



Dark Summit: The True Story of Everest's Most Controversial Season

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On May 15, 2006, a young British climber named David Sharp lay dying near the top of Mount Everest while forty other climbers walked past him on their way to the summit. A week later, Lincoln Hall, a seasoned Australian climber, was left for dead near the same spot. Hall's death was reported around the world, but the next day he was found alive after spending the night on the upper mountain with no food and no shelter.

If David Sharp's death was shocking, it was hardly singular: despite unusually good weather, ten others died attempting to reach the summit that year. In this meticulous inquiry into what went wrong, Nick Heil tells the full story of the deadliest year on Everest since the infamous season of 1996. He introduces Russell Brice, the commercial operator who has done more than anyone to provide access to the summit via the mountain's north side—and who some believe was partly accountable for Sharp's death. As more climbers attempt the summit each year, Heil shows how increasingly risky expeditions and unscrupulous outfitters threaten to turn Everest into a deadly circus.

Dark Summit: The True Story of Everest's Most Controversial Season Details

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Anne-Marie says

I get drawn into mountaineering books at certain times and this was another one of those phases. When I heard of the Englishman was passed by 40 climbers on Everest I was appalled. How could so many people be so inhumane? Recently I found this book and thought, this might explain how this could happen. In reading it I felt the author gave an objective as possible account of the circumstances surrounding this awful tragedy and I did feel I understood how this man was left to die by 40 people.

I still have a nagging feeling that at some point it will be possible to rescue people in the dead zone as people have ascended higher than they ever imagined possible without oxygen. Nevertheless it is clearer how his family could say that they understood that it was no one's fault.

This true event is more evidence to me that we ARE social beings and we DO need each other to survive. I am so sad this occurred but I am also reassured that there are good people in the world and in mountaineering it isn't simple enough to say these people are all totally selfish. A few people did everything they could and that restores my faith in humanity.

Christopher says

What I've learned: mountain climbers are crazy. Really crazy. Everest used to be my Everest. In my youth, I'd think, "someday I'll conquer that, the nearly unconquerable". The thought of climbing an icy mountain to the highest point on Earth was exhilarating to me, as was the idea of pushing myself to my physical limits, to possibly come back with fewer fingers. But I've no ambition or desire for that anymore. Not after reading this book.

And the thing is, climbing Everest isn't even that remarkable anymore. About 1,500 people have climbed Everest to date. (And that figure most likely ignores lots of Sherpas who do it with no recognition, carrying all of their white clients' belongings on their backs.) So why do so many people risk their lives to become one of the club of a thousand and a half crazy people who have climbed Everest?

Now, to make a name for yourself, you have to do something to make the climb crazier than it already is. You could do it without oxygen, but lots of people have done that already, so that's not even that remarkable. You could hang-glide off the summit, which is exactly what I would do, so that I could skip the grueling hike down, which is not too much easier than the trek up. But that's becoming popular, too; if you want to hang-glide, do it soon before it becomes *so* passé. If you're a double amputee, it would be quite a feat to summit Everest, but you wouldn't be the first to do it. Even if you chose to do it without your prosthetics, you still wouldn't be doing something someone hasn't done before. I just read about some old man who is carrying his mountain bike to the top of Everest, not because he's going to ride it back down. Just because he likes his bike a lot.

So if you want to do something really cool on Everest, you better think up something good. Possibly something involving a unicycle and juggling torches.

But I realize that I'm not talking about the book very much. This book is a vastly interesting, quick read. It's very much like Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, which recounts the details of a terrible season on Everest in 1996 in which eight people died. *Dark Summit* is the *Into Thin Air* of 2006's disastrous season. Eleven people died in one month. One man laid on the trail for more than a day, dying while people just traipsed past him, a casualty of the "it's me or you" mindset that causes many climbers to be unwilling to help those in need. To act like a freaking human being and lend someone a hand.

So, read this if you're at all interested in people doing crazy things like climbing crazy mountains. Read it if you like to learn about people in extreme situations.

And read it to cure yourself of your desire to do self-destructive and ridiculous things like climbing crazy mountains.

