? Is the book any good? Does it answer any serious questions? Does it redefine alpinism, move the bar, or change one's view of climbing? What questions has House's career presented that *Beyond the Mountain* might answer?

This book gives us a few powerful insights, the first of which is House's assessment of his success in understanding and then articulating the age-old question of *Why*. In the book's introduction House admits he failed to answer "why" and for the most part I agree. That said, he *is* successful in bringing the reader close to the experience of being in that moment of total awareness that high-stakes living on the sharp end affords. His narratives of soloing Beauty is Rare Thing on Denali and Hajji Brakk in the Karakoram are where we see the characteristic that is embedded in House's DNA and defines great climbers, namely depth and intensity of focus. In these passages House brings the reader face to face with the ultimate free-soloist question—up or down?—when success, failure, and death are all that remain. While most shrink from the question, throughout the book House strives to re-enter this transcendent state of being, but then struggles for meaning when the edge grows dull from accomplishment.

What House wrote in *Alpinist* magazine a few years ago about his experience with Bruce Miller on Nanga Parbat in 2004 left me (and others) wondering if House had lost his moral compass. To apparently blame your partner for personal failure and not honor the commitment of the partnership was appalling. House explores this imbalance in *Beyond the Mountain* and comes clean with an explication of his state of mind. Ironically, when I heard about Miller saving House a second time after his 25-meter fall this March on Mt. Temple, I wondered how many times Miller would be called upon before he got credit. Fortunately, House had already resolved the earlier transgression in writing this book. Nonetheless, I would like to learn more