



AAC Publications

Mysterium: A Novel

By Susan Froderberg

MYSTERIUM: A Novel. Susan Froderberg. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. Hardcover, 271 pages, \$26.

“There are climbers who climb primarily to enter a deepening mystery,” Professor Troy scrawls in his journal in the opening chapter of *Mysterium*. “For this woman or man, the long haul up the mountain contains the ecstasy of devotion. No seeker forgoes the slope.”

Mystery, philosophy, and devotion are at the heart of Susan Froderberg’s *Mysterium*, a novel loosely based around the events of the 1976 American-Indian Nanda Devi expedition. The story of the original climb began to unfold in 1974, when Nanda Devi Unsoeld (daughter of Willi Unsoeld, of Everest fame) approached H. Adams Carter, editor of the *American Alpine Journal*, with the idea of organizing a climb of the mountain in observance of the 40th anniversary of its first ascent. The 1976 expedition, co-led by Willi and Carter, succeeded in establishing a new route up the northwest face. As the first party of climbers (John Roskelley, Lou Reichardt, and Jim States) returned from their ascent, Devi and her father moved up to Camp IV, where she fell ill and died. Just over ten years later, Roskelley published his account of the climb in the book *Nanda Devi: The Tragic Expedition*.

In an essay at the publisher’s website, “How I Came to the Story,” Froderberg described how, during a 2008 trek in Bhutan, she became enamored with the mountaineering stories of her guide, John Roskelley. “[He] was full of anecdotes,” Froderberg recalled, “but he was reticent about incidents having to do with the Nanda Devi expedition. His hesitancy to speak about the Unsoelds or what happened on that trip fascinated me all the more.” Above all, Froderberg wondered: “What would it be like to be [Willi Unsoeld]? What would it be like to be Devi?” Later, she wrote, “I realized I would have to write the book I had been hoping to read.”

In Froderberg’s novel, the young heroine is Sarasvati Troy, named for the fictional peak of Sarasvati (also known as *Mysterium*). Her father, climber and widower Professor Troy, teaches philosophy but “doesn’t care to discuss dead wives.” Other character names and details wink at the historic record: There is the scholarly New Englander “Virgil Adams,” who also edits the *AAJ*, and a reference to a “William Hilman,” who, with Adams, completed the first ascent of Mt. Sarasvati twenty-five years prior. (H.W. Tilman and Noel Odell made the first ascent of Nanda Devi in 1936.) Other members of the anniversary expedition include Dr. Reddy and his son, Devin; Wilder Carson, a young mountaineer whose tough exterior hides his grief for his lost twin brother; and Wilder’s wife, Vida, a yoga instructor who pleads caution in the mountains.

As with the story of the 1976 Nanda Devi expedition, cultural and generational differences create some tension within the Sarasvati party. Some favor the more traditional tactics of the “siege” style of expedition, while others prefer to climb in alpine style. Early on, they debate whether men and women—romantic partners in particular—can successfully climb together in the high mountains.

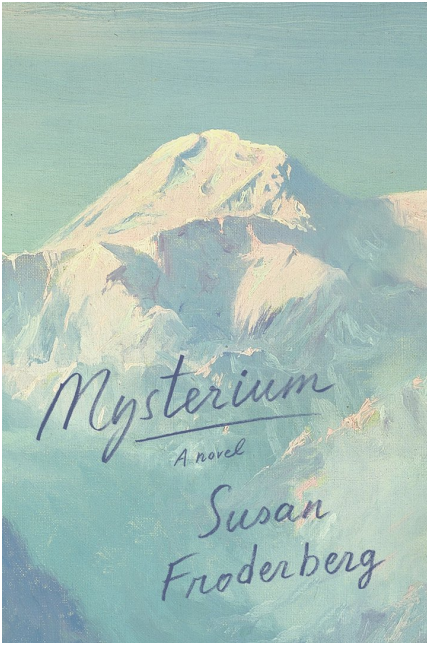
During the course of the expedition, each character is forced to grapple with the mystery driving their own desire to climb—a question that, though nearly as old as climbing itself, takes on a new luster under Froderberg’s ambitious pen. Richly imagined in beautiful, at times ornate prose, Froderberg conjures a high alpine landscape where the mysteries of life glimmer on the horizon: “Snow particles sparkle and waft about...like angelic dust, stellars of icy crystals becoming tiny mirrors of the miracle of existence.”

Yet in electing to frame her novel partly around an already well-known story, Froderberg has opened the door to critiques of the work for both its breadth and lack of imagination. Readers will question whether the novel is too deviant from or too similar to accounts of the historic 1976 climb. In their introduction to *One Step in the Clouds: An Omnibus of Mountaineering Novels and Short Stories* (1990), Audrey Salkeld and Rosie Smith observed, "Climbing is considered by its adherents to be somehow too sacred to fictionalize. Its vivid real-life dramas and intense loyalties, its acts of heroism, and the all-too-frequent encounters with violent death are too precious, too poignant, too much part of some private lore and myth to become the raw material of fiction." In a 2019 editorial for *Alpinist* 65, Katie Ives suggested, "If the best mountain fiction still appears threatening to some, perhaps it's because it's inherently subversive."

Mysterium abounds with mountain passion and philosophy, but in the end, a problematic oversight confounds its ambition. In its portrayal of the expedition staff, the book fails to subvert one of the deeply colonialist tropes of traditional Western mountaineering narratives: the marginalization of expedition workers. The low-altitude porters, the narrator informs, "wear...the dirt they are covered in like a second layer of skin;" nevertheless, "despite their hardships," they are "the most cheerful bunch on the trip." When one of the workers slips on talus and falls 1,000 feet, his death barely registers on the narrative: There is no mention of who he was or what loved ones he might've left behind—the climbing party never even appears to learn his name. With these oversights, ultimately, *Mysterium* fails to do what literature does best: in the freedom of imagining new worlds, to reach beyond the familiar to find beauty, to stimulate empathy, to stare into the depths of silence and startle the void.

– Paula Wright

Images



Article Details

Author	Paula Wright
Publication	AAJ
Volume	61
Issue	93
Page	343
Copyright Date	2019
Article Type	Book reviews