Roger says

Nick Heil is not a mountaineer, he is a journalist and writer, and with that knowledge and the quote on the front cover of *Dark summit* ("On Everest morality stops at 8000 metres"), I wasn't holding great hopes for this title. Ever since Jon Krakauer's *Into thin air*, there has been a genre of Everest books that concern themselves with the ethics of modern guided trips to the top of the world, most of which haven't reached the high bar set by Krakauer, and some of which have been as shameful as the events they purport to portray.

Thankfully Heil's book is quite a few rungs above those depths. His book is a description of the disastrous 2006 season on Everest, when eleven people died on the mountain (not all deaths occurred above 8000 metres). That makes the 2006 season one of the most deadly, in fact more people died than in the infamous 1996 season that forms the basis of *Into thin air*. Krakauer's book centred around the then novel notion of guided mountaineering trips up Everest, and the ethics and morality of that process. Since Krakauer's time the guided ascent has become an industry, and Heil jumps right into the centre of it. As with many of these types of books, the nub of the story is not quite enough to flesh out a whole book, so we are given the usual potted history of attempts on Everest, with a concentration on the North Face, where most of Heil's action is set. While this background is useful and in formative, for me - and I think Heil - this was going through the motions a little bit.

The "meat" of this book concentrates on the climbers on the North Face, and in particular Russell Brice's Himex group. Heil deftly explains the advances made in modern technology since 1996, which make planning a climb easier (better weather forecasts and communication), and has pushed Everest into the twenty-first century (the battle between groups to get clients, animosities between people fought out on the web). The inherent danger of very inexperienced people high on Everest (for some climbers in 2006 Everest was their first 8000 metre climb) is always in the background, and is well portrayed.

While the drive that sends people to attempt Everest may be difficult to articulate, the drive that leads the legion of armchair mountaineers (my sister has lent me this book, and when I'm done I'll lend it to my brother-in-law) to read books such as this is simple: the subject of human beings being pushed to their limits is inherently both gripping and fascinating. Thankfully *Dark summit* is relatively well-written, with only a modicum of cliché, so the story is free to breathe.

The apogee of the tale is the description and discussion of the death of David Sharp, a lone climber who was

found in a near-death state high on the mountain by members of Brice's expedition. Brice, and double amputee Inglis (who was one of the people who found Sharp), got a lot of flack from the press over the decision to leave Sharp. Heil treats this incident fairly, showing both that Brice and his expedition did what they could, and pointing out that some of the more, shall we say "cowboy" expedition managers at Everest don't really do their job properly.

The death of Sharp was put into high relief by the amazing survival and rescue of Australian climber Lincoln Hall during the same climbing season. Hall was an experienced climber, who collapsed and was left for dead. He survived a night in the open near the summit and was rescued by other climbers. Heil speculates that the rescue of Hall was one of the drivers of the criticism of the people who left Sharp to die, but goes on to point out that whereas Sharp was mostly passed by "amateurs", Hall was lucky enough to be discovered by a team of very experienced mountaineers.

As the industry of Himalayan climbing develops year-on-year, we can expect more tragedies to occur in the death zone - since 2006 we've had 11 deaths on K2, described in *One mountain thousand summits* by Freddie Wilkinson (which is not at the same standard as Heil's book), and 2012 saw another 10 people die on Everest - and no doubt more controversy to come.

This book is well worth reading if you're into mountain literature.

Check out my other reviews at <http://aviewoverthebell.blogspot.com.au/>

Colin Birge says

A follow-up of sorts to *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer's classic account of the deadly 1996 climbing season on Mount Everest. Nick Heil covers the equally deadly 2006 season, especially the controversial death of David Sharp. Over 40 climbers climbed past Sharp as he lay dying near the summit after spending a night alone on the mountain. Heil argues that it was understandable: at so high an altitude, rescue was virtually impossible, and Sharp had chosen to climb with no partners and no support.

As even Nick Heil admits, it's impossible to think of *Dark Summit* without Krakauer's work and all the follow-up books on Everest, so here's the comparison:

Krakauer is an accomplished technical rock climber and summited Everest during his ill-fated trip. Heil visited one of the mountain base camps but has no high altitude climbing experience.

Krakauer's book was at heart a very personal story. Heil's tale is more from the point of view of a detached reporter, though he admits to a bias in favor of one of the people he wrote about.

