

Note

- 1 PearlAnn Reichwein, *Climber's Paradise: Making Canada's Mountain Parks, 1906 to 1974* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2014).

***Peak Pursuits: The Emergence of Mountaineering in the Nineteenth Century.* By Caroline Schaumann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 365pp.**

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Caroline Schaumann's monograph on the pursuit of peaks in the nineteenth century changes preconceived notions about mountains and mountaineering. Although *Peak Pursuits* highlights tropes familiar to mountain studies and does so via a range of prominent alpinists representative of the era, the book is a deliberate move away from a reading of mountaineering in the widely studied contexts of empire, Romanticism, and scientism. Instead, Schaumann, an avid climber herself, proposes looking at nineteenth-century alpinism through "the embodied experience of the mountaineer" (4). This corporeal awareness allows her to emphasize the ambivalences, incongruities, and paradoxes of the sport. Mountain studies has long established that mountaineering emerged at the nexus of conflicting discourses, but not since David Robbins exposed the sport's inherent contradictions has anyone shown quite such a profound interest in them.¹ *Peak Pursuits* approaches the semantic and affective powers of physical experience with the dedication previously reserved for analyzing scientific, aesthetic, and imperial alpine motivations. Schaumann attempts for the recognition of physical experiences in mountain studies what scholars such as Marjorie Hope Nicolson, Philipp Felsch, and Peter Hansen have done for understanding the aesthetic, scientific, and imperial forces exercised against mountains. She is less interested in solving the discursive mysteries behind the "many inconsistencies and controversies" (154–55) in mountaineering than in describing the materiality of climbs and showing how these physical sensations complicate dominant frameworks.

The book is structured into three parts and moves effortlessly between leading figures and prime sites of European and American mountaineering in the long nineteenth century. Part One follows Alexander von Humboldt's American journeys, traces his departure from "paradigms such as the European sublime and scientific enlightenment," and portrays a language of mountaineering that "oscillates between superlatives and negation, amazement and protest, exaggeration and humility, detailed measurement and silence" (16). Having set the stage for the book's "Humboldtian history" (4), which mediates between discursive contradictions, bodily sen-

sations, and narrative representations, Part Two offers a thorough examination of how Humboldtian ideals, molded by South American mountains, “shaped perceptions and representations of European forays to Alpine summits” (16) and consolidated mountaineering in Europe between 1787 and 1867. Sketching the sport’s developments from Horace Bénédict de Saussure’s quest for Mont Blanc to Leslie Stephen’s making of modern mountaineering and all the heroic moments and mishaps in-between, this part elucidates the embodied dimension of climbing for scientific curiosity, commercial success, sublime reflections, and the celebration of the self. In Part Three, Schaumann assesses the North American bend to European mountaineering in a final transatlantic maneuver that demonstrates how “traditions of European Romanticism informed notions of nature and wilderness” and were subsequently conflated with the myth of the American West (234).

Each of the three parts and each of the ten chapters of this impressively detailed book showcases the life and works of one (or two) historical mountaineer(s), with an eye to how their varied experiences on the most attractive mountains of their time culminate in conflicting reflections. Navigating elegantly between the Americas and Europe, *Peak Pursuits* does more than trace the routes of nineteenth-century alpinists Alexander von Humboldt, Horace Bénédict de Saussure, James David Forbes, Louis Agassiz, Albert Smith, Alfred Wills, John Tyndall, Edward Whymper, Leslie Stephen, Clarence King, and John Muir; it is a comprehensive mountaineering history that contributes to an important transfer of knowledge between schools of mountain studies on either side of the Atlantic. Schaumann’s broad perspective on material discussions of mountaineering confirms an understanding of the sport’s emergence in international as well as interdisciplinary settings. For example, her unpacking of Agassiz’s repeated references to Romantic poetry as an attempt to increase the popularity of his research results, or the way in which she honors Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s impact on nineteenth-century glaciology. In these moments, *Peak Pursuits*, an otherwise unconventional work for a literature scholar, strongly supports the paradigm that mountaineering is roped to the written word.² By reading physical experience through narrative expression, Schaumann exposes the global character of nineteenth-century mountaineering. She spans an incredibly dense literary network that reveals the high degree of internationalization in nineteenth-century mountaineering and demonstrates just how strong the ties really are between mountain writing, science, and athleticism.

Yet, the most stimulating contribution to current scholarship in mountain studies lies in this book’s exposure of the dimly illuminated spots in the great show that is nineteenth-century mountaineering. *Peak Pursuits* takes interest in the fallen alpinists, the tragedies, the futile climbs, and their social struggles, weakened bodies, and failed marriages. The author also reads the ambivalent success stories of these his-

toric alpinists within a larger social network that is sustained by women and mountain Others who might not always be documented in the writings of celebrated alpinists but are written back into mountaineering history in *Peak Pursuits*. Schaumann dares to venture, also, into the uncharted terrain of same-sex friendships in the history of alpinism when she analyzes how the quality and intimacy of relationships between men intensified at great heights. By drawing attention to ambiguous moments on and off the mountain, Schaumann engenders a more comprehensive reading of what it meant and, perhaps more interestingly, what it felt like to climb mountains in the nineteenth century.

