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### **A Day to Die For**

1996: Everest's Worst Disaster, The Untold True Story

A Day to Die For 1996: Everest's Worst Disaster, The Untold True Story. Graham Ratcliffe. Mainstream Publishing (U.K.), 2011. 322 pages. Color photos. Paperback. £11.99.

The title refers to May 10, 1996, and what so many people have come to call the "Into Thin Air accidents" on Mt. Everest. Graham Ratcliffe was part of a team aiming for the top on May 11 that year, which means he was on the South Col for the tragic evening of the 10th.

As a longtime Everest guide, I consider myself familiar with the tragedy, although I've never been particularly fond of arguing its details, its heroes, and its supposed villains. My view is that one should understand the accident so as not to repeat it—while also respecting the privacy of those involved and not sensationalizing the misfortune of others. Given that bias, I was pleased that Ratcliffe began with non-tragic circumstances.

In 1995 Ratcliffe makes the top on one of the earlier commercial expeditions to succeed from Tibet. He then decides to go for Everest's summit again in 1996, and it occurs to him that he could be the first Brit to make it up twice, and the first to summit from both sides. Hard to quibble with such a lofty and ambitious goal, but I'll admit that I was a little shocked that he presents it all as a done deal to his wife just a few months before the spring trip—this after convincing us that his wife and two daughters are a priority in his life. I cringed to read: "She knew only too well that trying to talk me out of it would be tantamount to cruelty. As she put it, 'It would be like caging a wild animal asking you not to go.' "

Ratcliffe and his teammates are in the storm on the South Col that key night, unaware of the awful circumstances playing out around and above them. The next morning they descend the Lhotse Face before the disaster is apparent. I, for one, was convinced that his team had their hands full and they might be excused for not wandering around in the stormy night to check on others, presumably well-guided and fat on resources.

Ratcliffe, while understandably disturbed and saddened by the tragedy, is not ready to let go of his climbing goals in its wake. He learns the game of self-promotion and sponsorship and keeps trying for the top of Everest. He gets up in 1999, beating other Brits to the goal, as he'd hoped, but it is a rough climb. At this point in my read I was slightly worried, since Ratcliffe had reached the end of his climbing narrative but my Kindle showed plenty more book.

He begins an obsession with 1996. That's his word—obsession—and it seems quite accurate. He feels guilt at not helping those in peril on the mountain. And somehow, this transforms to anger. Ratcliffe seems inclined to entertain conspiracy theories and begins to believe very strongly that other teams had access to weather forecasting in 1996, and that Rob Hall and Scott Fischer urged his team to change their attempt from the 10th to the 11th so as to avoid crowding, but without warning them that this would put them in the path of an oncoming storm. I concur that it is interesting to put all the weather data together again, and see that it adds up to a storm, but that is not the same thing as knowing exactly what synopsis the team leaders had in their hands in the lead-up to the big climb.

The second half of *A Day to Die For* is repetitive and circular by its very nature. It becomes a book about writing a book, and so it gets tedious. Ratcliffe's transformation to muckraking investigative

reporter is a slow process. He doesn't seem to know how to get the information he wants, so we suffer along with him for years, poring through accounts of the tragedy and then eventually hitting up survivors and meteorologists for answer after answer in his quest. The "Aha!" moments and a few revelations do come, but they don't seem all that revelatory.

The things that Rob Hall and Scott Fischer allowed to interfere with their judgment in May of 1996 have been explored already, many times. I don't buy Ratcliffe's stated rationale for going there again. One begins to suspect that his guilt and sadness turned to anger over the years because he was left out. The clients and guides and leaders and Sherpas involved all became boldface names in our climbing world. They wrote books and articles and made movies—and they didn't consult Graham Ratcliffe or ask his opinion, because it wasn't his epic.

As I hinted at earlier, perhaps I'm predisposed as an Everest guide to not like a book that hammers Everest guides. And in the interest of full disclosure, I even take a small, unnamed beating in the book for my part in putting out "tasteless" pictures of George Mallory's body upon its discovery. Ratcliffe rightly believes that Mallory's descendants had feelings that should have been respected. Not unlike the families and friends of Scott Fischer and Rob Hall, I'd venture. Ratcliffe's venom for those dead and alive is righteous, but then at the end he says he feels a lot better for getting it all out there. So there's that. And hey, now he is in with the boldface names in the continuing saga of the May 1996 tragedy. I'll accept that writing such a book was good therapy for Graham Ratcliffe. Unfortunately, reading *A Day to Die For* is not terribly therapeutic for the rest of us.

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## Images

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