



AAC Publications

Short Peaks: 33 Brief Mountain Tales

By Jerry Auld

Short Peaks: 33 Brief Mountain Tales. Jerry Auld. Imaginary Mountain Surveyors, 2013. 280 pages. Paperback. CAN \$25.

Climbing fiction has always been problematic, perilously close to an oxymoron. During the bad old days in Camp 4 we used to read aloud from James Ramsey Ullman's trite stuff such as *And Not to Yield*, intoning his purple prose into the firelight and howling with derision. If that guy ever had any feel for the reality of climbing, it had long since slipped beneath the cushion of some overstuffed chair. I can only recall two pieces with respect: Jeff Long's moody saga of the Valley, *Angels of Light*, and James Salter's exploration of the life of Gary Hemming, *Solo Faces*. But Salter was a "real" writer, with the respect of the larger literary world, not just a climber. Fiction, apparently, was for better writers than climbing could muster.

So it was with a certain trepidation that I accepted a chance to review the stories in Jerry Auld's *Short Peaks*.

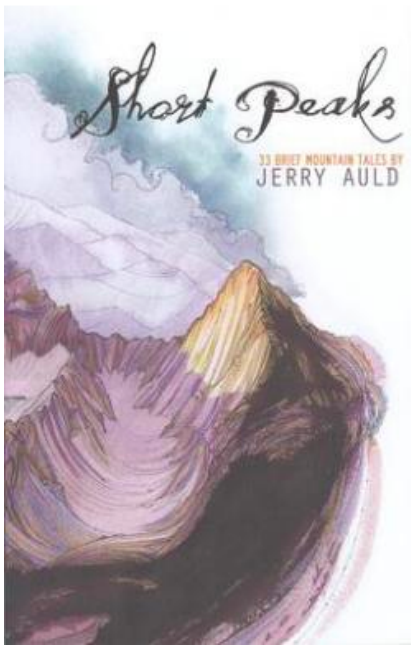
I've never been that fond of plot. Boy meets girl. Boy acts like a dick; girl goes on the rag. Whatever. So maybe it's just me, but when Jerry Auld evokes the tension in climbers on a ledge "with all of them tied in, pressed together like sticks of dynamite" it just lights my fuse.

One favorite story, and not such a short one, revolves around the mystery of George Mallory. I won't spoil the twists of the tale, but read "Proof." I got riveted when "The old man's voice is like the rumble of stones under ice." I came back for a second serving, steeping again in that voice, coming from "a wheelchair under a pile of blankets." I've heard out old men before. Norman Clyde for one, and his tales were way worth it. This guy, spun out of Jerry Auld's imagination, had been on the 1924 Everest expedition, and lingering out of that trip is climbing's hoariest mystery. Now we have an ice axe and a body, both discovered high on the summit ridge. But still no camera, Mallory's "pocket Kodak." Still no proof. So we are all set up to hang on the words coming from this gravelly voice on the veranda of an old soldier's home in the Darjeeling foothills.

This is what fiction is for, really: to carry us a ways beyond what we know. Could be a little, could be a lot. Loosened, as by the second beer, to wander beyond the bounds of proof.

Doug Robinson

Images



Article Details

Author	Doug Robinson
Publication	AAJ
Volume	56
Issue	88
Page	372
Copyright Date	2014
Article Type	Book reviews