

Into Thin Air-

REVIEW

By Jon Krakauer

Into Thin Air is the narrative nonfiction account of the tragic events of the spring of 1996 on Mt. Everest, which at that point was the deadliest climbing season in the history of the mountain. Jon Krakauer, a writer and climber, is a client on the Adventure Consultants climbing expedition; he serves as the book's narrator. The story opens with Krakauer on the summit of Mt. Everest, too exhausted and delirious to care about his accomplishment. As he begins the painstaking descent back down the mountain, a storm forms and quickly worsens while many of his climbing teammates are still high on the summit. While he survives, the storm would eventually claim the lives of 8 climbers, with 4 more climbers dying in unrelated events that same season.

By the 1980s, guided expeditions to the summit became popular among amateur climbers who could afford the steep price tag – like Dick Bass, the millionaire who climbs Everest by paying a pro to guide him. This led to widespread criticism about the over-commercialization of the mountain. Krakauer is offered an assignment to join one of these guided expedition and write about this new phenomenon in *Outside* magazine, and although he worries about his ability to reach the summit, he can't resist the opportunity.

Krakauer leaves his home in Seattle in late March 1996 and meets his teammates in Kathmandu, Nepal. Rob Hall, the leader of his expedition is a celebrated climber from New Zealand with an exceptional record of guiding clients to the summit of Mt. Everest. His Adventure Consultants company has such a strong reputation that he charges \$65,000 a head for a spot on his expeditions, more than any other company. There are seven other clients on Krakauer's team: Beck Weathers, John Taske, Yasuko Namba, Lou Kasischke, Frank Fishbeck, Stuart Hutchinson, and Doug Hansen. They are all amateur climbers with limited experience, and Krakauer worries about attempting such a challenging climb with strangers he doesn't know or trust. But this is the nature of guided expeditions, and he is reassured by Hall's leadership, along with Mike Groom, the senior guide, and Andy Harris, the team's junior guide.

On April 8, the team reaches Everest Base Camp, a collection of tents and temporary structures at 17,600 feet that serves as the staging ground for summit bids. There, Krakauer meets Scott Fischer, a friend and rival of Hall's who is leading an expedition under his young company, Mountain Madness. Krakauer reveals that Hall and Fischer competed to have him assigned to their respective expeditions, eager for the publicity that his *Outside* magazine article would generate.

The team begins feeling the effects of altitude sickness--exhaustion, loss of appetite, and nausea - as Hall prepares a detailed plan to help their bodies acclimatize. Over the next month, they would prepare for the summit bid by doing short runs to progressively higher altitudes.

Krakauer is concerned upon learning that many of the expedition hadn't had a chance to properly train or break in new equipment before departing on the expedition. But this is not unique to Krakauer's team: among the other expeditions on the mountain that season, an accident-prone Taiwanese team led by Makalu Gau and a dysfunctional South African team led by Ian Woodall are the biggest worries. Their presence on the mountain continues Mt. Everest's long history of attracting dreamers who are at best under-qualified to climb it.

Back at Base Camp, Krakauer introduces Ang Dorje and Lopsang Jangbu, the two expeditions' lead climbing Sherpas (Sirdars) who assists Hall and Fischer with their guiding responsibilities.

The team's final acclimatization run to Camp 3 is successful. Krakauer worries that his presence on the expedition, and the threat of what his future article might expose, is adding unhealthy pressure on his guides and teammates to try and prove themselves by pushing too hard to get everyone to the top.. He begins to respect them more as he sees that each teammate, like himself, has a powerful drive and sense of purpose that has kept them going despite their inexperience and battered physical condition.

Having completed the final run, Hall sets May 10 as their summit day, aiming to take advantage of a forecasted small window of good weather at the top. The team's summit bid begins from Base Camp on May 6, with Hall emphasizing the importance of putting judgement ahead of ambition, and setting a strict turnaround time of 1:00 pm on summit day (May 10) regardless of their progress.

Early in the ascent Fischer looks uncharacteristically tired as he encounters the dangerously low oxygen levels above 26,000 feet. This altitude marks the beginning of the "death zone," where the negative effects of thin air on the human body increase dramatically. At Camp 4, a fierce windstorm threatens to derail the summit bid; however, the wind subsides just in time, creating perfect summiting conditions. Krakauer's entire team of 8 clients departs camp for the summit, shortly followed by Fischer's team and Gau's team. In total, 33 climbers attempt the summit on May 10, leading to frustrating bottlenecks and slowing down the pace. Lopsang exhausts himself assisting Fischer's client Sandy Pittman and is unable to take his important position at the front of the line, while Hutchinson, Taske, and Kasischke reluctantly abandon the bid. Krakauer reaches the summit at 29,028 feet shortly after 1:00pm, ahead of most of the other climbers.

