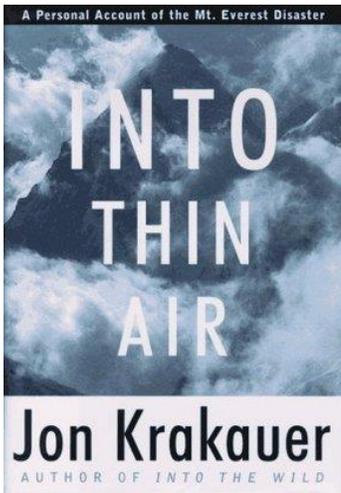


Into Thin Air

By John Krakauer



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

A bank of clouds was assembling on the not-so-distant horizon, but journalist-mountaineer Jon Krakauer, standing on the summit of Mt. Everest, saw nothing that "suggested that a murderous storm was bearing down." He was wrong. The storm, which claimed five lives and left countless more--including Krakauer's--in guilt-ridden disarray, would also provide the impetus for *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer's epic account of the May 1996 disaster.

By writing *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer may have hoped to exorcise some of his own demons and lay to rest some of the painful questions that still surround the event. He takes great pains to provide a balanced picture of the people and events he witnessed and gives due credit to the tireless and dedicated Sherpas. He also avoids blasting easy targets such as Sandy Pittman, the wealthy socialite who brought an espresso maker along on the expedition. Krakauer's highly personal inquiry into the catastrophe provides a great deal of insight into what went wrong. But for Krakauer himself, further interviews and investigations only lead him to the conclusion that his perceived failures were directly responsible for a fellow climber's death. Clearly, Krakauer remains haunted by the disaster, and although he relates a number of incidents in which he acted selflessly and even heroically, he seems unable to view those instances objectively. In the end, despite his evenhanded and even generous assessment of others' actions, he reserves a full measure of vitriol for himself.

This updated trade paperback edition of *Into Thin Air* includes an extensive new postscript that sheds fascinating light on the acrimonious debate that flared between Krakauer and Everest guide Anatoli Boukreev in the wake of the tragedy. "I have no doubt that Boukreev's intentions were good on summit day," writes Krakauer in the postscript, dated August 1999. "What disturbs me, though, was Boukreev's refusal to acknowledge the possibility that he made even a single poor decision. Never did he indicate that perhaps it wasn't the best choice to climb without gas or go down ahead of his clients." As usual, Krakauer supports his points with dogged research and a good dose of humility. But rather than continue the heated discourse that has raged since *Into Thin Air*'s denouncement of guide Boukreev, Krakauer's tone is conciliatory; he points most of his criticism at G. Weston De Walt, who coauthored *The Climb*, Boukreev's version of events. And in a touching conclusion, Krakauer recounts his last conversation with the late Boukreev, in which the two weathered climbers agreed to disagree about certain points. Krakauer had great hopes to patch things up with Boukreev, but the Russian later died in an avalanche on another Himalayan peak, Annapurna I.

In 1999, Krakauer received an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters--a prestigious prize intended "to honor writers of exceptional accomplishment." According to the Academy's citation, "Krakauer combines the tenacity and courage of the finest tradition of investigative journalism with the stylish subtlety and profound insight of the born writer. His account of an ascent of Mount Everest has led to a general reevaluation of climbing and of the commercialization of what was once a romantic, solitary sport; while his account of the life and death of Christopher McCandless, who died of starvation after challenging the Alaskan wilderness, delves even more deeply and disturbingly into the fascination of nature and the devastating effects of its lure on a young and curious mind."

