

route had probably been created by just such regular rainfall as this! It acted like a funnel and we were soaked in a few minutes.

We reached the glacier in a white-out and threaded our way along the edge of it, eventually finding a way back to New Zealand Pass. We left all our climbing gear as high as we could on the pass to collect the next day, and returned to our bivouac rock.

The following day we ascended New Zealand Pass again, picking up our wet and heavy climbing gear, and descending to Base. To our amazement Jean and Bernard, 2 climbers from Marseille, had managed to evade the red-tape of entry permits and had gained access to the interior. So we arranged a 'Franglais' team for our last route in the area, and their first.

As usual the early morning was fine and we were high on the glacier when white-out conditions arrived to dampen our day. However this easy snow traverse of Sunday Peak and Ngga Palu was very pleasant and constant movement together kept us much warmer than we had been on the other routes.

'Jalan, jalan'. We were moving away from the mountains and the French team quickly. The porters were happy again and laden with booty from their trading trip while we were climbing, hurrying us along with their call of, 'jalan' (hurry on). The jungle journey ahead was medicine more easily taken now we had achieved something. We enjoyed our Moni men more and they seemed more trusting of us. For 3 days a minor miracle happened and it did not rain which made the walking so much more comfortable. Photography of the tree ferns, the saprophytes, and the characters with us was very pleasurable. It seemed that at last, West Irian had decided to allow us to relax and enjoy it.

Fiction in mountaineering literature¹

George Pokorny

It is remarkable that such an enormous body of literature has developed around one of mankind's avocations, mountaineering. It is conceded that much of this writing is concerned with the reporting of scientific or explorative accomplishments, however, a significant amount is devoted strictly to narratives of climbing adventures in the mountains. An important subdivision of this literature of the mountains is fiction.

Novelists have utilized many of the standard formulas for plot development in writing the mountaineering story; that is, adventure, mystery, romance, melodrama, etc. Because mountaineering is identified as a thrill sport, the reading public expects a high degree of sustained stress and excitement in mountain fiction. While the adventure thriller is understandably a popular form for the mountaineering novel, other forms have been used successfully. This article identifies some typical examples of the mountaineering novel, and since the number of books in this category is surprisingly large only a small number can be mentioned. Additional titles are listed in the bibliography at the end of this article.

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54 Mountain fiction (This and next photo: G. Pokorny)

The mystery thriller is a popular form for the mountaineering novel. Since accidental deaths in the mountains, while infrequent, do occur, many writers utilize this tragedy to develop the story line where murder is made to appear an accident. One of the earliest novels utilizing this theme, and a classic mountaineering novel is A. E. W. Mason's *Running Water* (1907). Mason was an accomplished mountaineer and quite familiar with climbing in the Alps. This was the setting for his story of villainy in the mountains. The action builds up to a dramatic climax between the protagonist and his intended victim on the ascent of the Brenva Ridge of Mont Blanc. The description of the route and the climbing are stirring and believable. It was too believable to suit one of the members of the Alpine Club, W. A. B. Coolidge. In the story, Mason ascribes the second ascent of the Brenva glacier to a man who had been struck from the rolls of the Alpine Club after being convicted of a criminal offence. Coolidge, who had actually made the second ascent took

umbrage at this allusion, and threatened to sue Mason. Mason's other mountaineering novel *A Romance of Wastdale* (1923) takes place in the English Lake District—a story of lone rivalry with an ingenious murder on the cliffs of Scafell.

A prolific writer of mountaineering murder mysteries is Showell Styles who also writes under the pseudonym of Glyn Carr. At last count he had published 15 stories, beginning in 1951 he has published the following: *Death on Milestone Buttre* (1951); *Murder On The Matterhorn* (1951); *The Youth Hostel Murders* (1952); *The Corpse in the Crevasse* (1952); *Death Under Snowdon* (1954); *A Corpse at Camp Two* (1955); *Murder of an Owl* (1956); *The Ice Axe Murders* (1958); *Swing Away Climber* (1959); *Holiday With Murder* (1960); *Death Finds a Foothold* (1961); *Lewker In Norway* (1963); *Death of a Wierdy* (1965); *Lewker in Tirol* (1967); *Fat Man's Agony* (1969).

Most of these stories are set in the rugged mountains of North Wales although the Alps and Himalayas are also used. Common to all the stories is the eminent Shakespearian actor-manager, Sir Abercrombie Lewker ('Filthy' to his intimates), who is well known to Glyn Carr's readers as a climber and criminologist who is in no way hampered by his excessive adiposity. The author's total familiarity with the mountains and mountain techniques enables him to create the mountain scene in a highly credible manner. As Showell Styles he has written *Traitor's Mountain* (1946) a fast moving spy-thriller circa WWII, and the first novel to use the detective Lewker. Additionally, *Shadow Buttre* (1959) is a tale of adjustment to handicap, and a rock climber's battle with stubborn pride.