Krakauer reaches the summit of Everest, but he stops only briefly and feels no sense of awe or triumph, consumed instead by dread at the thought of descending back down the mountain. On the way down, it begins to snow and visibility quickly worsens. Krakauer's progress is extremely slow and painful, made worse by oxygen deprivation

limiting his mental capacity. He runs into Weathers, standing still in the blizzard and nearly blind due to a severe eye condition. However, he leaves Weathers alone, confident that Hall's junior guide Mike Groom is shortly behind and can better assist him. Krakauer eventually reaches Camp 4 after 6:00pm with the blizzard still raging. He falls asleep in his tent thinking that the others made it back as well.

The narrative returns to the summit to recount what actually happened to the rest of the group. At 2:10 pm, already after the designated turnaround time, all climbers except Fischer and Hansen have reached the summit. It is clear to the reader that Fischer is sick. That's why he is uncharacteristically weak. Neil Beidleman, Fischer's junior guide, decides he can't wait for Fischer any longer and starts descending with five Mountain Madness clients. They eventually catch up to Groom, who is struggling to support both Namba and Weathers.

Their combined group reaches the general area of Camp 4 around 6:45pm, but the blizzard is so intense by then that they can't locate the tents. Desperate and disoriented, they wander aimlessly before Beidleman decides they have no option but to huddle together and wait out the storm. Eventually the storm calms down enough for Beidleman and Groom to find the camp and send Boukreev to rescue the clients who were too weak to move. Weathers and Namba appear to be already dead when Bourkeev finds them, but by 4:30am he leads the rest to safety.

The next morning, Krakauer is shocked to learn of the others' fates. The group at Camp 4 learns that Fischer is still missing and Hall is alive, stranded on the summit with Doug Hanson. The day before, Fischer didn't reach the summit until 3:40pm; at that time, he found Lopsang waiting for him and Hall waiting for Hansen. This group, along with Gau, quickly turns to descend, but Hansen runs out of oxygen and is unable to move shortly afterwards. Hall radios Harris requesting emergency oxygen, and despite it being already 5:00pm, Harris turns and hikes back up the mountain to assist. Fischer and Gau, both extremely weak and without oxygen, stop descending around 8:00pm and tell their Sherpas to go ahead and summon a rescue party. No one hears from Hall until 5:00am the next day, when he radios Base Camp informing them that Harris and Hansen are dead. Every expedition in the area is now aware of the situation and takes turns trying to convince a weak and confused Hall to descend as fast as possible, to no avail. Base Camp patches Hall's pregnant wife through from New Zealand, who is the last person to speak with him.

A Sherpa mission to rescue Scott Fischer and Makalu Gau ends up only saving Gau after determining that Fischer is beyond saving. A second mission to locate the bodies of Namba and Weathers finds them both still alive, though barely. They are also left behind after determining that they are beyond saving, and Beidleman gathers the remaining Mountain Madness clients to begin descending. Another expedition arrives at Camp 4 ready to assist as Weathers miraculously stumbles into camp half-blind and severely frostbitten, having regained consciousness after being left for dead. The next morning, May 12, Krakauer and his remaining teammates begin the long and dangerous

descent. They reach Camp 2 in the afternoon, where a Nepali army helicopter is able to evacuate Weathers and Gau, both in critical condition.

The rest of the group arrives at Base Camp the morning of May 13. News of the tragedy has already spread around the world, and back in Kathmandu the survivors face swarms of reporters demanding to hear their story. When he finally returns to Seattle, Krakauer argues that a collection of small mistakes led to a big tragedy. In conclusion, he doubts that we can ever hope to prevent people from taking risks for glory and vanity.

On a separate sheet of paper, answer these review questions.

The questions are in order – one question for each successive paragraph.

What kind of literature is Krakauer's INTO THIN AIR?

How did the 1980s change Everest climbing?

With what company does Krakauer climb?

Why did Hall and Fischer compete for Krakauer's presence?

How does Hall acclimatize climbers?

Name two underskilled climbing teams.

Name the two sirdars.

How might Krakauer's presence push Hall and Fischer to dangerous actions?

What does Hall set as turnaround time?

What three teams take off from Camp 4 toward the summit on May 10?

How does Krakauer feel at the summit?

The narrative returns to the summit. Where is Fischer?

Who gets stuck wandering the South COL in a storm?

What does Krakauer learn the following day about Hall and Hanson?

How is Beck Weathers rescued?

How did small mistakes pile up to create a big disaster in the 1996 Everest Expedition?