

Copyright © Insight Publications

Copying for educational purposes

The Australian *Copyright Act 1968* (Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10% of the book, whichever is greater, to be copied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or the body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) under the Act.

For details of the CAL licence for educational institutions contact CAL,
19/157 Liverpool Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000
Tel: (02) 9394 7600, Fax: (02) 9394 7601, email: info@copyright.com.au

Copying for other purposes

Except as permitted under the Act (for example, any fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review) no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission. All inquiries should be made to the publisher at the address below.

First published in 2007.

Insight Publications Pty Ltd
ABN 57 005 102 983
219 Glenhuntly Road,
Elsternwick Vic 3185
Australia.
Tel: +61 3 9523 0044
Fax: +61 3 9523 2044
Email: books@insightpublications.com.au

www.insightpublications.com.au

Cover Design: Graphic Partners
Internal Design & DTP: Sarn Potter
Editing: Robert Beardwood and Joanna Di Mattia
Printing: Print Impressions

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Barnes, Diana, 1966- .

Jon Krakauer's Into thin air.

For secondary school students.

ISBN 9781921088735 (pbk.).

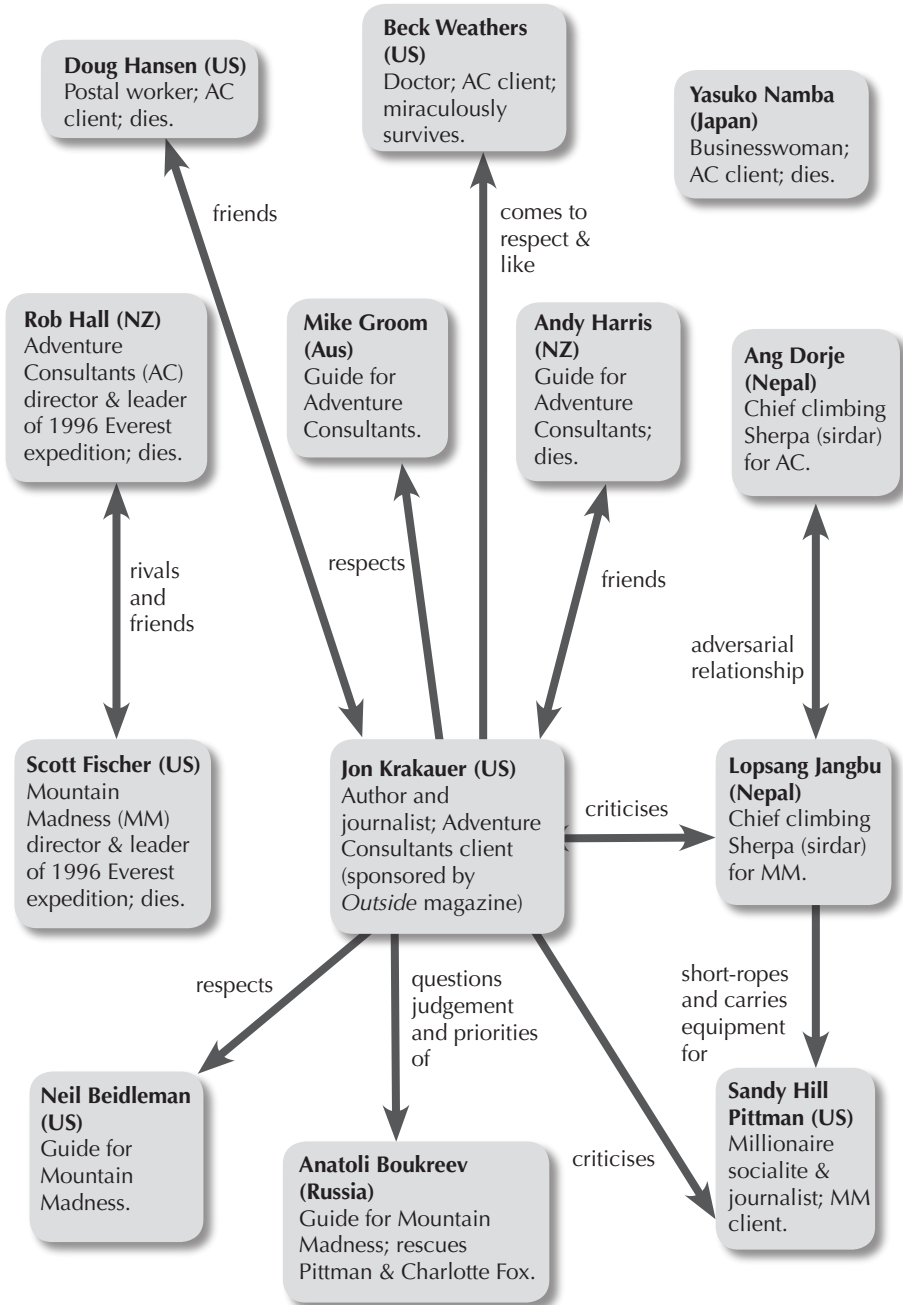
1. Krakauer, Jon. Into thin air: a personal account of the Mount Everest disaster. I. Title.