Dark Summit isn't going to displace *Into Thin Air* in people's minds, but it's an interesting, occasionally harrowing, story. Worth the read.

Max says

I was surprised by this one. I picked it up from the library to get some extra contextual information on the

events of 2006 (since the Discovery channel TV show was so sadly dumbed down), and I ended it up liking it as much as any mountaineering book I've read. Heil gives some great historical and cultural context that has been missing from lots of other accounts of climbing the world's highest peak, and has an admirable commitment to fairness (best displayed in his afterword) that much writing about high-altitude climbing lacks. Because of the fact that this isn't a first-person account, it's necessarily not as gripping of a book as the one whose shadow it understandably occupies, but Heil's book reveals more about the human condition on Everest than Krakauer's, in my opinion. Heil is really good about not pushing an agenda or judging, two things it's far too easy to do when discussing this particular topic. This book really exceeded my expectations, and I'll be sure to check out any other long-format work Nick Heil produces.

Beth666ann says

This was a really interesting look at ethics and community at high altitude. It makes you think about what level of responsibility high-altitude mountaineers can be expected to have for each other. Answers vary widely; it is pretty chilling.

Lil says

Picked this up at 10 last night and didn't put it down until I was done. What I especially enjoy about reading about Everest is just how bloody uncomfortable it always makes me. Like several people say, morality is different on the mountain. And it is, but should it be? I'm tempted to be curmudgeonly with Sir Edmund and close the mountain to one expedition/year, with the entire focus on not losing anyone. At the same time, reading the stories of these people who are driven to get to the top, I know that's impossible. This book adds more characters to that list, both the ones who made it and the ones who didn't.

Although this one didn't have nearly the suspense of the books around the 1996 season, I think in a way it was *more* striking because this was *not* a bad season for climbing - it was cold but clear, they didn't have nearly the logjams they have on the south side, etc. - and yet *it was still fucked*. People die on Everest. Period.

IIRC, this is also the most informed book I've read about the operational aspects of Everest's expeditions. Whereas so many others are told through a single guide's perspective, this gave me a peek into how the summit groups compare. Himex is pricey, sure, but going it alone? (And I know that this book can't be considered unbiased, it was pretty obviously pro-Himex, but when Brice called David Sharp's parents to tell them about their son - and then built a cairn memorial for them himself! - I was incredibly moved. Who would ever go with Asian Trekking after that?)

So now my "what would I do there?" nervestrings have been plucked again, and I'm going to add those who walked past David Sharp early and the teams that mutter "no English" as they scoot past to the list of horrible souls that includes those who shoved Beck Wethers in his tent alone a decade earlier, and get all judgey with the single-minded focus on the summit, and savour that uncomfortable wonder over if I'd be one bit different.

Heather says

I wish I could add a half-star. The book was good. Riveting, full of fascinating stuff. But it was confusing. The layout for a book like this is always going to be tricky, but there's way too much going back and forth in time. There was too much information given about the other hikers on the various expeditions, and most of them didn't have a real role in the story. I found myself relying on a chart in the beginning showing who belonged with what expedition company, and sometimes I had to use the index to remind myself who certain people were and what their story was.

The conclusion was more than a little lame. There was great build-up to the controversy from that hiking season, but when the reader actually GOT to the controversy itself, it was anti-climactic. I have my own opinions now, too, and they vary slightly from the author's.

It's a good read for anyone interested in Everest, but bookmark the index and the guide in front. You may need it.

LibraryCin says

In 2006, Mount Everest saw it's deadliest season since 1996 (the year Jon Krakauer wrote about in *Into Thin Air*). But this time around, weather was not the cause. One man died after being passed by numerous climbers while he was still alive; another was left behind when they thought he was a lost cause (he was "left for dead", similar to Beck Weathers in 1996); miraculously, he lived.

Another really good mountaineering book. The beginning, while looking back at history and – at the same time – introducing us to the "players" in 2006, I had a bit of hard time following, with so many people, years, stories. But, once we got going and focused on 2006, the story was riveting. I don't remember crying while reading *Into Thin Air* (but I'd be surprised if I didn't; I likely just don't remember), but I cried at a couple of places reading this one.

