

Fragile Edge

Maria Coffey

Seattle, WA: The Mountaineers Books, 2000

US \$16.95, 190 pages, softcover

“Joe . . . and all the lost friends—climbing was their dream, and an important part of what made them so vibrant; we survivors have to try to accept that, while coming to terms with the fact that it also took them away too soon.”

It’s something people don’t want to think about, but it is intriguing nonetheless: death in the mountaineering community. Until recently, the concept was shared by only a few: family and friends of, and the mostly women partners of, elite mountaineers and climbers. The well-publicized and recounted Everest tragedy of 1996 brought many of us to tears as we read an account of Rob Hall’s last words to his pregnant wife. Loved ones of these high-risk adventurers face the real fear of death on every expedition, and Maria Coffey tells the story of this tenuous lifestyle through the eyes of those left behind.

“The farewells never got any easier. There was always that wrenching in the gut when he walked away and three months of uncertainty stretched ahead like a tunnel with no light at the end.” In *Fragile Edge*, the author narrates the tale of her life with Joe Tasker, an elite British mountaineer, who perished atop Everest during an attempt at the Northeast ridge in 1982. Through her relationship with Joe, the author at first parties with, then befriends and eventually loves the members of the climbing community, but in an alarmingly brief period of time, many of her friends are lost to the mountains. Her recollections are very raw and personal, with little reservation, as she recounts their love story in the year and a half before Joe’s death. The author then recounts her trip to Everest to memorialize Joe and his companion Peter Boardman, accompanied by Boardman’s wife. It is a moving end to a tragic story and a courageous effort to come to closure with a man she loved.

So intimate is the story that it might appeal to Oprah, and although the book will definitely appeal to mountaineers and their spouses and families, it may well appeal to those interested in relationship stories in general.

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Wolves: A Wildlife Handbook

Kim Long

Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1996

US \$15.95, 179 pages, softcover

If you need to know something about wolves, from their taxonomy to Native American folklore, Kim Long’s book is an excellent resource. This pocket-sized book can be stuffed in a rucksack for hours of fireside entertainment or stored on a reference shelf. Trackers and hikers will find the book useful as a quick reference; the pages include everything from a reproduction of a life-size track to a chapter on how to distinguish a wolf from a coyote. The author writes in an easy-to-read style, and the book is organized with plenty of tables and illustrations. But the book is more than a fact resource; Mr Long devotes several chapters to mythology of the wolf, ancient culture associations with wolves, and the history of wolves in North America—from their proliferation in the late 1800s to their destruction and subsequent reintroduction in the last decade.

Anyone with an interest in learning more about wolves or with plans to travel in wolf country will find Kim Long’s book a valuable resource. It has found a place on my bookshelf.

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Tibetan Border Worlds: A Geohistorical Analysis of Trade and Traders

Wim van Spengen

London: Kegan Paul, 2000

US \$65.00, 307 pages, hardcover

Geographers have the freedom to blend many disciplines—history, sociology, economics, and ethnography—into the study of space and structure. The people of Nyi-Shang, or Manang, as it is more familiarly known, and their travels and trade are the focus of Spengen’s rather brief study. Spengen sets out to understand how these people became such long-distance traders and how they are different from other groups sitting near the border of Tibet.

This useful volume for travelers represents a geographic history of the Nyishangba, or Manangba—a group of people in Nepal often encountered by others on visits to the rest of Asia. Foreigners weren’t allowed to visit their homeland until the gates to Manang were opened literally in 1978. This allowed a circuit of Annapurna to be made by trekkers, which has since become one of the world’s classic mountain routes.

Spengen details the geopolitical history of Tibet up to the Chinese takeover in 1950. Trade between Tibet and Nepal was a keystone of the mountain and hill economy of Nepal until 1959, when the Chinese took over. He attempts to fathom the origins of the Manangi people, who appear to be related to the Gurung peoples to the south but preferred a sedentary agricultural lifestyle to the agropastoral of the Gurung. Spengen suggests they could not grow enough food to sustain themselves year-round because of insufficient labor. They turned to trading in the winter and were given special trading privileges by the Lamjung Raja (or king), probably for helping build his fort. Unlike most other traders in Nepal, this royal order granted trading privileges that have absented them from customs duties since 1784. This comparable advantage lasted until quite recently.

Spengen explores the history of their trade that reached many centers in Asia, as Manangba ranged far and wide, and led to considerable capital accumulation. The people of Manangba have become major entrepreneurs in Kathmandu and now maintain only a small presence in their homeland.

Most mountain wilderness has buffer zones around it inhabited by various peoples with varied livelihoods. Adaptability, chance, and foresight, especially to changing economic circumstances, have resulted in significant wealth creation among some groups, including these people of Nyishang. While most visitors to such regions

are unlikely to learn much about the ethnic groups' culture through which they travel, the outsider's experience is vastly enhanced by such understanding. The book represents one facet of cultural ecology found on one of the world's most impressive and tourist-visited mountain circuits. Those with an anthropological or geographic background will find it illuminating.

"There are travel writers and travel liars." Those with a professional background in these disciplines will question the reliability of some of the author's findings, given his rather brief stay in Nyishang collecting stories, his lack of any knowledge of local language, and his limited Nepali language skills. Most of the recent findings depend on the validity of the explanations of 1 interpreter who himself was not a Manangba and worked with a people in a language that was not their native tongue. The initial attempts to do interviews following a questionnaire format had to be abandoned for obvious reasons given that these people were seasoned smugglers. So we are left to rely on their memories of discussions reconstructed once they got home each evening. And there is little about modern times. The remainder of the material is from historical documents. These limitations aside, this book represents the best story yet on these resourceful people.

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Errata

In a collective review by E. Ben Welch and Barry J. Gales, "Use of stun guns for venomous bites and stings: a review," published in Issue 2, Volume 12, page 111, reference 29, the reference to Dr David L. Hardy, Sr, MD, was misprinted as "Harding." The reference citation, however, is correct. The authors and editors regret the error.

In a Letter to the Editor by Subhash C. Arya, "Disasters and therapeutic or prophylactic interventions," published in Issue 2, Volume 12, page 154, the references

were omitted. The editors regret the omission. The references are as follows:

1. Gdalevich M, Ashkenazi I. Infection control in earthquake rescue team. *Lancet*. 1999;354:1564.
2. Horton R. Croatia and Bosnia: the imprints of war—II. Restoration. *Lancet*. 1999;353:2223–2228.
3. *Physicians' Desk Reference*. 53rd ed. Montvale: Medical Economics Company; 1999.
4. Brown F, ed. *New Approaches to Stabilization of Vaccine Potency*. Basel: Karger; 1996.