A childhood dream of someday ascending Mount Everest, a lifelong love of climbing, and an expense account all propelled writer Jon Krakauer to the top of the Himalayas last May. His powerful, cautionary tale of an adventure gone horribly wrong is a must-read.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not? Do you think these people are crazy?
2. Why do you think the surviving members of the 1996 expedition met with so much criticism and negative press?
3. What is the significance of the fact that more guides than clients were lost on the mountain during the expedition?
4. Krakauer lays a large portion of blame on himself for the misinformation regarding Andy Harris. Given the altered condition that the human brain undertakes at that altitude combined with his lack of oxygen, should Krakauer shoulder the amount of blame he does? Is his survival guilt purely a product of him surviving, or a reflection of personal responsibility in the tragedy that occurred?
5. Do others bear blame for what happened that weekend on Everest? If so, who?
6. Each year, clients pay large sums of money for the chance to climb to the top of Mount Everest. Krakauer points out that many of them are ill-suited for the expeditions due to lack of relevant climbing experience. What role did money (and the subsequent sense of entitlement that goes along with it) play in the events that unfolded on Everest?
7. Why do you think neither Hall nor Fischer ever stressed a firm turn-around time for their teams on the morning of the summit push?
8. Both Hall and Fischer angled to have Krakauer on their teams because of the free publicity that would go along with it. How do you think Krakauer's role as a journalist impacted the events that unfolded?
9. Sandy Pittman was widely criticized for her actions on Everest after she returned to New York City. Many reporters and columnists demonized her approach to the summit, with one going so far as to blame the entire tragedy on her. How much responsibility, if any, do you feel she should shoulder?

10. Pittman is one of a handful of people on the mountain who feel they were not presented in a balanced manner. While Krakauer is definitely critical of certain individuals, do you feel he presents an even or uneven picture of the people and events that transpired?

11. After *Into Thin Air* was published, Anatoli Boukareev and Krakauer had a public battle over the guide's actions on the summit day. Boukareev's actions, as described in the book, resulted in many other professional climbers picking sides as to whether a client, such as Krakauer, is in a position to criticize an experienced Everest climber. What do you think?

12. Some critics have labeled *Into Thin Air* as a telling look at the business behind high-altitude climbing while others feel it was simply a means for Krakauer to cash in on the tragedy of others. Do you feel this is a worthwhile, cautionary tale or an exploitative tattle-tale book?

13. Has anyone here done any mountain climbing? Tell us about it. Does this book make you want to climb mountains? Did it alter your opinion of mountain climbers? Is mountain climbing a worthwhile endeavor?

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN KRAKAUER

Taken from boldtype magazine (Random House)

The immediacy of *Into Thin Air* is such that you feel you are actually with the Mt. Everest expedition as they struggle towards the summit and encounter disaster upon the harrowing descent. *Into the Wild*, the haunting and tragic story of Chris McCandless' idealistic attempt to live life as a modern day Thoreau, is more than the search to unravel the mystery of his eventual starvation in the Alaskan wilderness. McCandless' story became an obsession for the author and his gripping book causes readers to look inward, to reflect upon our own existence and question the manner in which we lead our lives. *Bold Type* recently caught up with Krakauer to talk about how he's dealing with incredible success and tragedy.

Bold Type: How did you start writing, what was your formal training?

Jon Krakauer: I never studied writing. but I'd always been a reader and had a secret fantasy about being a writer. Because of my climbing, I went to Alaska for the first time in 1974 to the Arrigetch Peaks in the Brooks Range and made three ascents of unclimbed peaks. The American Alpine Club has a journal, *The American Alpine Journal*, they publish every year which is a compendium of notable ascents around the world, and they invited me to write an article about these climbs. That was the first article I ever wrote. Three years later I was paid for the first time to write an article when I climbed the Devil's Thumb, and wrote about that for a now-defunct British magazine called *Mountain*. Then a friend and climbing partner, my writing mentor David Roberts, quit a teaching job at Hampshire College, where I had gone, to become an editor at *Horizon*. After a year he left *Horizon* to freelance, and said it's a great racket. He told me how to go about the protocol of writing query letters and convinced me to try freelancing. I dabbled in it for a couple of years and in 1983 quit my carpentry job and went for it and I've been writing ever since.

BT: How did you make the move from nature writing to mainstream magazines?

