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Snowblind: Stories of Alpine Obsession

By Daniel Arnold

Snowblind: Stories of Alpine Obsession. Daniel Arnold. Counterpoint, 2015. 296 pages. Paperback, \$15.95.

First-century Romans reminisced about the empire's expansion by watching gladiators in the Coliseum. Early 20th-century Americans relived their frontier on horseback and at Wild West shows. Similarly, at the start of the Industrial Revolution, Europeans climbed the Alps to satisfy a nostalgia for the challenges of wild nature. Climbing's come a long way since Whymper, but its perpetual risk still enforces a certain intellectualization of the sport revealed as literature. No other adventure activity offers such a diversity of creative nonfiction, novels, novellas, and collections of short stories.

Daniel Arnold's *Snowblind* is the best collection of short stories about alpinism I have read. It reads like a sort of choss fiction, not because it's bad, but because it's good—good in the way that early pulp generated today's media. I flew through its pages as I kept up with the protagonists racing up the alpine faces, ridges, walls, and couloirs of the world.

There are a lucky eight stories. From the Alps to Yosemite Valley, Alaska, Canada, the Karakoram, and the Andes, Arnold expends few words describing the views. Rather, he masterfully describes the colorful, twisted, archetypal characters most of us have roped ourselves to or maybe just watched as they climbed past.

Each tale is cast among a fistful of themes common to our ambition but freshly delivered. The responsibilities among partners that extend beyond a belay. The perpetual risk of death and harm. The nearly animate wind, cold, altitude, and falling debris. The suffering. The bad anchors and cramped bivouacs. The low-angle approach and retreat—both physical and emotional—as challenging as the vertical, technical climb. The drug-like addiction. The simple fact that “climbing is best when it's done.” Our pervasive superstition. A useless glory none but ourselves can bestow.

If there is any complaint, it would be that while each chapter spins a different and engaging plot, the author's voice and style come through thickly, with each chapter reading as variant on the last. But isn't that alpine climbing anyway?

– Roman Dial

Images



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