796.522092

contents

Character map	iv
Introduction	1
Background & context	3
Genre, structure & style	8
Chapter-by-chapter analysis	11
Individuals & relationships	27
Themes, ideas & values	37
Different interpretations	48
Questions & answers	52
Sample answer	55
References & reading	57

CHARACTER MAP



INTRODUCTION

'Climbing books, as a rule, don't live up to the drama of the climbs that produced them' writes journalist John Rothchild (2006). An instant bestseller, Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Everest Disaster* breaks this rule. This gripping reconstruction of a climbing expedition that went horribly wrong is also an illuminating analysis of the changing culture of high-altitude climbing.

Krakauer is well placed to write about mountaineering, as he was an avid climber before becoming an outdoor journalist. He has written numerous journal articles on climbing. *Into Thin Air* is his second nonfiction book. The first, *Eiger Dreams: Ventures Among Men and Mountains* (1990), is also about mountaineering; the second, *Into the Wild* (1996), is on Christopher Johnson McCandless, a man who rejected society for the Alaskan wilderness; and the most recent, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (2003), is about contemporary Christian sects.

In 1996, *Outside* magazine employed Krakauer to write an article about the commercialisation of Mount Everest. *Outside* enlisted Krakauer as a client of Adventure Consultants, a commercial expedition firm: the director Rob Hall was in charge of the Everest expedition. In anticipation of the publicity and business that would be generated by Krakauer's article, Hall waived the full fee of \$65 000. The expedition turned out to be disastrous for Adventure Consultants and others attempting the summit in May 1996. Nine climbers associated with the commercial expeditions died. Due to the presence of journalists Krakauer, Sandy Hill Pittman (reporting for NBC online) and Janet Bromet (reporting for *Outside Online*), the disaster made international headlines immediately.

Krakauer's *Outside* article (also entitled 'Into Thin Air') appeared a couple of months later in August 1996. It generated a heated controversy involving other eyewitnesses with different versions of events, such as Mountain Madness guide Anatoli Boukreev, who defended himself against Krakauer's savage criticism. Others who contested Krakauer's account included relatives of the deceased (for example, the family of Adventure Consultants guide Andy Harris, whose story Krakauer got wrong); and the general public, who criticised Krakauer's failure to act in the crisis and Pittman for paying for an easy passage to the summit and thereby risking others' lives.

This controversy and personal guilt motivated Krakauer to emend and expand the original article into a book-length account. *Into Thin Air* was published at the end of 1996. In 1997 Sony Pictures released a film adaptation (*Into Thin Air: Death on Everest*, dir. Robert Markowitz). In short, the drama of this ‘climbing book’ has certainly lived up to ‘the drama ... that produced [it]’.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Mountaineering

In 1923 the renowned British Climber, George Leigh Mallory, was asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest. He quipped: “Because it is there” (p.15). Mallory’s allusion to the unexplainable allure of Everest is often cited in mountaineering literature. Certainly mountains have always been there and people have always climbed them; but history reveals that the relationship between people and mountains has shifted over time. Records of people’s ascents of mountains span the ages. The mummified remains of Europe’s oldest Iceman, dated to 3300 BC, were found in a glacier high in the Ötztal Alps. What it meant to climb to a great height in 3300 BC and what it means in the twenty-first century are most definitely different.

