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Hidden Mountains: Survival and Reckoning After a Climb Gone Wrong

By Michael Wejchert

HIDDEN MOUNTAINS: SURVIVAL AND RECKONING AFTER A CLIMB GONE WRONG. By Michael Wejchert (HarperCollins, 2023). Hardcover, 243 pages, \$28.99.

When we climb mountains, at a certain point we quiet the monsters in our minds and go forth. This basic yet brave act contains the beauty of alpinism and the optimism of the human spirit, of facing the unknown armed with the illusion— or is it the reality?—of self-control. Think too much and the terrible “ifs” accumulate (to borrow from Winston Churchill, reflecting on events leading to the Great War). And so we plan and prepare, knowing that countless dangers still lurk beyond our control.

In June 2018, four climbers in Alaska’s remote Hidden Mountains were, by any reasonable standard, sufficiently prepared for their objectives. The two couples were close friends, had complementary skills and extensive experience, rescue insurance, and satellite communication devices. They were climbing well within their abilities. Their day began brilliantly, unfolding with the joys of partnership, movement, and a new route in a wild setting. The trip of a lifetime. They were doing everything right and then, suddenly, everything went horribly wrong.

In an impressively compact 243 pages, Michael Wejchert’s *Hidden Mountains* brings the climbers to life in all their passion, heartbreak, and courage, while masterfully weaving in the complexities we face when we live adventurously, from the culture surrounding climbing and risk to the inextricable influences of history and human drive.

As I read, I observed in myself a rising realization that the story may be both a magnifying glass and a mirror—when accidents happen, even those of us whose outings and choices are virtually indistinguishable from those affected enact shallow defense mechanisms, as if to make ourselves immune. *We all are probably guilty.* I wouldn’t have done that. They should have done this. If only they had brought X, Y, and Z. You wouldn’t catch me there. *(Of course not, you were on your smartphone proclaiming your virtual wisdom.)* All to shield us from the horrible possibility: What if it happens to me?

The pathos and humanity of Wejchert’s writing renders such denial impossible. He carries us through the fallout—such accidents are never truly over—where life changes forever yet still goes on, in all its messy and beautiful ways, equal parts tragic and inspiring, through friendship, sorrow, and love. Wejchert’s inside knowledge of alpine climbing (he’s an accomplished alpinist) and his personal connections to the climbers themselves result in a book that I doubt anybody else could have written—or at least written so well—about a topic all of us face.

Hidden Mountains shook me to my core. How in hell do we survive our adventures? Preparation, resolve, tenacity, sure. It’s what I told myself when I was younger. All true and, certainly, the more of those attributes the better. But also luck. Most of all, perhaps, luck.

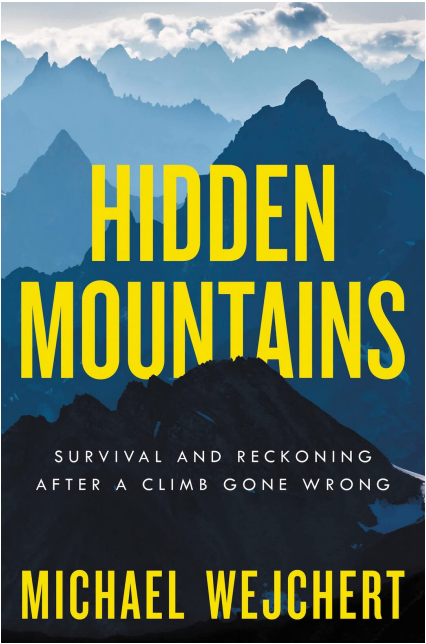
The book also reminded me of stasis and change, primality and progress. Technology has made nearly every aspect of climbing safer, and rescues are sometimes possible in previously unfathomable situations. (If tragedy strikes in Alaska, pray for the PJs: The Air Force Special Warfare Pararescue units are, hands down, the finest we have, and their training operations include rescuing

civilians in any and all terrain.) Progress will, no doubt, continue. But it will never ensure our safety. Perhaps it shouldn't. Part of climbing's allure is the autonomy of finding balance between dangers both real and imagined, while striving to live fully. If, one day, all risk is gone, climbing will have morphed into something else. Maybe golf.

Until then, in alpine climbing the lines between tragedy and joy remain impossibly thin and ever shifting, like the whims of the wind, and anyone who pretends to have fail-safe answers to walking those lines is trying to sell you sand in the desert. The invisible pulse of *Hidden Mountains* is that the problem holds the beauty, leaving us to settle with the terrible ifs every time we venture to those glorious, immaculate, and unforgettable mountains that make our hearts sing.

— Kelly Cordes

Images



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