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Imaginary Peaks: The Riesenstein Hoax and Other Mountain Dreams

By Katie Ives

IMAGINARY PEAKS: THE RIESENSTEIN HOAX AND OTHER MOUNTAIN DREAMS. Katie Ives. Mountaineers Books, 2021. Hardcover, 304 pages, \$26.95.

The Riesensteins were an invented mountain range, purported to be in British Columbia, that appeared in Summit magazine in 1962. In *Imaginary Peaks*, Katie Ives unpacks the cartographical mysteries of this hoax, and the unique characters, particularly Harvey Manning, the driving force behind Freedom of the Hills, who perpetrated the prank. Ives locates this moment within the larger context of climbing, literary, and personal history. She immerses the reader in the seemingly endless quest for newly discovered peaks, claims of first ascents, and human desire for blank spots on the map. — Editor

We all have dark nights. We all have dark summits. We all have those cold, desperate slogs to get off a peak, or the moments of terror when the next move is so committing, and a slip is so possible and retreat impossible, that we stuff our rationales deep down. It's been said that perhaps we climbers have short memories, and that's why we keep returning. But I'd argue the opposite.

Before the obsessions, before the certainties, before the knowledge, we were led by imaginings and dreams. Lying on the shag rug of the rumpus room with, as Katie Ives puts it in *Imaginary Peaks*, "scraps of old images that drifted from illuminated manuscripts and sepia-toned maps, tales that slipped from leather-bound volumes and ink-blurred magazine pages..." dreaming of yarding our way up pinnacles, yes, that was painless. Beautiful, too. The sunlight: how it bent. The solidity. The lack of doubt.

This is what Ives has rekindled in *Imaginary Peaks*.

In her retellings, as a fly-on-the-wall of rooms like the Explorers Club library in New York, we watch as friends cook up mountain hoaxes. This is a powerful tool to deflate the overly serious and egotistical, because, "...if modern maps and guidebooks detract from their user's imaginations, you can always shift the peaks around, mix in a few errors and fables, and then see what happens to the people you fool." Because "facts and fiction read the very same way in print."

But look deeper, and before that intention, before the spreading mischievous smiles, even before the first wondering "What if we..." was quietly breached—these were individuals scanning the maps. Smoothed flat by calloused hands, peered at by experienced eyes, pursed over by hardened lips. And in that nascent moment when something caught their eye was a hope. From somewhere deep in the recesses of their childish fascination with maps and mountains, a hope that they would find something everyone else had missed. And a "something" that was not a knoll or a minor ridge, but something hidden and discrete and very, very powerful. And that is where Ives brings us:

When the world has been fully codified and collated...a sense of loss arises.... It is within this context that the unnamed and discarded places...take on a romantic aura. In a fully discovered world exploration does not stop; it just has to be reinvented.... Hidden geographies are the inverse of lost places; they hint at the possibility that the age of discovery is not quite over.*

But dangerous too: As is all too apparent in this day and age, once the seal on the trust-lamp is

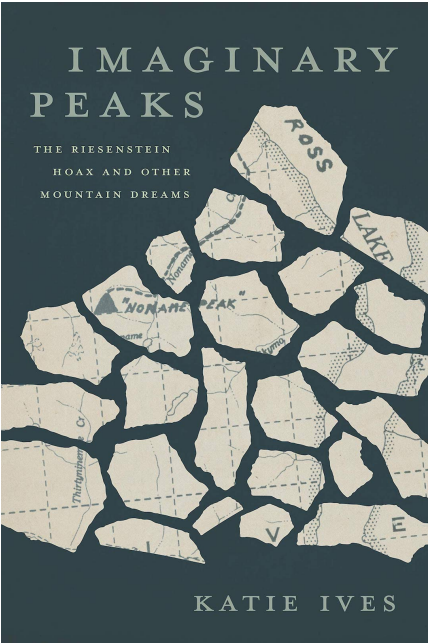
broken, that genie is hard to recapture. This book, then, is a guide on how to conduct a hoax, for “what people most desired, it seemed, was folklore, particularly if its content matched what they wanted to hear.”

And, ultimately, isn't that what we all want? When we construct these pranks, deep down, it's because we wish someone would do it for us. To lead us out there, with hope of the impossible. A journal description, a map fragment, a clue leading to something just bordering the imagination. That is the fountainhead. That is the vague sunlit memory that launched us all, because the next best thing to finding a treasure map is making a treasure map.

— Jerry Auld

Reviewer's Note: After this review went to press, I realized I had mistakenly omitted to credit this quote to Alastair Bonnett's **Unruly Places: Lost Spaces, Secret Cities, and Other Inscrutable Geographies**—a credit that was clearly marked in Ives' text. I regret this oversight.

Images



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