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Above the Reich

By David Chaundy-Smart

Above the Reich. David Chaundy-Smart. Imaginary Mountain Surveyors, 2016. Paperback, 231 pages, \$19.95.

"The Nazis said war was the same as mountaineering. They lied." Thus speaks Lukas Eichel, orphan turned reluctant German soldier in World War II, in David Chaundy-Smart's debut novel. Lukas never embraces the Nazi climbing ethos that blazing up *nordwands* defeats, even "murders," a mountain.

Still, as a young man in the wrong country at the wrong time, Lukas' fate is intricately wound with the Nazi establishment, especially when his love of alpinism dovetails with the fascist party's desire for international fame. Hungry for a home after the bewildering power plays of a Munich orphanage, Lukas finds comfort in the Alps, in the driving of pitons or the straightforward escape of abseiling. As Nazi Germany rises around him, he savors alpine isolation, though it's his climbing partners who fuel the story. Lukas comes alive not on the battlefield but when he ties in on the mountain, belaying a series of colorful characters—an SS officer, an American, a mixed-race African—that goad him into camaraderie, action, and rebellion.

Chaundy-Smart, the founding editor of Canadian climbing magazine *Gripped*, takes care to paint the Nazi characters with equal parts collective perversion and individual motivation. Lukas may not care much for the fascist philosophy, but there's claustrophobia in the fact that these are literally the only people he knows. While the regime's horrors are mostly alluded to, in oblique mentions of medical experiments and watchtower guards, Chaundy-Smart nails the stew of bravado and insecurity that powers the National Socialists; Lukas' childhood friend Dietrich is casually racist but goes apoplectic about anyone mocking his ascendant party.

Dietrich's fury takes national form with German failure in the Himalayan race, where the British held a stranglehold on Everest; Nanga Parbat became the German objective, more significant simply because it was *theirs*. In a move that efficiently distances the book from Heinrich Harrer and real events, Chaundy-Smart uses a Nanga Parbat stand-in, imagining a 7,348-meter Himalayan peak called Istighfar. Its bluish ice slopes and kilometer-high ice wall, littered with the remains of failed expeditions, make a convenient objective after Lukas and the novel have been worn down by the pernicious Reich.

Lukas's disinterest in fame or power makes him invulnerable to the macho Nazi climbing philosophy, and today the nationalistic concept of climbing solely for the homeland feels outdated. But Chaundy-Smart makes a more subtle argument: It isn't merely vanity that sours the Nazi outlook, but rather their irrational insistence on certainty: that Christian Germans are simply better, enemies are clearly evil, and to summit is to win. Lukas, having lost his family before he even understood it, embraces the open questions of mountaineering. He turns, he fails, he lets go of possessing much of anything. His first climb on the mighty Matterhorn is unremarkable, even ignoble. In the course of the novel, he's the only one who concedes to powers beyond his control and relies on partnerships forged on individual connection, not tribal affiliation. Wars are about beating someone else, but mountains aren't; it's that recognition of ambiguity that frees him. "As long as there is a centimeter of mountain left above me, nothing is decided," he says.

– Allison Williams

Images



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