



## AAC Publications

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### **Rock, Paper, Fire: The Best of Mountain and Wilderness Writing**

Marni Jackson and Tony Whittome, editors

Rock, Paper, Fire: The Best of Mountain and Wilderness Writing. Marni Jackson and Tony Whittome, editors. Banff Centre Press, 2013. 295 pages. Paperback. \$21.95.

On the face of it, an anthology of pieces written by students in any kind of writers' workshop sounds like a really bad idea. But in the Banff Centre's Mountain and Wilderness Writing Program, thanks to the inspired leadership of editor/teachers Marni Jackson and Tony Whittome, minor miracles seem to be wrought annually. *Rock, Paper, Fire*, a collection of pieces written by students in the program, bears witness to this conflagration.

Granted, some of the contributors to *Rock, Paper, Fire*—including Bernadette McDonald, Freddie Wilkinson, Katie Ives, and Maria Coffey—were pretty experienced writers even before they signed up for the Banff program. But what makes the anthology work, I think, is that all the aspirants are wilderness junkies, some of them at the cutting edge of climbing, sea kayaking, sailing, or skiing. The fervor that animates their three weeks together, I suspect, owes much to the fact that as they critique each other's projects, they're engaging in the endless colloquy that lies at the heart of adventure. How did we get into this mess? How are we going to get out of it? Why do we keep doing it, knowing we could die? Why is there nothing else in life that compares?

By now, in my more jaded moods, I like to think I've heard and dismissed all the specious rationalizations for why we continue to tiptoe on the edge of disaster as we play at being, in Lionel Terray's pithy phrase, "conquerors of the useless." But in *Rock, Paper, Fire*, I learned something new on every other page. From McDonald's rueful meditation on Tomaz Humar's all-but-inevitable pilgrimage toward death on a lonely Himalayan ledge. From Steve Swenson's account of a tragedy on Denali that he wonders to this day whether he could have prevented. From Jon Turk's rolling the dice under the sea ice closing in on Ellesmere Island. From Niall Grimes' linkage of grief over his mother's death to the joyful rediscovery of his childhood crags. From Don Gillmor's evocation of the bond between downhill speed on skis and the downward trajectory of aging. From Helen Mort's rekindling in poetry of the transcendent climbs of Dorothy Pilley and Alison Hargreaves.

Pick up a copy. You'll be surprised—and moved.

David Roberts

Images



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