

A Strange Breed

Reflections on the Banff Mountain Book and Film Festival

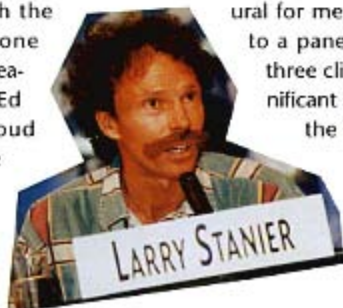
by Katherine Millett

The allure of danger and its personal cost were constant themes

during the Banff Mountain Book and Film Festival, where I, a non-climber, went in early November to meet some of the adventurers whose stories had thrilled and puzzled me. Perhaps I would come to understand the unparalleled joy climbers claim to feel when they sacrifice safety for a summit, or gain insight into the psychology of climbers, many of whom shared a childhood marked by driven fathers and fiercely devoted mothers. As I wondered to what extent parentage lends itself to an appetite for risk, I ruminated on the words of French mountaineer Louis Lachenal: "For certain men, [risk] is a necessity. It is the desire to perfect oneself; to raise oneself; to attain an ideal. It implies a taste for responsibility. Mastery of oneself and conquest of fear."

Talk of risk permeated the festival's slide shows and panel discussions. Conrad Anker described finding the body of George Leigh Mallory on Mount Everest last May, 75 years after the celebrated Englishman fell to his death. Only a few weeks before, Anker himself had narrowly escaped an avalanche that claimed Alex Lowe on Shishapangma in Tibet. I listened to David Breashears talk about his push to the summit of Everest hauling IMAX movie equipment in the spring of 1996, the same season eight people died on the mountain. Goran Kropp was in attendance as well. Summiting Everest without oxygen — the crowning achievement of his round-trip journey from Sweden to Nepal by bicycle — required him to walk past the bodies of mountain guides Rob Hall and Scott Fischer. In the company of such men, I felt like a mouse among lemmings.

I detected undercurrents of the competitive and the macabre beneath the talk. At dinner one night, I had the pleasure of meeting Ed Webster, a proud member of the International Frostbite Club, who had lost parts of several fingers



and toes while trying a new route on Everest in the '90s. Truly a climber's climber, Ed advises frostbite victims about treatment options and urges climbers to have each affected digit trimmed into a rounded shape. It seems that properly rounded stubs will maximize purchase on future cracks and bulges. There is implicit honor in such stigmas and fraternity among the afflicted. Ed told me about his initial encounter with the legendary Reinhold Messner. "He noticed my hands," said Ed, "and right there in the bar, he had to pull off his boots and show me what was left of his toes."

Climbers strike me as a strange breed of nomads, competitive allies and gregarious loners, yet I have come to admire their capacity to accept the ultimate responsibility for their thrillseeking. It was natural for me, then, to gravitate to a panel discussion where three climbers and one significant other grappled with the Big Question: Who suffers most when the euphoria of climbing crumbles into the anguish of injury



or death? There could be no denying tragedy in the presence of Paul Pritchard, a premier British climber who suffered brain damage when a rockfall cracked open his skull two years ago. Pritchard has spent every day since the accident relearning how to speak and walk, and has typed, with one finger, a moving and vividly written memoir, *The Totem Pole And A Whole New Adventure*. One week after Banff awarded Pritchard's book the Grand Prize for Literature, it won the 1999 Boardman-Tasker Award for Mountain Literature.

Pritchard is a tall and lanky 30-something man with blond hair, a paralyzed right arm and a cane to help him walk. On Friday the 13th of February 1998, he and his girlfriend, Celia Bull, were just starting up the Totem Pole, a 200-foot rock spire that rises from the sea off the coast of Tasmania, when a rock flew down the stack and knocked Pritchard upside down in his harness. Blood flowed from the wound



while Bull, 21 pounds lighter than he, rigged a simple pulley system. For the next three hours, with adrenaline-fueled determination, she hoisted Pritchard to a ledge from where, if he survived, he might be rescued. She then ran five miles to call for help. Pritchard was helicoptered to a hospital, underwent extensive surgery and began a new adventure: reclaiming his body.

