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# Where The Mountain Casts Its Shadow: The Dark Side Of Extreme Adventure



## Synopsis

Without risk, say mountaineers, there would be none of the self-knowledge that comes from pushing life to its extremes. For them, perhaps, it is worth the cost. But when tragedy strikes, what happens to the people left behind? Why would anyone choose to invest in a future with a high-altitude risk-taker? What is life like in the shadow of the mountain? Such questions have long been taboo in the world of mountaineering. Now, the spouses, parents and children of internationally renowned climbers finally break their silence, speaking out about the dark side of adventure. Maria Coffey confronted one of the harshest realities of mountaineering when her partner Joe Tasker disappeared on the Northeast Ridge of Everest in 1982. In *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow*, Coffey offers an intimate portrait of adventure and the conflicting beauty, passion, and devastation of this alluring obsession. Through interviews with the world's top climbers, or their widows and families—Jim Wickwire, Conrad Anker, Lynn Hill, Joe Simpson, Chris Bonington, Ed Viesturs, Anatoli Boukreev, Alex Lowe, and many others—she explores what compels men and women to give their lives to the high mountains. She asks why, despite the countless tragedies, the world continues to laud their exploits. With an insider's understanding, Coffey reveals the consequences of loving people who pursue such risk—the exhilarating highs and inevitable lows, the stress of long separations, the constant threat of bereavement, and the lives shattered in the wake of climbing accidents. *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow* is a powerful, affecting and important book that exposes the far reaching personal costs of extreme adventure.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Coffey is to be applauded for asking the hard questions about the climbing game. In my experience, mountaineers too often pay lip service to the death toll in the hills, regardless of their own struggles with grief and fear. I think it's because grief and fear become so tied up together for a high-altitude climber of any enduring ambition, it becomes very difficult for them to honestly talk about the issues -- because it's all very close to the surface and uncomfortable. Coffey's exploration, filtered through her own grief, is compelling but not complete. What's missing is that internal monologue where grief and fear are seen to be in starkest play. I certainly recommend Coffey's book, but I would urge you to look at the new book by Peter Hillary, 'In The Ghost Country', to complete the picture of the dark side. There you'll enter Hillary's mind and find the grief and fear of the game working there for all to see, a lifetime of horror playing out in his head on a walk to the South Pole. I love both books.

This engrossing and enjoyable read is one of the most thought provoking books to ever deal with mountaineering. Most books that have related the exploits and perils of mountain climbers have been first person accounts that balance observation with self-analysis, or journalistic efforts that seek to glorify or demonize the intensely individualistic adventurers that comprise the community of climbers. The views and impressions of those closest to the climbers, their spouses, lovers and children, have largely been ignored or suppressed... until now. Within a two page introduction, Maria Coffey firmly establishes her credentials to create this work. Hers' is a perspective that is simultaneously critical, yet admiring of the people that pursue adventure through mountain climbing. One of those climbers was Joe Tasker, her partner of two and a half years, who disappeared from the Northeast Ridge of Mount Everest more than twenty years ago. In the time since, Ms. Coffey has dealt with the abrupt end to his life and their relationship through an examination of the motivations that drive men and women to risk their lives in an exercise where success is achieved not by just reaching the top of a mountain, but safely returning to the bottom. Mountaineering is a unique endeavor, one without the usual trophies or audible applause of most other sports. It's a sport in which records are established not by a higher score or faster time but by the realization of firsts - the first to summit, the first woman, first blind climber to summit, first one to pioneer a new route and so forth. It's an activity that draws highly motivated people capable of surviving alone in the most harsh and solitary places on Earth. Despite this solitary, sometimes selfish pursuit, others are left behind to deal with the consequences of a climber's mistakes or bad luck. Ms. Coffey relates the stories of the wives, lovers and children with the type of empathy that can only be experienced by one who has shared experience. A combination of admiration and exasperation with their risk-taking loved ones is a common thread throughout this book. There is the expected pain of

