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### **Mountains and Desire: Climbing vs. the End of the World**

By Margret Grebowicz

**MOUNTAINS AND DESIRE: CLIMBING VS. THE END OF THE WORLD. Margret Grebowicz. Repeater Books, 2021. Paperback, 113 pages, \$14.95.**

Mountains and Desire is enigmatically subtitled Climbing vs. the End of the World. A more accurate subtitle might be Random Thoughts on the Current State of Mountaineering by a Fangirl [the author's term] Trained in Philosophy. This is a book about climbing as a cultural phenomenon as seen through the eyes of a non-climber. But being a non-climber isn't the problem here; rather, it's her academic training that has led her a bit astray. As in:

My working philosophy is that climbing is not just something that happens on the mountain's surface, not when the whole world is watching. At least since Mallory, it has taken the form of cultural/semiotic extraction, and this extraction seems to have reached its peak moment.

Cultural/semiotic extraction? Just one of many places in the book where I penciled WTF? into the margin. The point I am able to extract here is that she's interested in climbing, now, at the point at which it has become a mainstream activity and plays some kind of role in the culture at large, a phenomenon she traces back to Mallory and its "inauguration of celebrity climbers and celebrity mountains." Mallory's famous and flippant response, "Because it's there," is a kind of announcement, Grebowicz claims, that climbing has an audience, and that fact affects climbing.

The book owes a large debt, mostly acknowledged here, to David Roberts' 1984 essay, "The Public Climber: A Reactionary Ruminations." By the time it was collected in *Moments of Doubt* just two years later, Roberts was already defending the friendly accusation that no one had done more to popularize climbing than he had. Roberts' original question was something along the lines of: What does publicity cost in terms of innocence? Climbing that's recorded for the public, Roberts said, is "not the real thing." (Obviously, by the time he collaborated with Alex Honnold on their book *Alone on the Wall*, this opinion had evolved into something else.)

This book is divided into seven short chapters, but I would describe its movement as more recursive than linear. It's also structured, as Grebowicz points out, by the three mountains around which she measures her ideas: Everest, El Capitan, and K2.

Everest, she claims, is "symbolic of a world used up by humans, crawling with amateur adventurers who can afford it and littered with the corpses of those who don't make it down." Much of her discussion of Everest is focused on the use of supplemental oxygen and relies on Everest guide Lukas Furtenbach's assertion that most deaths on the mountain are caused by altitude, and could be prevented by using more oxygen. From there she leaps to the arguable conclusion that "almost all deaths are the fault of expedition companies, not the climbers themselves." This seems a radical oversimplification to me. Yet immediately following that she nicely complicates the issues: "Death by altitude," she notes, "is not exactly an accident since altitude is precisely what climbers seek out." She tempers that with the rhetorical question: "How safe do high-altitude enthusiasts want climbing to become?"

Part of her reasoning stems from her focus on 8,000-meter peak clients and "pro climbers" (guides).

She seems unaware that there are other measures of worthy climbing besides altitude. Of course, there are very skilled climbers guiding 8,000-meter peaks. But, for example, if we look at Piolets d'Or awardees, even though climbs in the Himalaya and Karakoram predominate, most are not done on 8,000-meter peaks, nor are most done by Everest guides. She seems to have a limited understanding of what is moving mountaineering forward.

Grebowicz's claim that the "tendency to distinguish between summiting and 'how you play the game' " goes back to Karen Warren's 1990 essay "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism" reveals a shockingly limited awareness of our history. Debates about the importance of "how you play the game" have been woven into the fabric of mountaineering from its inception.

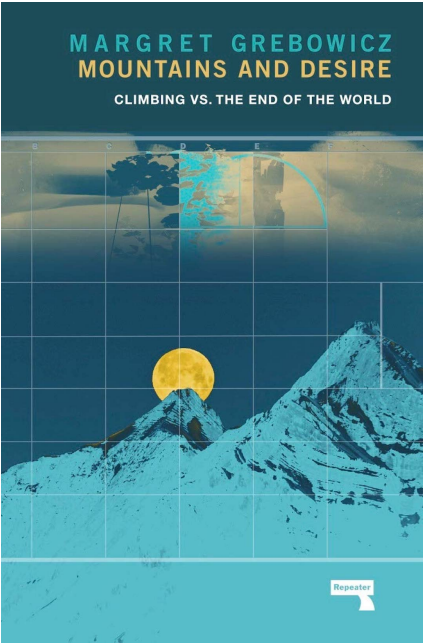
She does offer some compelling leaps from the climbing world to contemporary culture: "Because it's there," she writes, "is a symptom of the ever deeper well of uncertainty about why anyone does anything at all." And, "Summiting is not about summiting but can also be a call to re-interrogate and thus re-imagine what one really wants to do with one's time on earth."

For such a compact book, it's packed with a wide range of such big ideas. When I wasn't flummoxed by her opacity or questioning her conclusions, I was impressed by her attempts and ability to find in our still-relatively-small climbing subculture a magnifying mirror to humanity in general.

Grebowicz has a terrific instinct to rely on those whose fingers have accurately taken our collective pulse, like Roberts, who is both prescient and foundational here, but also Steph Davis, whose words may summarize Grebowicz's arguments more succinctly than the author herself is able to articulate: "Perhaps progression [in climbing] means something very different, perhaps it means refining the experience, becoming safer, more elegant, and more aware. Perhaps it means sustainability."

— David Stevenson

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