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A Fine Line: Searching For Balance Among Mountains

By Graham Zimmerman

A FINE LINE: SEARCHING FOR BALANCE AMONG MOUNTAINS By Graham Zimmerman (Mountaineers Books, 2023). Paperback, 224 pages, \$19.95.

Seventy pages into Graham Zimmerman's memoir *A Fine Line*, the author and his partners, who are forging a new route in the Waddington Range, take a break from the hard climbing in front of them to stare out across the Tiedemann Glacier and the Waddington-Combatant col. The once-straightforward icefall is riven with collapsing crevasses; the Tiedemann is a skinny, withering version of its former self. For a moment, Zimmerman weighs what he sees against his team's presence here: "I thought of the helicopter we had used to access the range, one of the least carbon-efficient modes of transportation available. We are part of the problem." It's not long before he turns his attention back to the climbing in front of him.

During the first third of *A Fine Line*, these hyper-focused moves on rock, ice, and snow indeed drive the narrative, as Zimmerman quickly ascends the ranks of exploratory alpinism to become one of its foremost practitioners. Like most alpinists of his generation, the young Zimmerman is steeped in the light-and-fast, "no future" ethos of Mark Twight. Jobs, marriage, and normalcy can only hinder this mission. He bounces between gigs: Yosemite Search and Rescue, a geophysics crew. He returns home only when injured or out of money. He climbs—a lot. Zimmerman's youthful, rowdy psyche sometimes gets him into trouble or hurt, but each lesson informs the climbing that follows.

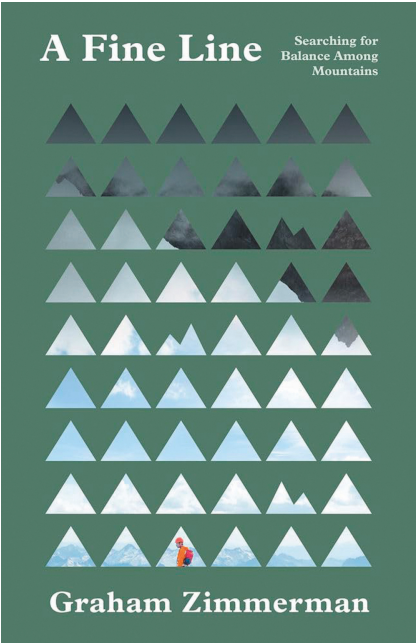
Life, love, and the stark, mountain-melting reality of climate change trickle slowly into the book. This gentle layering—and how it mirrors the way most of us reconcile with these topics as we age or gain reference points through experience—was my favorite part of *A Fine Line*. Zimmerman slips paragraphs like his Waddington realization between tales of risk, partnership, and adventure, and gradually these themes cascade into major elements of the story.

So, it's no accident that some of the most introspective passages of *A Fine Line* occur toward the end. By this point, Zimmerman has weathered the deaths of close friends and companions, worked through the triumphs and challenges of a serious romantic partnership, and ramped up his climate advocacy work with Protect Our Winters, the grassroots environmental advocacy group founded by snowboarder Jeremy Jones. He climbs, but doing so responsibly now matters as much as the moves themselves.

At the culmination of Zimmerman's 2020 ascent of Link Sar in Pakistan—along with Mark Richey, Steve Swenson, and Chris Wright—the summit has not come easily. Zimmerman is shaken from a big fall. He extols his seasoned companions to make no mistakes on the way down. He wants to survive. For a quick moment on top, though, the author casts his gaze across the expanse of the Karakoram, where "rays of dusk illuminated thin crests of ridges: first gold, then pink and violet" and at "ripples of light and shadow." He soaks in the view with a wizened perspective that is hard won. I am glad he has shared it with the rest of us.

—Michael Wejchert

Images



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