Mazola1 says

Mount Everest is a cold and inhospitable place. After what happened on the mountain in 2006, a lot of people were saying the same thing about the hearts of many of those who climb Mount Everest. Ten people died on Mount Everest that year, but no death provoked more controversy and outrage than that of David Sharp. Sharp is remembered in the public consciousness as the young British climber who "lay dying near the top of Mount Everest while forty other climbers walked past him on their way to the summit." Cold, inhuman and selfish, right?

Dark Summit tries to answer that question. It turns out that like a lot of difficult questions and issues that have grabbed the public's attention, it isn't simple as the first reports made it seem to be. Sir Edmund Hillary framed the choice confronting the other climbers as the decision between deciding to try for the summit, or to save a man's life. This book explains why the choices weren't that simple or easy.

Dark Summit tells the story of the deadly 2006 season on Everest, putting it in historical context and examining some of the thorny problems caused by the increasingly large number of inexperienced climbers

being guided, tugged, dragged and pushed to the summit by commercial outfitters. It also paints a vivid portrait of the pain and sacrifice it takes to climb Mount Everest, as well as the hazards, dangers and brutal conditions involved in a summit attempt. At the same time, it provides insight into the psyches of those who willingly risk their lives, limbs and health to get to the top.

But the heart of the book is the story of Sharp's death and the questions it raised. The truth is not as simple as most people were led to believe by the many sensational accounts which appeared in the media. The book presents a thoughtful examination of the issue of morality on the mountain. And it shows why you can't and shouldn't always believe everything you read in the papers or see on TV.

The widely held public perception is that dozens of climbers callously stepped over Sharp's body, deciding that it was more important to achieve their dream of summiting than to save a life. Sharp's story was contrasted with that of Lincoln Hall, also stranded on the upper reaches of Everest, and left for dead, but who was ultimately rescued.

To say that those who did not (or could not) save Sharp were callous and selfish, and that those who helped Hall were unselfish and heroic is to ignore the complexity of high altitude death and rescue. It ignores the fact that some climbers did try to help Sharp, dragging him into the sun and giving him oxygen. But by the time Sharp was found, he had already spent the night on the mountain at over 8,000 meters, and was comatose and catatonic, unable to walk, and indeed hardly able to move. It also ignores the fact that Lincoln Hall, like Beck Weathers in 1996, was able through an incredible effort of will or a physiological quirk, to rouse himself and become active. Many climbers who have collapsed in the snow and been unable to muster that last resolve not to die have indeed been abandoned on Everest, and left to their fate.

No climber who was not ambulatory had ever been rescued from that height, and to carry a climber down from that height would have been extremely dangerous and probably impossible. As Heil put it, fifty years of Everest history warned against a rescue attempt under these circumstances.

David Sharp was an experienced climber. He tried to climb Mount Everest with minimal supplies, little oxygen, no radio and no support system in place to help him in case he got into trouble. That was his choice, and he made it with full awareness of the dangers it involved. David's parents said they held no one accountable for his death, and spoke of his lifelong love of adventure. No doubt David himself was aware of the risk, and of the realities of climbing at extremely high altitude, in the so-called "Death Zone."

The Death Zone is indeed unforgiving, putting those who go there under unbelievable stress. This book shows just how unforgiving Everest is. As well, it is a revealing look at how people perform under pressure, the simplistic nature of much of what passes for news these days, and the ambiguity of difficult moral choices, made not from the comfort of the living room, but in harsh circumstances.

L says

Heil does not, and cannot, answer the question of where to draw the line of climbers' and guides' responsibility to help other climbers and/or climbers not under their corporate wing. It isn't clear whether David Sharp could have been saved, though it does seem clear that climbers passed him, saw the shape he was in, and kept going, their eagerness to summit outweighing their humanity. The explanations/rationalizations/excuses are there. For the most part, these folks are cold, both literally and

figuratively.

What is missing here, what was so prominent in "Into Thin Air," is the visceral sense of what it is to climb Everest. This book is more analytic and less passionate.

Eric_W says

Well, finally getting around to making a few notes about this book which I read at the same time as a bunch of other Everest-summitting books. All are pretty good, and I'm about to order some others I ran across, including K2, The Savage Mountain, K2 Triumph and Tragedy, The Last Step The American Ascent of K2, and The Endless Knot K2, Mountain of Dreams and Destiny: i.e., it's time to switch mountains.