In a small auditorium at the Banff Centre, a rapt audience waited for Pritchard's answer to a question posed by moderator Geoff Powter. "Knowing what you know now, would you still choose to be a climber?"

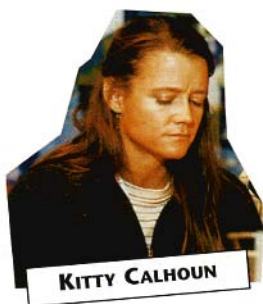
"My greatest regret," answered Pritchard, "is what this has done to my mother. She thought I would die." And yet, Pritchard doesn't complain about the personal cost to himself. In fact, the challenges of his present life seem to stimulate him intellectually and spiritually. "I didn't see myself climbing forever," Pritchard added, his lack of self-pity disarming. "I'd have to do something different, wouldn't I, to keep learning, getting new knowledge."

Yet ambivalence shaped his answer to the question, "Could you enjoy the mountains without taking risk?"

"No, I couldn't," said Pritchard with conviction. Then his gaze fell to the floor and he experienced one of the post-accident "stoppages" that occasionally derail his thoughts. "I can't really answer that question," he said dreamily, "but I retract my last statement."

How do women feel? There was no consensus, judging from





the views expressed by Kitty Calhoun, a top American climber, and Maria Coffey, who lost her lover to Mt. Everest.

Calhoun, strong, small and pretty, combines a Southern drawl with a country-western personality. She is the mother of a four-year-old boy.

"I love to climb, and I love my son," she told the capacity audience of climbers and enthusiasts. So how could she leave him to climb a new route on Middle Triple Peak in Alaska in 1997 or attempt Latoks I and III in Pakistan? How can she put climbing ahead of daily contact with her son?

"I know a lot of people wonder why I've done what I've done," Calhoun said, "but I tell them you shouldn't be too quick to judge. You can never know what's in another person's mind or how each of us answers these questions we all have." She sat back, arms folded.

Coffey, whose romantic beauty could smile from an old locket, advocated more traditional values. Her lover, British climber Joe Tasker, disappeared in 1982 while attempting the East Northeast Ridge of Everest. During the two and a half years Coffey and Tasker were together, Tasker planned numerous high-altitude trips without consulting her. He was gone for months at a time and sent only occasional letters, factual and emotionally detached. He refused to acknowledge overtly a commitment to their relationship.

"I thrived on Joe's energy," Coffey said, "but it was very hard to live with the risks and the absences. I loved his intensity and optimism. There was a contagious thrill in him when he was planning a big trip. I couldn't have had it any other way really, because without climbing, and the danger of climbing, Joe wouldn't have been Joe."

After Tasker disappeared with his climbing partner, Peter Boardman, Coffey wrote about their relationship and her loss in *Fragile Edge*:

Lost on Everest (Harbour Publishing, 1999).

Finally, a pragmatic view issued

from panelist Larry Stanier, a Canadian mountain guide, who gives this simple message to his wife and children: "Everyone lives with risk in their lives. If you want food on the table, Dad has to work. My work is guiding in the mountains. I am very lucky to have work that I love." I wondered if audience members noted a double standard that tends to condemn Calhoun's "selfishness" while accepting Larry's "sense of duty."

What about the children? A teenage girl in the audience spoke: "My father climbed when I was little. He and my mother are right back here." She gestured behind her. "I've never said this to them before, but here goes. I was very scared when he went to the mountains. I used to cry myself to sleep. I didn't know where he was, and I didn't understand why he would go to the top of a mountain in the snow. But now I'm a climber," she concluded, to the sound of laughter from the audience, "so I guess I'm doing the same thing to him."

The seeking and taking of extreme risk puzzle me, but there is something else I find disquieting. It is the utter self-absorption of many climbers. My misgivings were expressed by Jochen Hemmleb, a member of the audience, who put it to them this way: "We have heard about the love that climbers feel for their lives of adventure, and we have heard from their families and friends about the vicarious excitement that comes from being with climbers. But can any of you climbers tell us what you get from your loved ones, from their lives and interests?" No one answered.

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