The Romantic view

We see mountains as we are taught to see them. The contemporary fascination with high mountains is a product of the nineteenth-century aesthetic (of the arts) movement called **Romanticism**. Although there are exceptions, pre-Romantic writers tended to see mountains as ugly blemishes on the landscape, ‘warts, and pock-holes in the face/Of th’ earth’ as the seventeenth-century poet John Donne (1572–1631) described them (‘An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary’, cited in Nicolson 1959, p.28). Nature was viewed as something best tamed or converted into resources. A forest represented wood for heating, stone something to be quarried for building material, and a mountain a useless obstruction and a chore to climb. Then, during the seventeenth century, following the scientific revolution, people began to understand the world and human beings’ place in it differently.

This shift in attitudes paved the way for Romanticism and its avid interest in untamed nature as an elemental force, something to be appreciated for its beauty, timelessness and vastness. Mountains represented the infinite majesty of nature, what poets and philosophers called **the sublime**. As the philosopher Edmund Burke (1729–97) wrote: ‘The sublime always dwells on great objects and terrible’ (cited in Nicolson, p.371). Mountains were viewed as embodiments of the awe-inspiring monumental force of nature. The Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) wrote:

primeval mountains
Teach the adverting mind. [...]

The secret strength of things

Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
(‘Mont Blanc’, cited in Nicolson, p.388)

Gazing on mountains triggers an **epiphany**, or a moment of realisation, in which the poet recognises their place in the greater scheme. As travel became easier over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mountains became more accessible. Nature was regarded as tamed and no longer terrifying, but still tremendously uplifting. Romanticism has taught us to associate profound realisations – about life, nature and the cosmos – with awe-inspiring mountains.

Today’s view

Today in the age of extreme adventure tourism, mountains support a number of thriving industries: commercial expeditions, films, books and outdoor equipment. Modern mountaineering involves:

- highly-developed technical skills that enable a climber to surmount rock, ice and snow
- purpose-designed equipment such as the ice-pick, crampons (spikes for climbing boots), ropes, harnesses, oxygen cylinders and heavy-duty outdoor clothing
- high-tech communication via three-way radios, the internet and satellite telephones.

Nevertheless, people continue to draw upon Romantic ideals to explain their desire to climb and to describe what they gain from the experience.

Mount Everest

The highest mountain on earth is Mount Everest, known as Jomolungma in Tibetan or Sagarmatha in Nepalese. Located in the Himalayas on the border between Tibet, Nepal and China, it is 8848 metres or 29 029 feet high. Everest is climbed either via the Southeast Ridge from Nepal or the Northeast Ridge from Tibet. The Nepalese route is a technically easier climb and therefore more frequently used, particularly by commercial expeditions. For these reasons professional mountaineers refer to it snobbishly as the ‘Yak Route’ (p.21). The expedition described in *Into Thin Air* took this route, but Krakauer concludes: ‘Truth be told, climbing Everest has always been an extraordinarily dangerous undertaking and doubtless always will be’ (p.274). Aspiring to climb Mount Everest is a relatively recent phenomenon, since Everest was not always recognised as the apex of the planet.

Key dates in Everest's history

1852 Radhanath Sikhdar, a computer (or surveyor) working on 'the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India', calculated that 'Peak XV' was 'the highest mountain in the world' (p.13).

1865 Sir Andrew Waugh, India's surveyor general, renamed Peak XV, Mount Everest after his predecessor, Sir George Everest (p.14).

1924 George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine (members of a British team) got close to the summit, but bad weather closed in and they died probably without achieving their goal (pp.15–16).

1953 Edmund Hillary (New Zealand) and Tenzing Norgay (a Sherpa) on another British expedition reached the summit using bottled oxygen (p.16).

1963 Americans Tom Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld reached the summit via the difficult West Ridge (p.19).

1978 Reinhold Messner (Italy) and Peter Habeler (Austria) achieved the first summit of Everest without supplemental oxygen (p.153).

1985 Non-professional 55-year-old climber, Dick Bass, was guided to the summit of Mount Everest by David Breashears; the commerce of Everest began (p.21).

The May 1996 Everest controversy

When *Outside* commissioned Krakauer to write about commercial expeditions to Everest, it was soliciting an opinion piece on a controversy that was already raging. After Dick Bass had 'done' Everest, high-altitude climbing culture changed irrevocably. Traditional high-altitude climbing expeditions were national state-funded affairs involving experienced professional mountaineers, such as Mallory or Hillary. By contrast, in the commercial era – of Adventure Consultants, Mountain Madness or Alpine Ascents – clients pay to join an expedition organised and guided by professional mountaineers.