JK: I knew that you couldn't make a living simply writing about the outdoors, so I made an effort from the beginning of

my freelance career to write about other subjects. Since I had been a carpenter, I felt like I could bullshit my way writing about architecture for *Architectural Digest*. I had been a commercial fisherman, so I had queried *Smithsonian* about a commercial fishery in Alaska, and they went for it. I queried *Rolling Stone* early on about firewalking, walking on hot coals, and agreed to write it on spec. I tried writing for local Seattle magazines and found that it was just as difficult to get published locally as it was nationally and the local magazines paid literally ten percent as much, so I said fuck the local stuff. I was setting quotas that I would write ten query letters a week, and I definitely worked hard, but I got lucky. Because I wanted to pay the rent, I didn't have any grandiose ambitions of being an artiste; I wanted to pay the fucking bills, so I worked really hard. I realized that what I wrote for *Rolling Stone* had to be pretty different from *Smithsonian*, and I gave them whatever they wanted, I wanted to sell the article. It was useful, as a writer, to try out different voices and it was also smart, as a businessman.

BT: What are some of the other subjects you've written about that have captured your interest?

JK: The problem is that none of them have captured my interest as much as the outdoor pieces. The pieces I've written for *Outside* magazine are definitely my best work, and they're virtually all about the outdoors. That's why in *Eiger Dreams*, most of those were originally published in *Outside* or *Smithsonian*. It's hard for me to think about pieces that really stuck in my mind that weren't about the outdoors.

BT: How did you find the transition from short pieces for magazines to the extended narratives of a book?

JK: It was extremely satisfying. I really enjoy researching, and for almost every piece, I research enough to write a book. Almost every magazine piece I've ever written, I felt like I haven't done it justice, like it was just a gloss. So to write a book, and to spend a year or two and tell a story right is really satisfying and after doing that it's hard to go back and write magazine articles.

BT: What are you working on now?

JK: I'm six weeks overdue on a piece for *National Geographic* about going to the heart of Antarctica, to a place called Queen Maud Land, where I climbed with Alex Lowe, who's probably the best climber in the world.

BT: Most people who have read *Into Thin Air* would be shocked to hear that you've gone climbing again since returning from Everest.

JK: Well, I came back from Everest with serious doubts about the whole business of climbing, but it's real important to me. I'd give up writing before I gave up climbing. I had this invitation to climb with the best, and to go to this amazing place with these beautiful, huge fins of granite sticking out of the ice that had never been climbed before. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I took it. I committed with a little anxiety, and when I went I had greater anxiety, but it ended up being one of the best trips I've ever done. It was uneventful, the climbing was the kind of climbing I know how to do--technical, steep, vertical and overhanging granite. There was nothing higher than 11,000 feet.

BT: Were you fearful of climbing again after Everest?

JK: It wasn't like, 'Am I afraid of this?' It was more like, "Is this right? Is it too selfish?" I won't go back to Everest, I'm afraid of that.

BT: Is there an altitude ceiling you've set for yourself--a height you won't climb above again?

JK: Well, probably 23,000 or 24,000 feet. Below that you can acclimatize so it's really not so dangerous. Above that, everything changes.

BT: What was the reaction by your family and friends to the news that you were going climbing again after Everest?

JK: They understood. But my wife, and she didn't tell me this until I got back, it was harder for her in some ways than it was when I went to Everest. On Everest I could call her on the satellite phone, in Antarctica there's no communications at all for six weeks. And it seemed to be escalating: first Everest, then Antarctica, which in her mind was worse because it was more remote.

BT: How would you explain to a layperson what it is about climbing that is so appealing, that is worth the tremendous risk?

JK: It fascinates me because it matters. Unlike most of life, what you do really matters and you can't afford to fuck up. Your actions have real consequences. You have to pay attention and focus, and that's very satisfying. It forces you to pay great attention and you lose yourself in the task at hand. Without the risk, that wouldn't happen, so the risk is an essential part of climbing, and that's hard for some people to grasp. You can't justify the risk when things go wrong and people die. The greater the risk, the greater the reward in most aspects of life, and in climbing that's certainly true, too. It's very physical, you use your mind and your body. It's like full-body chess, and it gets you to beautiful, beautiful places.

BT: What are some other activities you enjoy and pursue, besides writing and climbing?

