PDF | Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster

by Jon Krakauer
A bank of clouds was assembling on the not-so-distant horizon, but journalist-mountaineer Jon Krakauer, standing on the summit of Mt. Everest, saw nothing that "suggested that a murderous storm was bearing down." He was wrong. The storm, which claimed five lives and left countless more--including Krakauer's--in guilt-ridden disarray, would also provide the impetus for Into Thin Air, Krakauer's epic account of the May 1996 disaster.

By writing Into Thin Air, Krakauer may have hoped to exorcise some of his own demons and lay to rest some of the painful questions that still surround the event. He takes great pains to provide a balanced picture of the people and events he witnessed and gives due credit to the tireless and dedicated Sherpas. He also avoids blasting easy targets such as Sandy Pittman, the wealthy socialite who brought an espresso maker along on the expedition. Krakauer's highly personal inquiry into the catastrophe provides a great deal of insight into what went wrong. But for Krakauer himself, further interviews and investigations only lead him to the conclusion that his perceived failures were directly responsible for a fellow climber's death. Clearly, Krakauer remains haunted by the disaster, and although he relates a number of incidents in which he acted selflessly and even heroically, he seems unable to view those instances objectively. In the end, despite his evenhanded and even generous assessment of others' actions, he reserves a full measure of vitriol for himself.

This updated trade paperback edition of Into Thin Air includes an extensive new postscript that sheds fascinating light on the acrimonious debate that flared between Krakauer and Everest guide Anatoli Boukreev in the wake of the
tragedy. "I have no doubt that Boukreev's intentions were good on summit day," writes Krakauer in the postscript, dated August 1999. "What disturbs me, though, was Boukreev's refusal to acknowledge the possibility that he made even a single poor decision. Never did he indicate that perhaps it wasn't the best choice to climb without gas or go down ahead of his clients." As usual, Krakauer supports his points with dogged research and a good dose of humility. But rather than continue the heated discourse that has raged since Into Thin Air's denouncement of guide Boukreev, Krakauer's tone is conciliatory; he points most of his criticism at G. Weston De Walt, who coauthored The Climb, Boukreev's version of events. And in a touching conclusion, Krakauer recounts his last conversation with the late Boukreev, in which the two weathered climbers agreed to disagree about certain points. Krakauer had great hopes to patch things up with Boukreev, but the Russian later died in an avalanche on another Himalayan peak, Annapurna I.

In 1999, Krakauer received an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters—a prestigious prize intended "to honor writers of exceptional accomplishment." According to the Academy's citation, "Krakauer combines the tenacity and courage of the finest tradition of investigative journalism with the stylish subtlety and profound insight of the born writer. His account of an ascent of Mount Everest has led to a general reevaluation of climbing and of the commercialization of what was once a romantic, solitary sport; while his account of the life and death of Christopher McCandless, who died of starvation after challenging the Alaskan wilderness, delves even more deeply and disturbingly into the fascination of nature and the devastating effects of its lure on a young and curious mind."

Amazon.com Review

"Intrinsically irrational" is how Jon Krakauer characterizes the compulsion to climb Mount Everest in his audiobook Into Thin Air. The highly publicized fates of the May 1996 Everest expeditions, including the tragic loss of 12 lives, seem to bear out Krakauer's statement. Listening to Krakauer read his own account of the events in this unabridged version adds a uniquely intimate and thought-provoking dimension to the tragedy. Although Krakauer reads his account with journalistic professionalism, it's impossible to forget that you are listening to someone unburdening himself of a great weight, an unburdening that sometimes nearly approaches a confession.

Since the 1980s, more and more "marginally qualified dreamers" have attempted the ascent of Everest, as guided commercial expeditions have dangled the possibility of reaching the roof of the world in front of anyone wealthy enough to pay for the privilege. In 1996, Outside magazine asked Krakauer, a frequent contributor, to write a piece on the commercialization of Everest, and Krakauer signed on as a member of New Zealander Rob Hall's expedition. The disastrous outcome of the 1996 expedition forced Krakauer to write a very different article.

Those who read Krakauer's book may wonder whether the audiobook can possibly shed more light on the unfortunate events. It does. Krakauer's chronicle is chilling and horrifying. He recounts with excruciating detail the physical and mental cost of such a climb. Even under the best of circumstances, each step up the ice-clad mountain is monumentally exhausting, and the oxygen-deprived brain loses the ability to make reliable judgements. And on May 10, 1996, when Hall's expedition and several others made their summit assault, the conditions were far from ideal. The mountain was so "crowded" that climbers had to wait their turn near the summit while their bottled oxygen dwindled by the minute. By afternoon a blinding hurricane-force storm had stranded a number of climbers on the highest, most exposed reaches of the mountain.

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failures were directly responsible for a fellow climber’s death. Clearly, Krakauer remains haunted by the disaster, and although he relates a number of incidents in which he acted selflessly and even heroically, he seems unable to view those instances objectively. In the end, despite his evenhanded and even generous assessment of others’ actions, he reserves a full measure of vitriol for himself. (Running time: 467 minutes; six tapes)