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The Beckoning Silence



Synopsis

Joe Simpson has experienced a life filled with adventure but marred by death. He has endured the painful attrition of climbing friends in accidents, calling into question the perilously exhilarating activity to which he has devoted his life. Probability is inexorably closing in. The tragic loss of a close friend forces a momentous decision upon him. It is time to turn his back on the mountains that he has loved. Never more alive than when most at risk, he has come to see a last climb on the hooded, mile-high North Face of the Eiger as the cathartic finale. In a narrative which takes the reader through extreme experiences, from an avalanche in Bolivia, ice-climbing in the Alps and Colorado and paragliding in Spain - before his final confrontation with the Eiger - Simpson reveals the inner truth of climbing, exploring both the power of the mind and the frailties of the body. The subject of his new book is the siren song of fear and his struggle to come to terms with it.

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Customer Reviews

Having read each of Simpson's five mountaineering books, I walked away from this one with the feeling that Joe has finally reached a certain acceptance of himself, the world he is a part of and the dangers that go along with being a climber. Whereas some of his previous efforts have been dark

and devoid of humor ("Storms of Silence" and "Dark Shadows Falling" for example), I found myself frequently laughing out loud at this one. Joe has mastered the art of storytelling and this may be his best effort since his classic "Touching the Void," which of course is in a class by itself. This book starts off as somewhat of a tribute to a friend of his who gave up mountaineering because of a fundamental war-weariness to its dangers only to be killed in a paragliding accident a short time later. This leads Simpson to vow to give up serious mountain climbing himself ... but not before completing a handful of classic climbing routes (a "tick list" as he calls it). Among these is the 1938 route of the North Face of the Eiger, which is the focus of the second half of the book. There seem to be a few phrases in this one that were ripped off right out of Heinrich Harrer's "The White Spider" and Joe tacitly acknowledges some unintentional plagiarism at the end of the book, explaining that he's read so many books on the North Face of the Eiger that he doesn't even know where much of his knowledge had its origin. A little lame, but I bought it. And fear not, the reader who has come to expect Simpson (the "Mr. Magoo" of the climbing world) to be in a precarious situation will not be disappointed.

I've enjoyed every one of Simpson's books that I've read. It's hard to say why -- maybe it's because his books seem more personal than others or maybe it's because his books tend to ramble in a personal way that cover a lot of ground -- from personal to philosophical and then to the side of the mountain. At any rate, this book starts with a climb in the Andes and a near call with a collapsing serac and Simpson's increasing sense of his own mortality. For some people, this would be called a mid-life crisis and Simpson explores the impact of this realization on his own endeavors. Unlike other people, though, Simpson decides to climb the classic route up the North Face of the Eiger. As he prepares for the climb, he reflects on some of the historic efforts in the 1930s -- and then as he details his climb, he relates the stops and efforts to the history. In fact, he revels in the history as he ticks off some of the stops on the route. I get the sense that we haven't heard the last of Simpson yet. This should be the second of Simpson's books to read after Touching The Void.

The Eiger Nordwand comes to life as Joe Simpson describes the attempts he and Ray Delaney made on it in 2001. At the time, this route was the big item on the tick list Simpson had worked up as his fortieth birthday loomed and he considered retiring from serious climbing. Simpson's writing and climbing are bold, clean, and done. Touching the Void, is a single story, whereas The Beckoning Silence is a set of stories and ruminations - on climbing, on danger, and on aging. Simpson seems to have been of the "Live fast, die young, and leave a beautiful corpse" school of

living. As he hit forty, he discovered his body no longer seemed indestructible and he saw very competent friends get killed. The phrase "wrong place, wrong time" recurs in this book. Time to move to Plan B, cut the hazard, and figure how to live to a sedate old age. If you have stuck your neck out on rock, snow, or ice, you will resonate with Joe Simpson's descriptions here. It rings true, evokes the spirit and feelings of the crags and mountains. Simpson is a professional climber, but even moderately ambitious weekend climbers will feel a frisson of vicarious fear as Simpson describes his unease as "Tat" Tattersall swings up the crux of Alea Jacta Est on dodgy smears of ice over rock with unreliable protection. At 68 I am looking for interesting though less challenging climbing objectives. Given Simpson's remarkable record of achievement, I expect him to be around for many further climbs, especially if he pulls in his horns a bit, as he says he intends to in this book. I wish him the best, possibly including a full ascent of the Eiger Nordwand under ideal conditions - and with some long-time climbing partner. Let's hope his writing remains at this standard, too.

Joe Simpson's writing is compelling, lucid and interesting. As in his previous writing he is refreshingly honest in his story telling of both facts and feelings. The book deals mostly with the 1938 route on the North face of the Eiger. The historical details alone make this book a must read for mountaineering buffs. But, more importantly Simpson explores the interplay between mountaineering experience and the objective dangers of climbing in big mountains. The balance he contrasts is between the extreme satisfaction of being in the mountains and climbing at standards that challenge, with the feelings of those involved, including concerns over route conditions internal motivation and personal performance. In days when we are increasingly fed a diet of what I call "Dare and Scare", or "Mountaineering Rubbernecking Exploitation" books, Simpson had written a sensitive personal account that anyone who has ever had the urge for adventure will relate to. I couldn't put it down. Bravo Joe!

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