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High Risk: Climbing to Extinction

By Brian Hall

HIGH RISK: CLIMBING TO EXTINCTION. By Brian Hall (Sandstone Press, 2022). Hardcover, 432 pages, £24.99.

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, mountaineering in the Greater Ranges changed dramatically. Large, cumbersome, and expensive expeditions were increasingly replaced by small teams climbing in a manner that eschewed fixed ropes, perpetually restocked camps, and massive Sherpa support. It was a period of transition and upheaval, with climbers often struggling to understand and keep up with the new game.

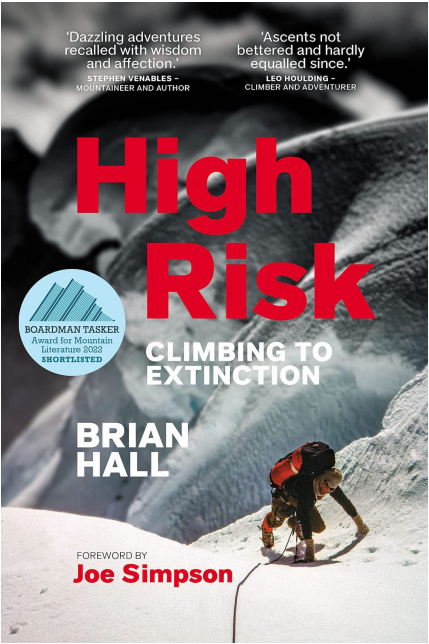
Against that backdrop, Brian Hall has woven a poignant tale of friendships, lofty climbing goals, and, ultimately, tremendous loss. His premise is simple: Climbers during this tectonic shift went all out, often to the point of “climbing to extinction.” Hall focuses on a dozen friends whom he admired and tells their stories as individual chapters. Many of these overlap in chronology, which under the pen of a less agile writer would quickly get muddy. (William Finnegan’s often-praised surfing memoir *Barbarian Days*, for example, is far less successful at managing chronology.) But Hall distills the points he’s making about a person while preventing other aspects of this important period from dragging attention away from the human he’s profiling. How he achieves this is a master class for every student of writing.

This book is, ultimately, the kind every climber-writer wants to put together. A book about climbing on the cover, a book about people within its pages. The sketches of his friends and climbing partners are wholly engrossing, but somehow Hall also has managed to make the descriptions of climbing—where he allows them to bubble to the surface—as compelling as anything ever written. Three stories really stood out for me: his description of the 1978 first alpine-style ascent of Jannu, the autumn 1979 joint expedition to Kusum Kanguru, Kangtega, Nuptse, and Everest (with Rab Carrington, Al Rouse, Doug Scott, Mike Covington, and Georges Bettembourg), and a winter of 1981 attempt on Everest.

There’s also a tremendous amount of sadness in this book—indeed, there’s more sadness than joy. Brian Hall takes us through decades of his friends’ lives, and while there are some dramatic deaths in the mountains, there are also some equally sad, very pedestrian ends for characters. Hall’s early partner Simon Cochrane suffers a heart attack after a jog; John Syrett, a huge talent of early 1970s British climbing, commits suicide (it’s believed) at Malham Cove after a long dependence on alcohol; and partner John Whittle suffers a fatal heart attack. The timeline of events and exchanges layered carefully on top of each other as he watches his friends’ lives decay is perhaps the magic of Hall’s work. He does a magnificent job of showing how life’s chaotic unravelling affects us all.

— Cameron M. Burns

Images



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