

The exhilaration of disaster

Mountain-climbing disasters may be 'inevitable,' as one expert claims, but then so are books about them. Two writers discuss the joys and dangers to be found on steep, high mountains.

HIGH EXPOSURE

An Enduring Passion for Everest and Unforgiving Places

By David Breashears
Simon & Schuster,
319 pages, \$38.50

CLIMBING HIGH

A Woman's Account of Surviving the Everest Tragedy

By Lene Gammelgaard
Seal, 201 pages, \$35

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL LeGAULT

Shortly after the 1996 Mt. Everest climbing disaster that claimed the lives of eight people, Reinhold Messner, the first person to climb Everest solo and without supplemental oxygen, called the tragedy inevitable. Messner argued that by leading clients up Everest along preset fixed ropes into hotel-like base camps, "adventure" leaders such as Rob Hall and Scott Fisher (both of whom died in the '96 ascent) were effectively lulling inexperienced climbers into complacency about the dangers of high-altitude conditions. False confidence would cost lives, Messner believed, as people suddenly found themselves in precarious situations far beyond their abilities to handle.

The crux of Messner's point is illustrated by two images from that year's climbing season. One, described in both Jon Krakauer's 1997 bestseller *Into Thin Air* and Lene Gammelgaard's *Climbing High*, is that of journalist Sandy Pittman receiving a syringe of the energy-boosting steroid dexamethasone in her buttocks from another climber after the effort of ascending all of Everest's 29,028 feet had left her nearly incapacitated. The other, depicted in David Breashears's *High Exposure*, is that of climbing veteran Ed Viesturs breaking trail through thigh-deep snow up the South Col without benefit of bottled oxygen on his way toward his fourth successful climb to Everest's summit. Both won the summit. One, however, won it honestly, with skills honed by years of gradually more challenging climbs. The other won it ugly, heedlessly putting the lives of herself and her teammates in danger.

The lack of apprenticeship and experience in many of today's climbers, writes Breashears, also means a lack of a mountaineering ethos. The core of that ethos for Breashears is self-reliance. It is not getting to the top, but the way it is done that counts most. Large commercial expeditions and technology, Breashears notes, have led to what Messner terms "the murder of the impossible."

On Everest that year, Breashears was a first-hand observer of the tragic effects these compromises can have on the sport. His team, which included Viesturs, Spanish climber Araceli Segarra and Jamling Tenzing Norgay, son of Sir Edmund Hillary's Sherpa partner Tenzing Norgay, listened with alarm at their base camp to the radio reports that described a quickly evolving worst-case scenario, a storm trapping

climbers outside shelter in the very upper reaches of Everest's "death zone."

Putting his own potentially career-making Inax film project in jeopardy, Breashears organized a rescue of the survivors. His shaken team considered abandoning their climb, but finally made a soul-searching decision to proceed up the mountain. On his team's push to the summit, Breashears describes the macabre and unsettling experience of coming upon the bodies of his friends and fellow expert climbers, Fisher and Hall. Failure to follow strict Everest climbing protocol had cost them and a number of paying clients their lives. Kneeling next to Hall, Breashears feels sorrow welling to anger. "His clients had come for a climb, not to take serious risks. Rob's expertise was supposed to be their warranty against danger and Rob had let them down."

Breashears's tale, however, is more widely about the risks, joys, suffering and rewards of the "brotherhood of the rope." The Himalayas may exert an irresistible pull upon the climber's psyche, but Breashears's formative passion for the mountains was first explored among the tall, sheer vertical sandstone towers of Colorado's Eldorado Canyon. There, "bouldering" and free climbing, Breashears finally found release from a childhood clouded by a bullying father and a split family. Among the canyon's itinerant, free-spirited clan of climbers, Breashears quickly established a reputation as a brash, teen-aged, rock-climbing, *wunderkind*, clamoring up rocks whose formidable topologies are captured in names such as Psycho and Naked Edge.

Breashears's clear, precise prose takes the reader up the wall with him on many of these palm-sweating climbs: "Imagine standing on the edge of a nickel and looking down 500 feet between your legs." Even if he had never set foot on Everest, Breashears had secured immortality among his climbing brethren for pioneering a free-climbing (without aid of ropes) ascent of a 100-foot, gnarly geological paroxysm known as Perilous Journey. With an overhanging bulge and nothing more substantial than pea-sized surface blemishes to use for toe and finger holds, Perilous Journey became Breashears's signature statement of his arrival in the climbing and, to his view, larger world: "I believed I was in the process of creating myself. Like Gatsby, I thought that I alone heard the drums of my own destiny, that I could become the product of my own imagination."

That destiny led to eight trips to Everest and four successful ascents to its summit. It has also led to the breakup of his marriage, his discovery of the camera as a means to make a living and convey the splendor of the mountains to a wider public, and his realization that, Messnerian idealism aside, he too has played a role in the commer-

cialization of mountaineering that contributed to the 1996 Everest disaster. Breashears documents this story in the same manner he has always attempted to climb: skillfully, honestly, patiently and with no wasted effort.

Lene Gammelgaard was a member of Scott Fisher's 1996 Everest expedition team, so *Climbing High* documents many of the same events previously, and more thoroughly, described by Rob Hall-team member Krakauer in *Into Thin Air*. Gammelgaard, a Dane, became the first Scandinavian woman to climb Everest, and her "woman's account" of the climb does in some ways complement and expand upon Krakauer's narrative. Yet Gammelgaard's more impressionistic version is ultimately a skittish, somewhat schizophrenic tale, careening between brutal vulnerability and outlandish bravado.

Gammelgaard's mountaineering experience was sketchy, with little to no time spent at altitudes above 25,000 feet, Everest's so-called death zone, where the air has less than half the oxygen of air at sea level. Nonetheless, she intended to climb without supplemental oxygen. When Fisher informed her before the summit attempt that her climbing performance didn't warrant permitting her to go up without oxygen, Gammelgaard was livid: "So much for him! Now I don't even want to climb Everest; I'd just like to disappear. What a jerk!" The emotion lasted until she reached the 26,000-foot South Col, at which point she took to bottled oxygen like a fish to water, never again mentioning her waylaid ambition.

The author's strength lies in her ability to flesh out the eccentric mix of personalities that made up the climbing team. Fisher's Russian co-leader, the distant Anatoli Boukreev, sprinkles his tent with white daffodils and presents Gammelgaard with a half-dead butterfly before the climb, joking, "This is you at the South Col." Klev Schoening confides to Gammelgaard that going on long, risky climbs ultimately strengthens his marriage. Throughout the month-long acclimatizing process many people, including Fisher, suffer from various illnesses — headaches, vomiting, coughing spasms — related to high altitude.

Gammelgaard makes it clear she was the strongest of the four women climbers on the Hall- and Fisher-led teams. She may be right. Then again, the most honest observation gleaned from her reportage is that most of the paying clients, male and female, were just plain lucky to get off Everest alive.

• • •

Michael LeGault is editor of a business trade journal in Toronto.

• • •

[Editor's Note: Please see Susan Perren's Children's Books column, on page D12, for a review of *The Top of the World: Climbing Mount Everest*, by Steve Jenkins.]