



## AAC Publications

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### **Karakoram: Climbing Through the Kashmir Conflict**

By Steve Swenson

**KARAKORAM: CLIMBING THROUGH THE KASHMIR CONFLICT. Steve Swenson. Mountaineers Books, 2017. Hardcover, 315 pages, \$26.95.**

In *Karakoram*, Steve Swenson describes the climbs he attempted and accomplished in this great range from 1980 to 2015, during 15 discrete expeditions. Greg Child, who wrote the foreword, counted Swenson's days in the Karakoram at 1,200. An ascent of Everest, the only outlier, is included almost as a postscript to his K2 climb and is the only occasion he is attached (very loosely) to a larger expeditionary framework. The Karakoram climbs are done with small groups of friends, alpine style, and without oxygen.

The reference to the Kashmir conflict in the subtitle is not mere lip service. Every trip is contextualized within the ever-shifting violent political realities of the region. The only other mountaineering book I know that makes such an insistent and effective case for including such an extensive detailing of regional politics is Bernadette McDonald's *Freedom Climbers*, which connects the post-World War II economics and politics of Poland to the character of the superb alpine achievements of Polish climbers. Note that Swenson's works-cited page includes three titles on climbing and 16 on political conflict.

Swenson's first four trips to the region—two to Gasherbrum IV and two to K2—did not result in summits, but he would reach the summit of K2 via the north ridge with Greg Child and Greg Mortimer in 1990. This scenario gave me pause to wonder how many climbers failed to summit in their first four big trips, but went on to further success? The summit of G-IV would elude him two more times before he turned his eyes to other goals. And yet there is not much wailing or gnashing of teeth over this. One of Swenson's many strengths is an ability to see the big picture, as if all these ventures were part of a larger whole, which includes his marriage, parenthood, a successful engineering career, and the lasting friendships with climbing partners old and new. His friendship with Ghulam Rasool, his Pakistani cook on an early K2 attempt, spans not only cultures and years but generations.

It's probably not fair to quote one of the few passages where Swenson uses an expletive (excluding when he's quoting Marko Prezelj!), but this seems essential: "It was the kind of fear that got my brain to say things like, 'Don't fuck up now, kick a step, make sure it's stable, stand up, shove your ice axe shaft into the snow, don't fuck up.' Over and over. Managing this state of heightened anxiety for hours on end was what I had been working on for years."

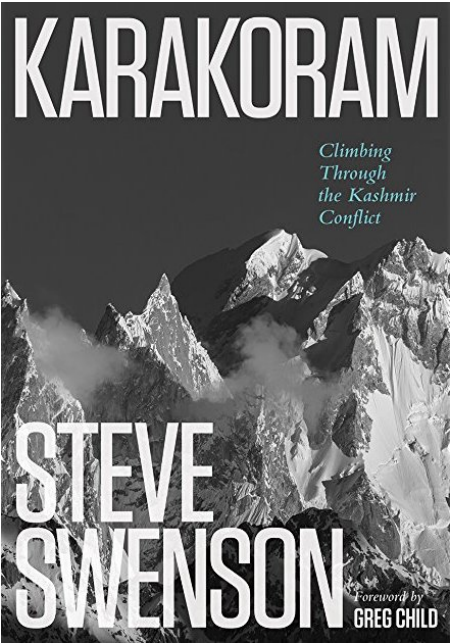
Swenson describes many moments that leave indelible impressions on the reader: his harrowing descent off Nanga Parbat with Doug Chabot after completing the first ascent of the Mazeno Ridge (to the Mazeno Gap: six miles!); Mark Richey's careful treading over loose snow on the north ridge of Latok I (Richey's photograph of the ensuing bivy is the stuff of nightmares); and his 2011 climb of Saser Kangri II with Richey and Freddie Wilkinson, a late highlight, though he barely mentions receiving a Piolet d'Or for it.

The maps are plentiful and first-rate, so that even as the locations change frequently the reader always knows exactly where the treks and climbs are located. Likewise, the index, so frequently omitted these days, is accurate and exhaustive. Any first-time Karakoram climber who chooses not to read this book is making the first of what will undoubtedly become many mistakes.

Swenson's Karakoram forms a triumvirate with Steve House's *Beyond the Mountain* and Barry Blanchard's *The Calling* (both writers share a rope with Swenson in these pages). While House may have charged harder and wore his obsession more visibly on his sleeve, and Blanchard is the more natural raconteur, Swenson emerges as the steadiest, who best shows us how to be in the mountains, and maybe, in the world.

– David Stevenson

Images



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