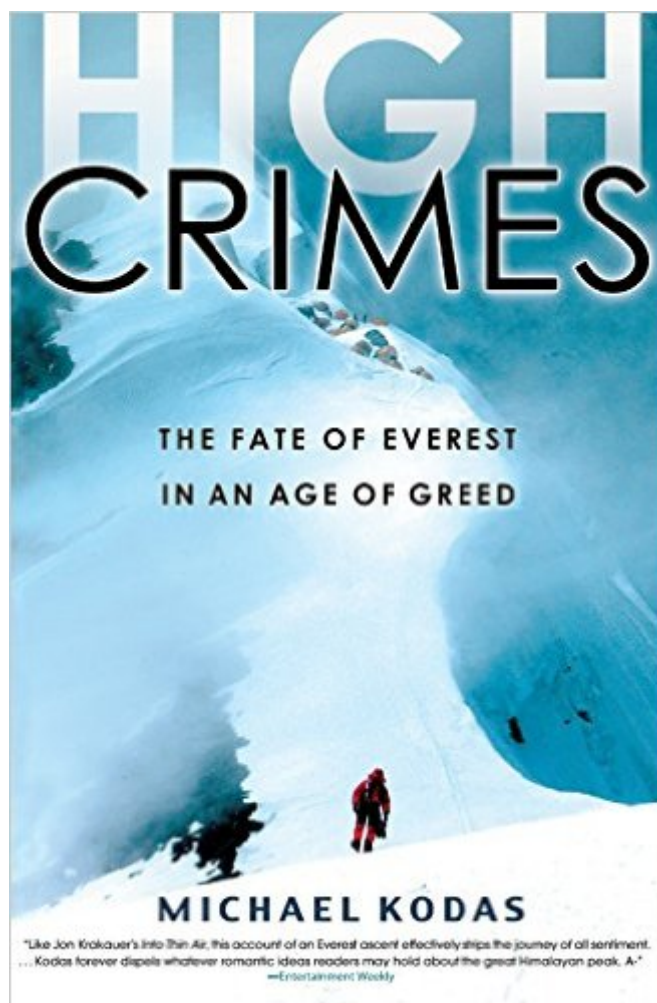


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High Crimes: The Fate Of Everest In An Age Of Greed



Synopsis

High Crimes is journalist Michael Kotas's gripping account of life on top of the world--where man is every bit as deadly as Mother Nature. In the years following the publication of *Into Thin Air*, much has changed on Mount Everest. Among all the books documenting the glorious adventures in mountains around the world, none details how the recent infusion of wealthy climbers is drawing crime to the highest place on the planet. The change is caused both by a tremendous boom in traffic, and a new class of parasitic and predatory adventurer. It's likely that Jon Krakauer would not recognize the camps that he visited on Mount Everest almost a decade ago. This book takes readers on a harrowing tour of the criminal underworld on the slopes of the world's most majestic mountain. High Crimes describes two major expeditions: the tragic story of Nils Antezana, a climber who died on Everest after he was abandoned by his guide; as well as the author's own story of his participation in the Connecticut Everest Expedition, guided by George Dijmarescu and his wife and climbing partner, Lhakpa Sherpa. Dijmarescu, who at first seemed well-intentioned and charming, turned increasingly hostile to his own wife, as well as to the author and the other women on the team. By the end of the expedition, the three women could not travel unaccompanied in base camp due to the threat of violence. Those that tried to stand against the violence and theft found that the worst of the intimidation had followed them home to Connecticut. Beatings, thefts, drugs, prostitution, coercion, threats, and abandonment on the highest slopes of Everest and other mountains have become the rule rather than the exception. Kotas describes many such experiences, and explores the larger issues these stories raise with thriller-like intensity.

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Customer Reviews

It might be tempting to dismiss Michael Kudas as a guy with an Ice Ax to grind, but don't. High Crimes thoughtfully examines two main events; the tragedy that befalls Nils Antezana, as well as the nastiness that plays out during Kudas' own expedition to Everest. In the story of Dr. Antezana, I suspect that Kudas is trying not only to set the record straight, but also seek some sort of justice (my opinion, of course) for another needless death on the mountain. One cannot remain unmoved given the events that unfold. Be prepared to take some notes, since the timeline got confusing (as noted in a previous review). As a climber, I tend to shy away from these kinds of books. Often, they are too self-serving to really be informative, but Kudas is trying to capture and come to grips with what went wrong and why. In this way, High Crimes is comparable to Krakauer's, Into Thin Air. Both Kudas and Krakauer elevate the 'climbing book' genre to something deeply more affecting, and I just couldn't put it down.