In large part, the value of reading for an embodied experience lies in teasing out the ambiguities and the genuine commitment to foregrounding material perception over theoretical frameworks. Except for a few minor signposts to Stacy Alaimo, Onno Oerleman, Alan McNee, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Richard White in the introduction and ecocritical echoes at the end of each chapter, *Peak Pursuits* develops its case from close rather than critical reading. This commitment helps us look beyond established theorems but also leaves unanswered the question of how these conflicting notions are discursively constructed and what these inconsistencies might reveal about human engagement with the alpine Other. Whymper's parallel praise and critique of mountain guides, for instance, might imply a socio-cultural landscape that shapes these assertions in addition to the physical experiences of the mountaineers and the physicality of the mountain. Moreover, despite Schaumann's conscious decision not to employ postcolonial theory (293), the discipline's long tradition of unpacking ambivalence and representation might have supported—rather than obscured—the book's interest in the ambiguities of alpinism. A discursive inquiry into the emerging sport's contradictions might provide a sustainable investment for (mountain) scholarship and advance knowledge on the relationship between body, place, and literature for the study of other times and texts.

What this book's rigorous focus on the paradoxes of mountaineering achieves, in any case, is providing an impetus to translate nineteenth-century incongruities to contemporary alpinist endeavors. As disparate discourses continue to dominate the sport, Schaumann's detailed portrait of mountaineering in the long nineteenth century also offers valuable insights for the current moment. With its transcorporeal, transatlantic, and transdisciplinary perspectives on the emergence of mountaineering, *Peak Pursuits* entertains the possibility that the experiences of human bodies on mountains—of “seeing, smelling, and sensing different natures” (297)—remain crucial today. While the mountaineers in Schaumann's book are hardly models of embodied sustainable action, they find imaginative ways to rationalize quests caught in the tension between scientific curiosity, exploration, and awe. In this sense, Schaumann's scholarly ascent of nineteenth-century mountaineering history has us

wonder about contemporary conflicts in alpinist action and invites reflection on how we might be able to justify our own conflicting pursuits in the Anthropocene.

Notes

- 1 David Robbins, "Sport, Hegemony and the Middle Class: The Victorian Mountaineers," *Theory, Culture & Society* 4, no. 4 (1987), DOI: [10.1177/026327687004004001](https://doi.org/10.1177/026327687004004001).
- 2 See, for example, Bruce Barcott, "Cliffhangers: The Fatal Descent of the Mountain-Climbing Memoir," *Harper's Magazine* (August 1996); Stephen Slemon, "The Brotherhood of the Rope: Commodification and Contradiction in the 'Mountaineering Community,'" in *Renegotiating Community: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Global Contexts*, ed. Diana Bryon and William D. Coleman (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008); Zac Robinson, "Early Alpine Club Culture and Mountaineering Literature," in *Mountaineering Tourism*, ed. Ghazali Musa, James Higham, and Anna Thompson-Carr (London: Routledge, 2015), DOI: [10.4324/9781315769202-18](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315769202-18).

***False Summit: Gender in Mountaineering Nonfiction.* By Julie Rak (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 268pp.**

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Julie Rak's *False Summit* is the most important work on gender and mountaineering in many years. The gender politics of climbing Annapurna, K2, and Mount Everest were recorded in nonfiction writing over the last century. For even longer, images of mountaintop figures standing above a sea of clouds (à la Caspar David Friedrich) have invited viewers to imagine themselves in the summit position of the sovereign individual. Rak notes that to substitute someone else into this position requires an equivalence, a form of physical embodiment, that often excludes those who are not white, male, and Euro-American. These challenges make it difficult for others to occupy this position which creates the "false summit" of the book's title.

Rak critiques these familiar images of modern man at the edge of a cliff by placing different bodies in the foreground. First are Bolivia's cholita climbers—women who have climbed Aconcagua and Andean peaks in skirts and hope to climb Everest—a story that bookends the text and provides its opening illustration. Rak later includes a photograph of Junko Tabei, Pan Duo, and Wanda Rutkiewicz, the first women to climb Mount Everest, to spotlight an intersectional feminism that contests the effects of nationalism, sexism, and racism that would view female climbers as inauthentic, ascents by a person in the wrong body.

The author demonstrates the importance of "mastery, of the body, the environment, and of others" (33) as a central theme in mountaineering, no matter the gender of the climber. This reading of climbing nonfiction amplifies influential accounts