The literature of mountaineering has evolved. It used to be they were stories of teamwork and assistance. Now, it seems, the treks to the top have become lines (literally) of people hanging on to ropes preset by Sherpas -- the real heroes imho-- just waiting their turn to get on top so they can have bragging rights the next time they head for the bar. Every imaginable disability from double amputees (one guy's prosthesis fell off so a Sherpa had to climb up several thousand feet with a new one) to a fellow with only one lung, to the oldest, or first MD, or first moron, a guy with multiple bones screwed together from a motorcycle accident, etc. has to make the climb now. Everest has become a veritable traffic jam of upper middle-class hero wannabes. And people die. And they no longer help each other. The picture presented by recent books is one of dismal back-biting, chaos, and catastrophe. But they are great fun to read for slugs like me sitting in front of the fire.

Dark Summit portrays the 2006 climbing year, second in tragedy only to 1996 -- see Into Thin Air A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster. Personally, I think they should shut the mountain down and leave it alone. Problem is, as with everything, there is too much money to be made.

Karen Terrell says

I love Nick Heil's writing. The details, perspective, and voice he brings to *Dark Summit* - a reflection on Everest's controversial 2006 climbing season - are thought-provoking and compelling. I could not put this book down (and I don't mean this figuratively - I literally had to finish this book before I could go to sleep).

Heil's word choice is exquisite. When comparing the mountaineering of earlier years with modern climbing, he describes "the tweedy gentlemen climbers of yesteryear" with today's "high altitude playground where conga lines of novice clients clogged the route, where deep-pocketed dilettantes of dubious ability were short-rope to well-compensated Sherpas and guides." When describing the process of death from hypoxic-hypothermia, Heil writes: "At last the pump shuts down, and with that the limited circulation ceases. Internally, there is perfect stillness, equilibrium returning between a delicately calibrated but dissonant energy field in the form of a man and the larger energy field around him - the mountain, the air. The only movement now is wind, ice crystals skittering over rock and snow, a jacket flap-rustling, a clump of hair, stiff with rime, flicking across the forehead."

I began this book with a bias that I wasn't aware I had. When I started reading **Dark Summit** I had acquired the belief that the "bad guys" in the 2006 disaster on Everest were climbers who had walked past dying men without giving them a thought – their only aim to reach the summit. By the time I finished **Dark Summit**, my thoughts about the 2006 climbing season had been revised. With careful objectivity, Heil presents the history, the sequence of events, the timing, the eye witness accounts, and the personalities involved, and then trusts his readers to reach their own conclusions. The conclusion I reached when I got to the end of the book was that an uninformed and sensationalistic media – ignorant of the challenges of high altitude expeditions – was too eager to cast judgment and point fingers where there shouldn't have been any finger-pointing, and to editorialize about something of which they knew little. If high-altitude climbing has changed in the last 50 years, so has the media. Objective, researched, fact-based reporting often seems to be replaced with subjective opinion in modern journalism. And it often seems to take an independent writer, such as Nick Heil, to pick up the media's slack in reporting news-worthy events.

My dad, Dee Molenaar, was a member of the 1953 American K2 Expedition (and author of **Memoirs of a Dinosaur Mountaineer**). Maybe it's my desire to better understand what my father experienced on K2, and to connect with him, that draws me to books about expedition climbing. My own experience with mountaineering has been limited to much less challenging climbs in the North Cascades (Rainier, Adams, Baker, Hood), made years ago when Dad was still guiding me up the snowfields – but I've had just enough climbing experience to be able to relate, in a small way, to the expedition climbing Heil describes in **Dark Summit**. And when Heil reflects on his own attitude about climbing Everest, he perfectly captures my own thoughts about the whole enterprise: "A few days earlier, I had stood at the North Coo, gazing up at the ridge, wondering if I could make it to the top. Ever since I had seen Everest for the first time a couple of years earlier, my unwavering opinion had been: No way, no way, no way. But as I stood on the col, the summit so close it seemed as though I could reach out and touch it, suddenly, surprisingly, a different thought materialized: Hell, yes, I can. It must have been the hypoxia talking. Now, crunching across the gravel in the middle of the night, lightless, tired, my wet foot quickly going numb, all I wanted to do was get back to camp, don dry socks, and crawl into my sleeping bag. Looking up at the ridge only made me shudder."