In 1973, Gwen Moffat an English writer and mountaineer, turned from journalistic writing to her first novel, *Lady With a Cool Eye*, a detective thriller set in the mountains of North Wales. In this story Moffat creates a middle-aged lady detective Miss Pink, à la Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. In addition to writing mystery thrillers, Moffat manages to effectively incorporate in her stories messages about conservation, climbing ethics, the friction between hard men and conservative climbers and other elements which are relevant to the real mountain world. She has written four more mountain novels since that time.

Other stories of murder in the mountains are Newton Gayle's *Sinister Crag* (1939) and Alan Hunter's *Gently to the Summit* (1961). *The Eiger Sanction* (1973) by 'Travianian' is a story about an art professor who maintains a collection of masterpieces by working as a paid assassin and is tricked into climbing the Eiger in the Bernese Alps. With regard to the Eiger, the mountain and its famous Nordwand have been used as the background in several stories. Paul Townend's *The Man on the End of the Rope* (1960), Charles MacHardy's *The Ice Mirror* (1971), and Diana Raymond's *The Climb* (1962). Each of these stories is suspenseful and compelling reading, with climbers scrabbling frantically for toe-holds, slipping on vertical ice, and subjected to physical strains and undergoing psychological changes.

Another favourite story line is the spy-thriller with international intrigues, and illicit crossings of mountain borders. W. H. Murray has written a number of non-fiction books about mountaineering expeditions; for example, *The Story of Everest*, *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition* (1951) etc. His ventures into fiction include *Five Frontiers* (*Appointment in Tibet*) (1959). The plot concerns a conflict between the forces of good against a subversive foreign agency charged with the destruction by atomic weapons of targets in Europe and Asia. A sequel to this novel is *The Spurs of Troodos* (1960) with more international power plotters and murderers. Along a different story pattern he has also written *Maelstrom* (1962). Andrew Garve has written a novel about a secret weapon which becomes lost in a plane crash in the

mountains, *The Ascent of D.13* (1969). In the course of trying to locate it and outwit the Russians who are also desperate to find it, a major peak is ascended but the details of the mountain climbing are much too incredible and the story suffers greatly. Ronald Hardy has written *The Face of Jalánath* (1973) a story of an audacious plan to infiltrate into China a team of skilled mountain warriors whose mission is to destroy an important science centre with a powerful nuclear weapon judiciously planted. One of the scarcest mountaineering novels is *Secret Mission* (1942) by Frank Smythe. It's another story about a secret weapon. The lone inventor tries to hide the secret plan and himself from the world and foreign agents by fleeing deep into Himalayan Nepal. A lot of intrigue, high altitude action, and a love affair. Still another book involving espionage and intrigue is Kay Boyle's *Avalanche* (1944) set in the French Alps during WWII. There is much suspense, danger and courageous action; and at the same time it is a richly emotional love story.

The individual reactions to hazards, tensions and difficulties in mountaineering, and the interaction under stress with other personalities are some of the elements in the psychological mountaineering novel. An example is Hugh Merrick's *The Breaking Strain* (1950) where poor mountaineering judgement tests the breaking point of men, women, and ropes. Another story in this class is Ethel Mannin's *Men Are Unwise* (1934) a story of a man's obsession with the mountains, who because of his financial circumstances is unable to do serious mountain climbing. He eventually gets to the Alps and his behaviour in the mountains is a fascinating mixture of irony and paradox. Wilfrid Noyce has used several elements to create the plot in *The Gods Are Angry* (1957) a story portraying the varying reactions of a group of men to the mountain they try to climb, to their homes, loved ones, jobs left behind, and to their Sherpas. Pearl Buck has written a novel *Other Gods* (1938) where mountaineering is important as background but the people and what goes on in their heads is the substance of this engaging novel. A central theme in this story is the selling of a hero to the greedy American public.

Some novels use the mountains simply as a setting in which the plot takes place. One outstanding example of this form is James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933). The mountains are important to the story only as they serve to constrain the action to a particular location, and create mood. It is a powerful story that added Shangri-la to our vocabulary.

In 1939 Ruthven Todd wrote *Over The Mountain*, a mountaineering novel with strong political overtones. It is a satirical work written in Orwellian style which parodies all the insane madness going on in Europe just prior to the outbreak of WWII. The book is quite scarce because most of the copies were destroyed during the London blitz.

Not all mountaineering fiction is serious, suspenseful or philosophical: humour is also used in a number of novels and short stories. An early story in this vein is Daudet's *Tartarin On The Alps* (1888), later examples being W. E. Bowman's *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* (1937), and a delightful short story by H. G. Wells, *Little Mother Up The Morderberg*. And finally, a mountaineering novel with both humour and pornography by William Hjortsberg, *Alp* (1969) a comical but not very sexually stimulating story.

