



## AAC Publications

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### Native Air

By Jonathan Howland

**NATIVE AIR. By Jonathan Howland (Green Writers Press, 2022). Hardcover, 380 pages, \$24.95.**

Historically, climbing fiction has been an under-developed genre. At least compared with our nonfiction canon. Aside from a few luminaries—James Salter, David Stevenson, James Ramsay Ullman, René Daumal, and Jeff Long (who recently told me that climbing fiction “tanked his mainstream career, but focused his heart”)—the options for good climbing fiction are few and far between. Perhaps it is because “climbing is considered by its adherents to be somehow too sacred to fictionalize,” as noted by Audrey Salkeld and Rosie Smith in the introduction to their book, *One Step in the Clouds*. “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.”

Fortunately for us, Jonathan Howland—winner of the Mountain Fiction and Grand Prize awards in the 2022 Banff Mountain Book Competition—seems to have missed the memo. In fact, the dramas, loyalties, heroism, and death he presents in his book *Native Air* struck me as far more precious and poignant than most nonfiction climbing accounts I have read. Perhaps through fiction he allows us to play a sort of game of ad-libs, his colossal and iconic characters transcending their archetypal bases, and taking shape in our minds as real-life people we, ourselves, have known and loved (or hated, as the case may be).

The Cliffs Notes, in general, are as follows (avert your eyes if you’d like to on-sight this one): Two college best friends become climbing junkies together. One (Pete Hunter) embraces the sport wholeheartedly and ultimately dies in a soloing accident; the other (Joe Holland—note the similarity to the author’s name) embraces God and becomes a priest. The book starts *in media res*, with Pete’s son (Will)—an up-and-coming climbing prodigy—reaching out to Joe to take care of some unfinished business. Pete and Joe never finished the crown jewel of their partnership: the High Sierra first ascent that should have become the eponymous Hunter-Holland. Sprinkle in a bit of romance, some requisite climbing partner homoeroticism, crises of faith, and voila!, a climbing fiction book.

The Cliffs Notes sound trite, but the book is not. Howland is a master of craft and, thank goodness, a real climber to boot. That’s a rare combination, and the result is an equal share of authenticity and narrative chops. The prose is beautifully rendered, and though sometimes a bit heavy-handed, rarely overburdening. Meanwhile, the drama and suspense carry the story along easily—at least I suspect it does for real climbers. There were plenty of moments while reading that I found my hands sweating profusely, the way they sometimes do at the base of a thought-provoking trad pitch. I can’t think of another book—other than, maybe, Salter’s *Solo Faces*—that has had that effect on me.

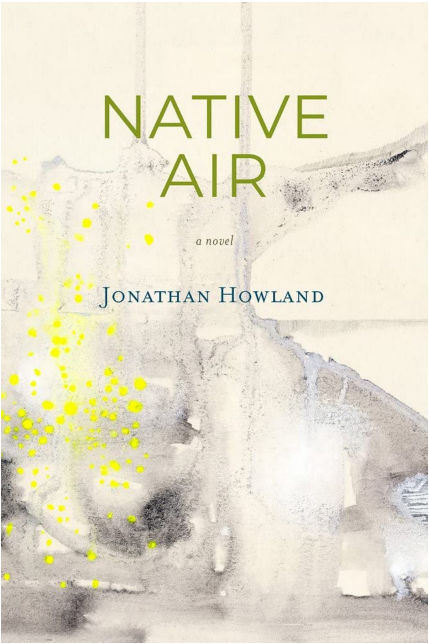
As one of the jurors of the 2022 Banff Festival, the fact that I loved this book is no revelation at this point. Of course, my fellow jurors liked it just as much—our vote for *Native Air* to win the grand prize was unanimous. I concur with writer Daniel Duane, who said in his blurb for the book, “Native Air is the novel that we American climbers and readers of serious fiction have been waiting for...the first true literary deep dive into the austere beauty, deep friendships and high emotional cost of the lives we’ve all led in America’s great empty spaces.”

You may not love *Native Air*. I know one reader who didn’t—jaded in part by Pete Hunter’s machismo.

But lots of people don't like *Moby Dick*, or *Beloved*, or any book ever written. I think what can be said, unequivocally, is that even if you don't love it, you will admire and respect the work for what it is—a massive leap forward in the genre of climbing fiction, and a book that hits awfully close to home.

— Chris Kalman

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