Near the beginning of **Dark Summit**, Heil quotes George Mallory (who had died on Everest in 1924): "What we get from this adventure is sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life. We do not live to eat and make money. We eat and make money to be able to enjoy life. That is what life means and what life is for." I'm really glad Heil includes this quote in his book, and at the beginning of it. I think it helps put everything that follows into perspective for the reader. No one who climbs Everest is forced to be there. Those who are on Everest are there because they choose to be. As I read **Dark summit** it became clear to me that, ultimately, each individual climber must claim responsibility for his own choices and his own life.

Jim says

Books about high-elevation mountaineering are about death. Either the suffering of or escape from. Sure, there is a lot about courage, preparation, luck, cruel mother nature, and such, but if there is not death, then it seems few climbers will write about it, especially if there is not some controversy to throw in. And Everest has provided a lot of death and controversy, as well as mystery, to be sure. Herewith another account of climbing gone astray, but in this instance there is a mix of miraculous survival and disputed decision making that may have led others to their demises. Although I realize the danger of attempting to get some people off the highest heights, in one case I seriously wonder if perhaps one (or maybe a couple) climber could have

been saved. There seems to be too many people on the mountain at the same time, as well as an array of equipment, devices, and attitudes. Not only is there glory involved, but lots of money to be made, both in guiding and in post-climb activities (lectures, books, fame). So climb on, you crazy folk.

Chad Sayban says

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British climber David Sharp lays along a ridge near the top of the highest point in the world. He is dying, but he isn't dead...yet. Still, forty other climbers walk past him on their way to the summit and not one of the stops to help. A week later, veteran climber Lincoln Hall is also left for dead in the same spot. His death is reported around the world. However, the next day he is found still alive and heroically brought down off Everest. He survives. In a thorough investigation into the events of the deadly 2006 Everest climbing season - as season that would claim 11 lives - Nick Heil attempts to get to the bottom of what went wrong and exposes the peril of greed and ambition colliding at the top of the world.

"The two climbers looked at each other, a glance that bored all the way down to Medvetz's DNA - not desperate or pleading or frightened but resolved, almost at peace. Here were two men, united in their obsessive enterprise, their trajectories intersecting for just an instant, but an instant that contained some fundamental understanding: the long journey full of failures and setbacks, injuries and disfigurement and pain, propelled by a commitment beyond reason. Here were two men in this inhospitable place, the wind raking across the ridge, the shadows lengthening - one departing his life, the other walking back into it.

"God bless you," Medvetz murmured. "Good-bye."

And then he faced down the mountain and resumed lumbering along the route, toward Brice and Brett Merrell and Mogens Jensen and all the others waiting for him in the world below."

Every year mountaineers from around the world are drawn to the base of Everest - whose peak reaches 29,035 feet into the sky - to attempt to reach the summit. Many have died climbing Everest, but perhaps no single death had created more controversy than the death of British climber David Sharp during the 2006 climbing season. In all, the 2006 season resulted in 11 deaths – the second deadliest season on record. In *Dark Summit*, author Nick Heil writes a comprehensive account of the events of 2006 that took place on the north side of Everest, including David Sharp's death, the miraculous rescue of Lincoln Hall and the ethical questions being raised as more and more people with less and less experience attempt to climb the highest peak on earth.

Nick Heil is an experienced climber, but he was not on Everest in 2006. Rather than handicapping him as an outsider, it actually enhances his credibility because, unlike Jon Krakauer's book *Into Thin Air*, Nick doesn't

have any loyalties to the people involved nor is he trying to paint himself as a hero. Instead, the book creates a comprehensive review detailing exactly what happened on the mountain and allows the reader to draw their own conclusions about the industry that has formed on the side of Everest. *Dark Summit* is also very accessible. Heil eschews the technical nomenclature of hardcore climbers, instead utilizing a more approachable language that allows those with limited knowledge of the climbing world to appreciate the difficulties involved.

In addition to being well researched, *Dark Summit* is also a very compelling read, told with a story telling knack that any reader should appreciate. This is necessary reading for anyone who has ever wondered what goes on at the top of the world.
