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The Tower: A Chronicle of Climbing and Controversy on Cerro Torre

By Kelly Cordes

The Tower: A Chronicle of Climbing and Controversy on Cerro Torre. By Kelly Cordes. Patagonia Books, 2014. 400 pages. Hardcover, \$27.95.

The Tower is not only the definitive book about Cerro Torre—it's also one of the finest examples of a subgenre of mountaineering writing that is surprisingly rare: the biography of a single peak. It calls to mind Heinrich Harrer's *The White Spider*, and Kelly Cordes' authoritative treatise deserves its place on the shelf next to that classic account of the Eiger Nordwand.

Rather than plod chronologically through the various ascents and new routes on the spire once declared "the hardest mountain in the world," as Walt Unsworth's comprehensive but often lugubrious doorstopper does for Everest, Cordes wisely frames his book around the central enigma of Cerro Torre. A brilliant soloist in his native Italy, Cesare Maestri claimed the first ascent by an incredibly difficult route in 1959, after his partner Toni Egger plunged to his death on the descent, leaving no witness to corroborate or contradict his claim. Stung by detractors who suspected a hoax, Maestri returned in 1970 with a 150-pound, gas-powered compressor to drill his infamous bolt ladder toward the summit on the opposite side of the mountain—a bizarre stunt that only reinforced the suspicions of those detractors.

Still alive at 85, Maestri has long since stopped talking to the press about what is probably the greatest controversy in climbing history. To examine the mystery from every possible angle, Cordes has ransacked obscure journals and newspaper clippings in four different languages and made numerous trips to Europe to interview everyone who might cast light on the story. He also covers in depth and judiciously the furor that erupted after Hayden Kennedy and Jason Kruk chopped some 150 of Maestri's bolts on the way down from their "fair means" ascent of the route in 2012.

Cordes is a Patagonia veteran with many fine routes in the Cerro Torre and Fitz Roy massifs to his credit. *The Tower* thus veers toward a personal memoir, especially in the last pages, when he discusses his near-fatal ice climbing accident on what should have been a warm-up route in Montana, which left him with the fear that he would never be able to climb well again. Yet the personal story is understated and modest, and Cordes goes out of his way to salute the deeds of such stellar Patagonia pioneers as Ermanno Salvaterra and Rolando Garibotti.

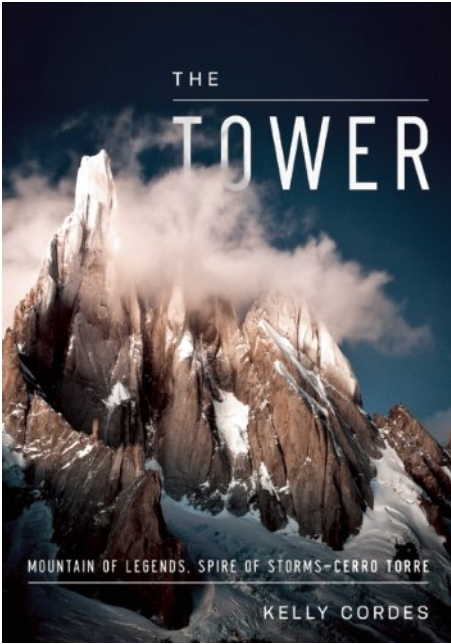
Just as *The Tower* stands as the definitive work about Cerro Torre, it also delivers the irrefutable verdict on Maestri, in the process co-indicting his 1959 teammate, Cesarino Fava, who was not on the summit push but went to his deathbed insisting on Maestri's truth. Cordes' sad but well-earned conclusion:

"That is where Cesarino Fava and Cesare Maestri failed. They failed themselves, they failed those who believed in them, and they betrayed the code of trust that is essential to climbing mountains. I believe the ways we treat the things and people we profess to love are expressions of who we are."

The Tower is a major contribution to mountain literature worldwide. And as Kelly Cordes' first book, it represents an astounding achievement.

– David Roberts

Images



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