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Tides: A Climber's Voyage

By Nick Bullock

TIDES: A CLIMBER'S VOYAGE. Nick Bullock. Vertebrate Publishing, 2018. Paperback, 256 pages, £14.95.

When I picked up Nick Bullock's second book, *Tides*, which won the 2018 Banff Mountain Book Festival's Mountain Literature Award, I wasn't sure what to expect. Bullock is known in New England, where I live, as the funny Brit to whom one hands the rack when the climbing gets scary and difficult. But, as *Tides* confirms, his writing chops match his alpine ability. Throughout the book, he balances intense moments (a grizzly bear attack in the Canadian backcountry, a killing storm high on Denali's south face) with a swirling observance rare in alpinism's neon-colored, Instagram-savvy world: the bobbing head of a seal off the coast of Wales, a child in Kathmandu, litter on a rainy run, a flock of starlings. These details are so wrought and vivid they compete with—and sometimes surpass—many of *Tides*' climbing sequences.

Tides covers Bullock's climbing life from 2003 to 2016. Perhaps more importantly, it tackles the relocation of his elderly parents to a houseboat on the United Kingdom's system of canals and waterways, and the fallout of his own relationship with a younger woman. Bullock's unflinching examination of death, of aging, and of the darker side of alpine motivation makes for some heavy reading. It's easy to seethe with jealousy after scanning the newswires and Facebook posts of professional alpinists—I dare anyone to do so after reading this book. Sure, Bullock delivers the moments of alpine glory, but usually with a grain of salt and an awareness I wish more climbers possessed: "I become entranced. I am guilty. But the game we climbers play is trivial. It is not poverty, famine, homelessness, war, destitution, or hopelessness."

The time line and location in *Tides* shift often, as the title suggests. While this is ostensibly to cover the wide swath of climbing Bullock has done, I found the writing shone in the quiet, in-between moments. Often the author dives into the minutiae: "There was always a glimmer of hope in the small unnoticed things of life..." he admits towards the end. A dismal drive to Scotland is given as much weight as the climb the next day: "I turned off the motorway and into the services—one of those strange islands of people in transit. The wind strafed the tarmac and bit back into my face. People stood shivering with smoke trickling from cigarettes clamped between cold fingers. Dead cigarette stubs scattered around tubes of polished steel." When he returns to the U.K. from abroad, Bullock navigates islands within the island. Llanberis and the slate climbing of Wales becomes an oasis; the ribald satisfaction of Scottish winter climbing counters the grimy canals where his parents are moored.

It's moments like these that make Bullock's climbing accomplishments—often oozing with self-deprecation—appear secondary. Without paying ardent attention to the routes described, like a repeat of the House-Anderson line on Mt. Alberta with Will Sim, a reader might think the climbing Bullock tackles in *Tides* is ordinary. It isn't—it's just tempered by an introspection usually removed from such books.

If you're looking for a streamlined mountaineering read in the classical tradition ("I really don't like classics," Bullock admits), look elsewhere. If you're looking for a portrayal of the ups and downs of professional climbing, and of the lost moments in between—all given deft treatment by a seasoned, sensitive writer—this is it.

Images

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