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The Mountain Path: A Climber's Journey Through Life and Death

By Paul Pritchard

THE MOUNTAIN PATH: A CLIMBER'S JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE AND DEATH. Paul Pritchard. Vertebrate Publishing (U.K.), 2021. Hardcover, 192 pages, £24.

British climber Paul Pritchard's 1998 fall on Tasmania's Totem Pole is one of the most famous accidents in mountaineering history. It left him paralyzed on the right side of his body and became the inspiration for two books. Now, Pritchard has written a third book that concerns the accident, but only peripherally. In it, he takes us on a tour of his thinking and philosophies about climbing as a busted-up old man.

The Mountain Path took Pritchard six years to write, and it contains some outstanding reflections on life, death, pain, disability, perception, misconception, mind games, and, of course, climbing.

Pritchard's first chapter, about freedom, is highly recommended for all readers. Through research and personal anecdotes, he describes why choice can be stressful, and why following a line up a mountain face can become a clarifying experience, freeing us from burdens we are generally unaware of. "With limited choice there is less expectation of a positive outcome," he writes. "We follow a particular sequence of holds up the cliff because it is the only thing we can do.... More choice brings greater expectation. Greater expectation leads to frustration and negativity."

Pain is an important theme, and Pritchard's struggles against his dogged physical state see him dive deep into the philosophy of pain: whether it really is a thing, how it can be offset by the mind, and some treatments that require moving toward a state in which we view pain without "prejudice," that is, as just a thing that exists without value. "This was the profound moment that I realized that by being non-reactive I could simply observe my pain compassionately, as though it were not my pain but someone else's," he writes. "A good feeling, a bad feeling, it didn't make any difference. They were both impermanent manifestations of subatomic vibrations."

From a philosophy for pain, death follows. In 1993, five years before the Totem Pole accident, Pritchard himself experienced a form of death when, after a bone-crunching fall, partner Glenn Robbins could not revive him nor find a pulse for several minutes ("...back then I wrote that this had been 'the most beautiful part of all my life. Utterly final'").

Death should come naturally, he writes. The event should not pollute with our bodies "...stuck with needles, with a snorkel stuck down our trachea." Modern humans have "the most important time in our lives: our precious last moments on the Earth" taken from us in unnatural ways.

He argues death should be an easy transition because, in essence, we are a part of a greater universe, we are a part of everything around us. And this really is the point of understanding *The Mountain Path*. The people, places, worlds, and universe around are just part of us and we are a part of it. Judgment is unnecessary, and forgiveness and understanding are the keys to success for life and death and whatever life and death might encapsulate. It's a very heady path that Pritchard lays out for us, but one that is beautiful in its simplicity.

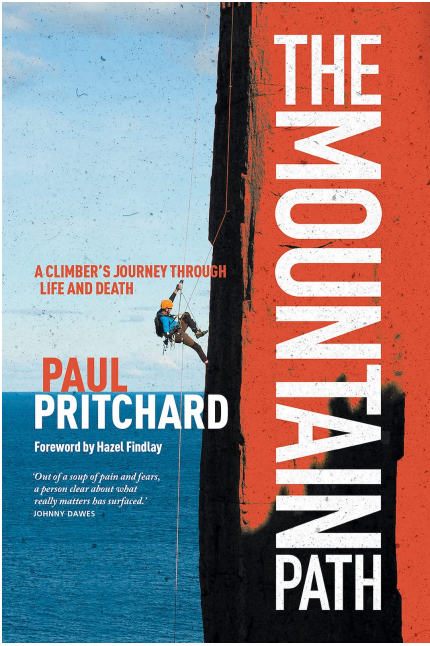
On a more basic, fun-climber level, *The Mountain Path* periodically dips into the rise of 1980s British

rock stars who lived, like Pritchard, for climbing, often under meager circumstances. No good climbing book would be sans action and Pritchard delivers when, 18 years after his accident, he climbs the Totem Pole a second time. It's an arduous journey, but it ties his philosophizing into a nice package, at the heart of which is adventure.

Ultimately, Pritchard pulls himself back to reality in a concrete way to which every climber can relate: "As long as I am moving forward on the path, skyward on the mountain path, I am content. I am content to be on this road always, to not ever arrive. And this is of great consolation. Though, sometimes, especially at night, I do still ask the darkness one question. 'What the hell am I doing here?'"

— **Cameron M. Burns**

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