Some traditionalists (including Hillary) criticise commercial ventures for taking inexperienced people into such dangerous situations (p.34). Other professionals recognise the risks involved, but they see commercial guiding as a livelihood, as state-funding for expeditions dwindles (Boukreev 1997). Krakauer expresses grave ethical concerns about the risks involved. He proposes that different rules must be applied to professional and commercial ventures, and that what is appropriate for experienced professionals is too risky for novices. In an age of extreme adventure tourism, *Into Thin Air* addresses these pressing concerns directly.

Anatoli Boukreev's response

Krakauer's conclusions about the conflict between traditional and commercial climbing practices lead him to criticise Anatoli Boukreev, Mountain Madness's guide. According to Krakauer, Boukreev:

- was the product of an old-style tough Soviet climbing culture and did not grasp the expectations of Western clients
- frequently left his clients to fend for themselves
- undermined his capacity to care for his clients at high altitudes by forgoing supplemental oxygen
- focused upon his own climb rather than guiding.

Boukreev justified his behaviour in May 1996 in a letter to *Outside* magazine. When *Outside* refused to publish it due to its length, Boukreev (assisted by G. Weston DeWalt) wrote his own best-selling book about the disaster: *The Climb: Tragic Ambitions on Everest* (1997). In it Boukreev describes Soviet climbing culture and how it ill-prepared him for Western expectations. He argues that Krakauer and others misinterpreted his lack of fluency in English as stand-offishness. He explains how his strict acclimatisation regime prepared him to climb without oxygen, but that he carried oxygen to use if needed. He argues that by not using oxygen, he could perform better as a guide because he did not have to adjust suddenly when oxygen supplies ran out (as happened in May 1996).

Boukreev explains that he left the Mountain Madness clients: when they were climbing well; under direct orders of expedition leader, Scott Fischer; to perform work behind the scenes (such as securing ropes, or setting up camp, necessary because the expedition was short-staffed) of which Krakauer was ignorant; and to conserve his energy in case of a disaster. He also describes his frustration that Fischer did not respect his experience and authority when he proposed a more rigorous acclimatisation regime, and when he judged that the weather was too unstable to attempt the summit on May 10, 1996.

David Breashears's response

Breashears and the IMAX team were on Mount Everest in May 1996 to shoot an IMAX (wide format) film and he was involved in the rescue of Adventure Consultants client, Beck Weathers and Taiwanese expedition leader, Makalu Gau. Breashears is a film director, an elite professional climber, and the first guide to take an amateur (Bass) to the summit. His book, *High Exposure: An Enduring Passion for Everest and Unforgiving Places* (1999), is an autobiographical account of his mountaineering and filmmaking career.

Breashears gives a fascinating account of professional mountaineering culture. He mentions the May 1996 disaster both in his introduction and the final chapters. Breashears was a witness and not a victim of the disaster and this gives him a different perspective. His account differs from Krakauer's in a number of respects. He outlines the code of conduct required for guiding non-professionals and points to where Hall, Fischer and Boukreev failed it. Breashears stresses his respect for Hall's skills and meticulousness, but he feels that Hall saw himself as invincible and downplayed the risks facing amateur climbers. The IMAX team was scheduled to reach the summit of Everest the day before Adventure Consultants and Mountain Madness, but Breashears had ordered the team to descend due to unstable weather. Breashears also provides more sympathetic portraits of wealthy amateur climbers vilified in the media, in particular Pittman and Bass.

Beck Weathers's version

In 2000 Weathers's story, *Left for Dead: My Journey Home from Everest* (written with Stephen G. Michaud) was published. This book focuses less on the professional versus amateur controversy and more on Weathers's remarkable near-death experience, rescue, and his long struggle after amputations and a nose reconstruction. His experience triggered a profound and life-changing realisation. He affirms the accounts given by Krakauer and Breashears, and reiterates their criticisms of Fischer's carelessness and Boukreev's failure to use oxygen. As a practising pathologist, Weathers gives a medical perspective on the effects of altitude on the body. He also adds a few humorous anecdotes of his own.

And ...

The most recent eyewitness account appears in Ed Viesturs's autobiography, *No Shortcut to the Top: Climbing the World's 14 Highest Peaks* (2006, written with David Roberts). Viesturs was involved in the IMAX project (directed by Breashears) and the rescue of Beck Weathers and Makalu Gau.