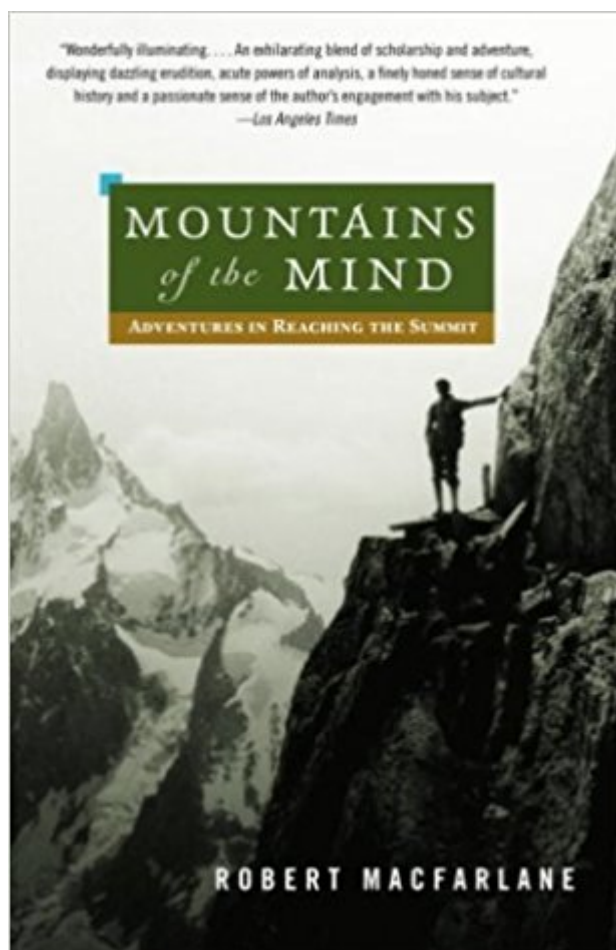


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Mountains Of The Mind: Adventures In Reaching The Summit



Synopsis

Combining accounts of legendary mountain ascents with vivid descriptions of his own forays into wild, high landscapes, Robert McFarlane reveals how the mystery of the world's highest places has come to grip the Western imagination and perennially draws legions of adventurers up the most perilous slopes. His story begins three centuries ago, when mountains were feared as the forbidding abodes of dragons and other mysterious beasts. In the mid-1700s the attentions of both science and poetry sparked a passion for mountains; Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Lord Byron extolled the sublime experiences to be had on high; and by 1924 the death on Mt Everest of an Englishman named George Mallory came to symbolize the heroic ideals of his day. Macfarlane also reflects on fear, risk, and the shattering beauty of ice and snow, the competition and contemplation of the climb, and the strange alternate reality of high altitude, magically enveloping us in the allure of mountains at every level.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have read the edition entitled "Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination," an English 2004 Granta Publication bought in Kathmandu. This is an interesting series of essays following the development and transitional phases of Western European conceptions of the "mountains" and exploring the mountains. In fact, that is my biggest warning about the book. MacFarlane never comes to terms with his Eurocentric, indeed Anglo-centric conception of mountains. And this really limits the book. Yes, it is interesting to read about how the mountains changed, from an British perspective, from a place of fear to one where fear was courted as a test of character, and an

affirmation of life itself. But other cultures, such as where I live in Nepal, have been living in the mountains for centuries before what is essentially an Enlightenment project - scaling the heights of the world as a humanist exploration of identity - starts to occur. Buddhist monks, travellers and other explorers have been travelling and living at great heights in the Himalaya for, well we don't know how long. But caves used by lamas and pandits dot the high areas of the Himalayas as do gompas (Buddhist temples). Caves have been found in Upper Mustang dating back over 2000 years. Milarepa, the Buddhist sage, lived in a cave near the Gangapurna glacier above Manang, Annapurna Himal, over 700 years ago. And as a lot of MacFarlane's book deals with people travelling and exploring the mountains, not just climbing them, the omissions of the world's true high mountain cultures, that of not just the peoples of the Himalaya, Karakoram and Hindu Kush, but also the Andes and East Africa needs addressing.

In this book, MacFarlane tries to trace the process by which humans - - well, European humans - - came to view mountains as places of beauty, glory, and adventure. He doesn't succeed in giving us an answer but he provides a lot of stories, and a little history, on these themes. He builds the story around themes such as scientific research into geology, glaciers, and the nature of time; fear and adrenaline; fascination with altitude; and the joys of walking off the map into uncharted regions. The final substantive chapter is a narrative of George Mallory's attempts on Everest, written as a single coherent story that works very nicely. In contrast to the Everest chapter, most of book is a collection of relatively short essays, bundled as chapters. Each essay one is about the length of a newspaper or magazine article, and they seem to have been recycled from MacFarlane's contributions to these kinds of outlets. This makes each chapter a collection of essays around a theme. When it works, it can be thought-provoking. Unfortunately, MacFarlane doesn't make major points or build an argument around these themes, leaving unanswered the great question of mountaineering (and of this book): why? MacFarlane also mixes personal anecdotes with the other essays. As he confesses in the acknowledgments section at the end, his editor made him do this. I'm afraid that this is how they read, too, as inserted bits rather than as coherent parts of each chapter. They also unfold in a strange way, with MacFarlane hiking up a Scottish peak in one but helicoptering up a glacier in the Tian Shian later in the book - - only gradually does the reader realize that the author is a serious mountaineer.

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