separation as their loved one is away for three or more months on yet another expedition, but they also must deal with the frustration of trying to maintain a "normal" home while faced with the specter of a spouse or parent in near-constant peril. Some strive to build a life of their own, separate and distinct from that of their climber. Others network with the partners of other climbers, sharing news, monitoring the progress of each expedition from base camp or home. As Ms. Coffey illustrates, the price of failure for these adventurers is thrust on their surviving loved ones as well. Many are left with the doubt and denial left by a report that someone has "disappeared", never knowing precisely how or why the climber died. They might cling to a dwindling thread of hope that somehow he has survived, only to learn five, ten or more years later that a mummified body has been found near a summit. Often, the fate of their climber is all too clearly known as when teammates witness their entombment under an avalanche of snow, rock and ice. This burden of witness often torments the surviving climbers, as they are left to question the deaths of close friends when they themselves were spared. Every account, every personal story is different, from the individual epics related by the survivors of incidents on Everest, Annapurna, The Eiger, K2 and other legendary mountains, to children's memories of a parent removed from their life long before they were capable of understanding. Each resounds in a differing way. A climbing team survives by the chance discovery of a bag of supplies left behind more than a year ago in tribute to teammates lost on a vertical wall. A daughter builds a collection of teddy bears by giving her father a different one to carry on each climb, with one providing a psychological rescue for him during a near-death crisis. A son bonds with his dad through climbing; then is arbitrarily removed by his father from the summit team just days before the final push. The reason for his demotion goes unresolved for nearly twenty years. There are also the countless bargains struck at moments of peril; where a climber vows to himself or others to abandon climbing should they survive, only to be drawn back to the mountains again and again. Throughout the book, Maria Coffey weaves her own memories and emotions into the narrative, laying bare the good and the bad of her relationship with Joe Tasker. While the question so often asked of the mountaineers is "why do you do it?" The one posed to their families might be more along the lines of "how can you stand them?" Ms. Coffey provides some potential answers, each of them as profound and personal as the next.

My friend Arlene Blum (*Annapurna: A Woman's Place*) climbed in the Himalayas and elsewhere and lived to tell the tale. She now leads treks into the world's remote and wild regions, but she once rendered me speechless with her offhand reply to my horror at one hair-raising tale she told of crossing an ice bridge about a million miles up a some scary mountain. "Why on earth would you do

that?" I had asked, when I recovered my voice. And another unspoken question hung right behind the first: Having done it once and survived, why on God's green earth would you do it again? And again, and again. "Oh, it's not really dangerous," and she poured me another cup of tea. Not dangerous. Yeah, right. Arlene had already lost a lover and several friends to accidents in high places, and others have died cold and lonely deaths since then. Not dangerous? I mean, what?? But there will still be those who MUST climb mountains. Some of them will die, and their survivors often are quoted as saying, "He died doing what he loved best," or the feminine equivalent. Maria Coffey's book, *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow*," chronicles the naked underbelly of the experience of this particular kind of loss. It looks behind the public quotes into the hearts and bleeding souls of the survivors, and I believe it's a story whose exposure is long overdue. The personal costs of extreme adventure are too often dismissed for the thrill of reading about the adventures themselves. Coffey handles with grace and delicacy the stories of wives, husbands, lovers, friends, and children left behind my someone who just had to climb yet one more mountain - for reasons the rest of us armchair travelers can't even begin to imagine.

This is a deeply personal and sensitive portrayal of lives left shattered after a death from a climbing accident. My husband died as the result of a skydiving accident and the two sports seem to have more in common than I ever would have known. The climber's drive, determination, and absolute need to engage in a dangerous sport is so much like that of a skydiver's that I found her book a deeply personal & accurate account of what I have lived through. She helped me understand and come to terms with my late husband's insatiable need for an intense existence. And as she so eloquently writes, "that intensity, I now realize, was ...his legacy to me." Why, with spouses and children, are people driven to extremes? Maria addresses these questions with sensitivity that struck directly at my heart. My copy of the book is so underlined and marked that I can't share it with anyone, I'll just have to buy them a fresh copy.

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