An unusual style for the mountaineering novel is the unfinished, thought-provoking, surreal novel by the late avant garde poet, writer-philosopher Rene Daumal *Mount Analogue* (1952). It is a peculiar story which Daumal subtitled 'A novel of symbolically authentic non-euclidean adventures in mountain climbing'.

It is about a group of strange characters who set out to climb a symbolic mountain higher than Everest. The novel has touches of both physics and metaphysics, yet is neither science fiction nor mystic, although an appreciation of all these elements will enhance the reader's understanding of this book.

While many of the books in the genre of mountaineering fiction are interesting reading, and some are quite well written, the really superb mountaineering novel has yet to reach us. James Ramsey Ullman did write a best seller in 1945, *The White Tower*, which was a Book of the Month Club selection, and to this day it is probably the only exposure many people will have to mountaineering. It is a thrilling tale to the non-climbing reading public, and served to arouse interest in mountaineering when it was published. Unfortunately, the experienced mountaineer finds the book replete with technical errors.

On the other hand, a recent book *North Wall* (1978) by Roger Hubank is a superb novel written in very believable language. It is a story about the climb of an incredibly difficult Swiss north face direct. The plot is fairly simple without a lot of digression. The descriptions of climbing on ice and snow-covered rock, and the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique, is a brilliant piece of creative effort and results in a mountaineering novel of first class proportions.

Almost every appraisal of mountaineering literature states that the best works are the factual accounts of mountaineering achievements, and virtually all fiction is regarded as an Alpine disaster. In Hugh Merrick's book, *Companion to the Alps* (1974), in a chapter titled Literature and Art, he states 'The factual details of mountaineering, in the hands of a good writer, will always be so much more evocative and thrilling than any invented happenings revolving around imaginary characters;' and further on he continues 'I can sympathise with the failures, having tried my hand many years ago in five alpine novels and, while perfectly competent to produce a story in which the situations and details are authentic and free from the howlers of the non-mountaineering novelist, failed signally, for one of the reasons given earlier, to write the "great" mountaineering novel of my aspirations. I no longer believe in its possibility.'

Perhaps the harshest judgement of the mountaineering novel is by Claire Elaine Engel in *A History of Mountaineering in the Alps* (1950) in a chapter titled Mountains and Literature. On page 261 she states 'There is one branch of mountaineering literature which is still an almost complete failure, and that is fiction. In whatever language they have tried to recapture the spirit of mountain expeditions, writers have never succeeded in bringing their characters to life.' And in the same chapter on page 266 she states further, 'One of the elements which tend to paralyze the novelist who treats of mountain adventures is the fact that real stories—the stories of great climbs or mountain tragedies—are so perfect in all their details that it is difficult to imagine more effective or better planned episodes.' Finally she states, 'A good climber is not often a good writer, endowed with a gift for fiction. Mountaineering is an exacting pursuit and novelists do not often possess the physical gifts required to scale mountains. Few young novelists are climbers.' I believe her criticisms are much too severe, and even in 1950 it was inaccurate to state that only a few young novelists are climbers. Admittedly, most mountaineering fiction does fall short of capturing the mountain spirit. But the novelist writing a mountaineering story who wants his book published has a dilemma. If he wants to appeal to the vast reading public who seek out a vicarious experience, or a means of escape from life's tedium, the writer needs to capture the reader's interest



55 More mountain fiction

with a good story without being overly technical. He thus prostitutes himself and writes in the vernacular of the mass audience rather than writing in the language of the mountains to appeal to a small (but growing) number of climbers who enjoy fiction.

Mountaineering fiction like any fiction needs to satisfy some common basic conditions for the reader, who to quote de Maupassant, asks of the novelist: 'Console me, —make me sad, —make me sentimental, —make me dream, —make me laugh, —make me tremble, —make me weep, —make me think.' The great peaks continue to succumb on all sides to the efforts of expert climbers using advanced techniques to assist them. It remains to be seen if a great mountaineering story will be created using a new and imaginative writing approach.

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The opening of Ladakh—five years on

Mark Dravers

Tibetan areas of the Himalayas have always held a special fascination for Western travellers. Ladakh is a large area W of Kashmir which is geographically isolated from India, and has therefore retained its Tibetan-Buddhist culture. It lies between the main Karakoram and Himalayan ranges and has historical importance as a gateway for trade with Central Asia. Large caravans of yaks, camels and mules used to pass this way carrying salt, spices, opium and bricks of tea. Younghusband noted the importance of this trade when he travelled through Ladakh on his second journey into 'the Heart of a Continent', and Shipton used the route on his way to