JK: I love being outdoors, being in the mountains and the desert, and my wife enjoys that too. That's one of the things that sustain our relationship. I snowboard, I read and I write. I'm not gregarious. I don't really have many friends, because I'm away a lot, and I feel like when I'm home I want to spend time with my wife. I'm just not social to begin with, so I'm entirely happy being alone for long periods of time.

BT: But you're so charming at your slide shows... have you just gotten used to speaking to large groups of people?

JK: I've learned how to speak publicly, but I hate it and it's really hard for me. It's really, really anxiety-inducing and difficult. I would pay a lot of money not to have to do this book tour.

BT: Who are some of the writers you admire most?

JK: There are so many. I've always loved Updike. My favorite Updike novel, not one of his best known, is called *A Month of Sundays*. I've always liked Joan Didion, E. Annie Proulx, Charles Bowden, David Roberts, Lorrie Moore. I probably read a lot more fiction than non-fiction, I'm not sure why. I just read this pretty cool novel, sort of weird, but it works--*The Lives of the Monster Dogs*. It sounds so preposterous but it's brilliant.

BT: Did you bring any novels with you to Everest?

JK: I brought *Infinite Jest*, because I really like David Foster Wallace, but it proved impossible to read at base camp. My brain just wasn't up to it. Runners brought old copies of *Time* and *Newsweek* to base camp, but I had no desire to read the news; I was just completely focused on the climb.

BT: How were you able to take such detailed notes and remember so many facts throughout this harrowing experience?

JK: Well, my memory proved unreliable, but as a journalist, I'm disciplined. I take the reporting side of writing more seriously than the writing side. I think it really is a lot of work to get things right, so I trained myself. I filled nine notebooks. I had a big notebook that I wrote in every morning and night in the mess tent, recording what I observed. And I had these little reporter's notebooks I took up the mountain, and every time I stopped to rest or take drink of water, as a matter of discipline I'd take it out of my breast pocket and write. I had one of those space pens that writes well below zero, and they work. I sort of take notes the way photographers take photos. You just sort of scattershot, record everything, because you never know what's going to prove invaluable when you get back down. And I don't worry about how the story's going and try to fit it in, I try to just record it, because if you're prejudiced and you're looking for a certain quote or something, you're going to miss the stuff that's going to prove to be important. The only time I didn't take notes was on summit day. I tried at 27,600 feet when I got to "The Balcony" at 5:30am, but they're basically illegible, and they make no sense because my brain wasn't working. I didn't start taking notes again until 6am on May 11th when Stuart Hutchinson woke me up. So there's a period there, the most important period, where I took no notes. I've reconstructed that from many, many interviews of all of the people who were up there, and as you know, I got stuff wrong. You can't trust your memory, it was a matter of cross-referencing and corroborating. And even now, astute readers will find that the timeline doesn't add up precisely. Everyone who was up there agrees that time is the slipperiest thing.

BT: What was the writing process like when you got back? The thing that strikes me is, of course this is an incredibly powerful story, but it's the immediacy of your writing that I find so incredibly impressive.

JK: I got back and told *The New York Times* and NPR that I was definitely not going to write a book, no fucking way. I had to write the article for *Outside*, and then I was going to put Everest out of my mind. So I wrote the article, and after it went to press I learned the huge mistake I made about Andy Harris. And that was the first time I thought that maybe I should write the book. The article was 18,000 words, and I still hadn't done the story justice. So writing this book became all I could think about; I was obsessing about it. Even after the article was done, I was calling people and interviewing them. That's how I discovered the Andy Harris mistake--the article was done, but I compulsively called Martin Adams because I hadn't talked to him yet. Once I decided to write it, I decided to write it quickly because I was going to Antarctica in December and I didn't want it hanging over my head. People counseled me not to write it, but in the end I'm glad that I did. I think it does have a certain immediacy and an honesty that it would have lacked had I waited three years. Once I decided to write the book I did some more research and began writing it the second week in September, and from then until December when I left for South Africa to fly to Antarctica, I was writing between 14 and 20 hours a day, every day, seven days a week. It was just a fever.

BT: Did you find the act of writing cathartic?