After reading this book, it's clear the armchair adventurers who have always dreamed of Everest should perhaps concentrate on more pedestrian, less-life-threatening pursuits - say, helicopter skiing, or extreme whitewater rafting; even high-altitude hang-gliding. Mountain climbing would appear, in this day and age, to be fit only for canny professionals. Tyros need not apply, on pain, literally, of death. I heard the author of this book, Michael Kudas, being interviewed on National Public Radio, a lightning rod for me in deciding on literary works; if NPR thinks it's worthy of note, then I usually will read whatever book is being discussed. It helped that the author seemed well-informed, at pains to be fair to all concerned, even restrained in his answers; it intrigued me all the more. I can't recall the last time I bought a book, hardbound, right at publication. This was a worthy read. I will never understand what it is that drives people to WANT to crawl up the face of a mountain, literally hanging in space, aware that they are courting frostbite, storms, failure, and death, from the capricious mountain they yearn to conquer. As it turns out, the mountain - Everest - is almost the least of their worries. Michael Kudas, a journalist for the Hartford Courant, and several other Connecticut people collaborate with a successful climber of Everest to make an attempt at the summit of the one mountain every mountaineer hungers to put on their resume. None of them, apparently, are rank amateurs; the nominal leaders of the party have achieved the summit several times already. But what they are all totally unaware of is the level of humanity to which the base camps has stooped in the past twenty years. The book chronicles two parallel climbs, on opposite sides of the mountain; Mr Kudas's party, and another party fully funded by a wealthy transplanted Bolivian doctor from the Washington, DC area. There is pure tragedy in the doctor's party; he has

hired a guide whose credentials he trusts, who turns out to be the lowest sort of glory hound. Mr Kodal's party, not even starting out with all members on a level footing, descends into a bickering, acrimonious mess, with sabotage, missing equipment, and cruelty thrown into the mix. Apparently it has devolved into an every-man-for-himself mindset on Everest over the years. The climbers - who, just because they can afford to climb, doesn't mean they should - are the chief source of revenue for the Sherpas who are native to the area, and those poor people can perhaps be somewhat forgiven in taking what advantage they are offered by the advent of a lot of ill-prepared, difficult-to-deal-with Westerners, whose whole goal is summit. The stories of them routinely bypassing dying climbers who might, with intervention, be saved, chilled me to the bone. Theft of gear and sabotage of equipment are rampant. The most chilling story in the book was of a climber, having achieved the summit, rappelling down to one of the camps and looking behind him just in time to see that the rappel rope ends just below where he is, over a fearsome void; the rest, along with the anchors, has been stolen. His perilous primitive climb down the rest of the route gave me goose pimples. Most of the book seesaws between the tale of the doctor, left to die by an unscrupulous guide, and the doctor's daughter's subsequent and dogged efforts to discredit the guide out of ever doing the same thing to someone else; and Mr Kodal's trials with the fractious and foreboding leader of his expedition. I really think I would have left far sooner than Mr Kodal; the leader sounds unhinged at best, and at worst downright criminal, threatening the lives of those in disagreement with him, not to mention throwing in some domestic abuse, as he assaults his wife in front of everybody. The Base Camps on Everest would appear to be very unpleasant places, no better than the Wild West of the 1880s; and Mr Kodal does a good job of demystifying Kathmandu as well, a place I had long held in my mind as full of peace, harmony, and followers of the Dalai Lama, and which instead appears to be little better than a grimy little border town on the frontier. I do not read books very fast, but I zipped through this one; someone else commented that they had a hard time remembering who was who, but if you keep in mind what storyline you are following - aside from the very interesting side stories, of which there are many - it isn't hard; and this is a heckuva good read.

Base Camp on the North (Tibetan) side of Mt. Everest is situated on the vast flat moraine at the end of the Rongbuk Glacier. In our 1986 expedition, the British SAS camp lay a quarter-mile away. A half-mile across the valley was a California team. And that was it. There was a certain purity to the endeavor. As twilight fell, all the ghosts of Everest seemed to swirl around in the desolate emptiness of this barren plain. What a difference today. Author Michael Kodal describes a lawless wild-West atmosphere more akin to a gold rush mining town rife with aggressive thieves and prostitutes,

delusional amateur "climbers" anxious to buy fame and glory at any price, and--the main subject of this excellent book--the subculture of criminally incompetent hustlers ready to sell it to them. The author tries not completely successfully to weave several related tales into a single whole: his own attempts to climb the mountain; the abandonment by his guide and death of a 69-year climber. And the numerous hustlers selling dreams they cannot deliver. The book centers on George Dijmarescu and Gustavo Lisi and the low-budget expedition services they (separately) ran by advertising themselves as Everest summiters, and the holders of various official French and Italian guide qualifications. None of these claims were true (although Dijarescue did eventually summit the mountain). Their low prices depended on using safety ropes put up by others, cheap, defective oxygen systems, and even sleeping in tents placed high on the mountain by other expeditions for their own use. Their concern for their clients in desperate trouble always seemed to be that of leaving them to their fate, or expecting the Sherpa porters from other expeditions to rescue them. After abandoning his stricken 69-year old client near the summit, Lisi descended to his own tent to call his mother on a (borrowed) Satellite phone, assuring her he himself was all right. He made no attempt to rescue his client. Hours passed before he even began making inquiries as to his client's fate. Dijmarescu's explosive temper led to numerous beatings and threats of extreme violence against staff and clients. "The fate of Everest in an age of greed" is the subheading of this well-researched work. It is depressing beyond words to learn how strongly many wealthy middle-aged men feel the need--the desperate need--to purchase their own Everest summit. The contrast of these dilatants to the real men who over 60 years (1920's-1980's) climbed the mountain "because it is there" could not be greater. And now the field has become even more clogged with the addition of the politically-correct riff-raff: the first one-legged climber, the first blind climber, the youngest climber (15), the oldest climber (71), along with the long list of "first" climbers from each nation. What ever happened to mountaineering for the glorious fun of it?

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