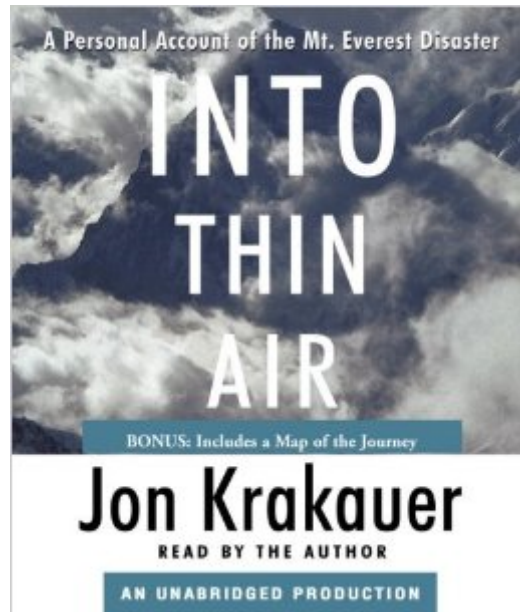


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Into Thin Air: A Personal Account Of The Mt. Everest Disaster



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I first read "Into Thin Air" right after it was first published five years ago. It haunted me at the time, and it continues to do so today. By now, the story has been told so many times and by so many different people that it's hard to remember that Krakauer's original account is the one that made it famous to begin with. Were it not for his incredible abilities as a storyteller, it is doubtful that anyone outside the world of mountaineering would remember what happened at the peak of Everest in that fateful May of 1996. Krakauer's account is so compelling because it reads like a book-length confession, which it is in a sense. The author worked through his very considerable feelings of survivor's guilt in the book's pages. His descriptions and not inconsiderable opinions have become legendary. For example, how many people read of AOL Chairman Robert Pittman's recent ouster from the company and remembered him as the husband of Sandra Hill Pittman, who personified the rich amateur climber who buys their way to the top of the world's tallest peak and who has no business being there? Krakauer's descriptions of Mrs. Pittman on the mountain are an example of his simple but devastating observations. Krakauer's highly readable prose makes the book read like

fiction, probably another reason why it was so popular. He signed on for the Everest climb intending to write a standard mountaineering magazine article. That he chose the fateful May 1996 climb is simply a rare case of someone being at the wrong place at precisely the right time. Though it caused him plenty of personal torment, it also allowed him to write a story for the ages. Overall, "Into Thin Air" fantastic storytelling make it one of the best non-fiction books published in the last decade or so.

Even if you already know the story of the deadly Mt. Everest expeditions of 1996, you will appreciate Jon Krakauer's own first person account of the Adventure Consultants and the Mountain Madness groups. Both of these expeditions were led by well-seasoned Everest climbers---Rob Hall from New Zealand and Scott Fischer from the States--and had the aid of expert guides, Sherpas from Nepal and "outsiders". But we soon find that even these experienced people are not immune from the human frailties of greed, denial and self-serving. Those Achilles' heels will cause both expeditions to completely fall apart. At the same time, human error combined with the unforgiving terrors of high altitude climbing sets the scene for heroism in many of the climbers and crew. Krakauer, a journalist who signed on with Hall's expedition to do a story for Outside magazine, doesn't disappoint as weaver of a tale. I took the book everywhere with me while reading it, always eager to find out what would happen next. If a book that explores deftly our desire to reach an unreachable summit appeals to you....especially when that book does not shy away from the tragedy caused when the desire to reach it undoes common sense and humanity....I highly recommend "Into Thin Air."

By and large, the negative reviews posted here have little to do with the quality of this book and almost everything to do with the presumed character of the writer, Jon Krakauer. Similarly, those who dislike Krakauer's Into the Wild tend to focus their judgment of the book's worth on their own feelings regarding the essay's subject, Christopher McCandless, the young man who traveled the Western United States and Mexico for two years before perishing in Alaska. I read Krakauer differently. I am not interested in Krakauer's liberal politics, his emotional instability, and variable maturity. I am not interested in whether he portrays the absolute truth in his account of the 1996 Mt. Everest disaster for the simple fact that I don't believe the truth can be told. Writing is a very poor substitute for a frostbitten finger or a hypoxic head. All we have is Krakauer's writing, so let's look at what he does as a writer. Krakauer is a sensationalist journalist, and since he reports on dangerous and near-death experiences regularly, he really can't help being grandiose and spectacular. The subject of his writing demands that he ratchet up the emotional power of his style and word choice.

And let's be honest--don't we, as readers, demand it of him as well? Don't we want a voyeuristic and graphic account, where the size, the shape, and the smell of death seem to lift from the pages? Who wants to read about a mountain climbing disaster sans the emotion and the ego it takes to put one's self unnecessarily into such perilous situations? Perhaps some readers want a quiet truth about what happened on the mountain, but this is to ask the impossible since every climber is guaranteed to have a different story and different perceptions of similar experiences--none of which are altogether true and none of which are altogether lies. And when he/she goes to tell about it, pieces of reality will inevitably be missed and left forgotten on the mountain. Emotions will well up and color an event with bias. Egos will peek from behind a boulder and whisper truths and nonsense. No writer can make sense of all of that, but Krakauer has tried, and largely succeeded, to give the reader an idea of what it was like on Mt. Everest in late spring 1996. He may or may not have retraced every path exactly, but he acts as a good guide. He welcomes the reader to disagree with him and simultaneously makes a bold and convincing case. He admits a myriad of his own mistakes and points out the mistakes of others. I'm impressed mostly with the balanced feel of his account. For example, much is made of Krakauer's portrayal of Anatoli Boukreev's actions on the mountain. Those who read Krakauer as blaming Boukreev for the deaths of some climbers must not have closely read the many times Krakauer praises Boukreev's numerous heroic actions. By telling of both the shameful and heroic actions of Boukreev--all told from Krakauer's self-admitted hypoxic state--I find that Krakauer achieves a kind of truth about both Boukreev and himself. In the end, for me, the book is about how truth changes states: It's solid and reliable when you start to climb Mt. Everest. And then you climb too high, and the truth becomes slippery and liquid; you're not quite sure and you're not quite in doubt. And then sometimes, the truth changes to a gas, a gyre of contradictions--the terrible beauty of chaos, which you'll never completely remember or entirely forget.

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