JK: Well, I think I will eventually. It wasn't at the time, it was just hard and very painful. It's not the way I usually write. I write long hours, but I'm really slow and I suffer writer's block. I work on a single sentence sometimes for two or three days. I didn't have that luxury this time, but that was good. I couldn't fuck around with it too much, it was just 'get it down and get it down fast.' I had 80 or 90 days of writing and there were about 88,000 words in the book, so there was sort of like this quota. I knew I had to do about a thousand words a day, and I was a basket case by the end.

BT: Why do you think this tragedy captured the public imagination the way it did?

JK: Because it's Everest, and there's all this mystique surrounding Everest. The media was drawn to it like flies to shit. And the media was primed because of all of the Web sites and Sandy Pittman, this very colorful figure who had been written about by *The Wall Street Journal* and others before she even went. So when this happened there was me and Sandy along, both journalists, it was primed for the feeding frenzy. I'm not surprised that it hit big, I'm surprised that the interest seems to be sustained. I worried that people would be sick of this whole thing and wouldn't be interested in the book, but that's not been the case.

BT: What do you think about the way the media covered this story?

JK: Short form media is reductionist by nature. Television especially, but magazines, too, including mine, distilled it down to "Here's the good guys, here's the bad guys." And TV tried to say, "Here's this tragedy that didn't have to happen," and "Who's to blame?" It's so much more complicated than that. Rob Hall, for instance, fucked up big time, and he died, and one of his guides and two of his clients died. But I don't blame Rob, and I sort of understand his mistakes, and a lot of them were rooted in altruistic, generous motives, but the end was tragic.

BT: What do you hope that people come away with after reading this book?

JK: I wanted more than anything else to show the complexities and ambiguities of this tragedy. That's it's not simple, and it's not easy to assign blame, and it's rooted not in greed and the crassness of thrill-seeking or trophy hunting, but it's much deeper and more profound. The motives for people who climb Everest are, in some ways, noble, as misguided as they often are. It's wanting to reach beyond yourself. There's also a lot of hubris there and selfishness. I wanted it to be a very fair, sympathetic, even-handed portrait of the characters involved. I just wanted to tell the story in its full complexity. That's what I'm always trying to do in my writing and that's why I'm always frustrated by magazine articles. There's always a lot of gray area in life, and in most journalism you're forced to boil it down to the black and white and the gray just gets leached away. In a book you have the luxury of developing characters and showing that people are both good and bad, and they do good things and they fuck up.

BT: What were your thoughts when you heard about the deaths on Everest this year?

JK: I got sick to my stomach, I couldn't believe it was happening all over again. It brought back way too many memories.

BT: Is it a case of people not learning any lessons from last year?

JK: Oh, absolutely. Everest self-selects for very determined people and because it's Everest, people take all kinds of chances they wouldn't take on other mountains. That's why this tragedy will be repeated again and again. It's called "the death zone" for a very good reason, it's just like playing Russian roulette.

BT: What would Chris McCandless have done had he been with you on the Everest expedition?

JK: He would have run so far from Everest. He was an adventurer, but he thought wealth was corrupting and evil, and people spending \$65,000 to climb Everest, he would have thought that was obscene. Chris was a guy who didn't appreciate the gray areas and ambiguities and he would have been quick to form strong opinions about us, and he would have castigated all of us. I can just imagine what he would have said (laughs).

BT: You still seem to have this incredibly strong connection to Chris. What is it about his story that keeps you obsessed several years later?

JK: I identify with him a lot, and it's a sad story. I went back to the bus for the third time last September. I've become quite good friends with his family, we have sort of this weird bond. His parents came to the slide show I gave in Baltimore a few days ago, and it was the first time they'd seen many of these slides and it must have been very hard for them. Several people came up to them and told them how much they admired Chris, it was really touching. It's so weird to me that I never knew Chris; I've written this book about him and his parents have thanked me for explaining aspects of him that they never knew, but I never met the guy. At the readings in Atlanta and Nashville, people came up to me who'd gone to college with Chris at Emory and knew him, and it was really eerie.

--Larry Weissman