



Interviews with North American Mountaineers

# GRASPING *for* HEAVEN

FREDERIC V. HARTEMANN

*and* ROBERT HAUPTMAN

*Foreword by Jan Reynolds*

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We dedicate *Grasping for Heaven* to  
Norman Vaughan,  
who died before we could interview him,  
Bradford Washburn,  
who became too frail to undertake a discussion,  
Christine Boskoff,  
who was killed in an avalanche  
just a few months after our meeting, and  
Charles Houston,  
whose recent death greatly diminishes  
the number of early 20th century pioneers  
among the living.

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# Foreword

*by Jan Reynolds*

When George Leigh Mallory, famed British Himalayan explorer of the early 1900s, was asked after a lecture, for perhaps over the hundredth time, why he wanted to climb Everest and he responded, "Because it's THERE," he wasn't being rude. He wasn't being trite. He wasn't even necessarily frustrated. It was a genuine answer. For Mallory "THERE" had a mystical, magical sense to it. In letters to friends involved in arts and letters, Mallory would comment, you must see this painting, because it is THERE, you must read this piece, because it is THERE.... For Mallory, climbing Everest was a personal, creative form of art; it took him to a place where he felt this wonderful sense of being THERE.

From most accounts it appears that Mallory was misunderstood when he gave his famous answer to this complex question asked of all mountaineers: Why? It has been said that those who need to ask why will never know, and those who know will never need to ask. And yet there are as many reasons to climb mountains as there are mountaineers. It is all so very personal and individual. This is part of the allure of mountaineering. Perhaps it's the peace and simplicity, and the obvious goal of reaching a peak, that draws us to mountaineering. The simple rhythm of *eat, sleep, climb* boils one's world down to its most basic elements. One's connection to nature and other humans is paramount, and life becomes intense. Life is at its fullest, being brought to the brink, making life and death decisions, on a daily basis. This intense focus makes a life feel significant.

Mountaineering is considered an adventure, which an expedition mate defined as "somewhere you are when you wish you weren't, and where you aren't when you wish you were!" An adventure is intangible, indescribable, and that is just what mountaineering is. But perhaps mountaineering satisfies us on an unconscious level, feeding that fire of the mythic quest humans have always longed to go on, much like Jason and the Argonauts, or the challenges found in ancient fairy tales.

But like ballplayers on a field where each person has a different experience of the game, each mountaineer has his or her own personal experience while climbing with others on an expedition. I can only see mountaineering through my own eyes. As a Vermont farm girl, I was first exposed to higher mountains

while racing cross country skiing on a national level, and was taken up to a high mountain pass in the Rockies of Colorado as a break in the stress of competition. From that moment on I was hooked! Although I was one of the best skiers in the country, I moved on to spend my time on the rescue squad in Yosemite and Tuolumne Meadows, so I could climb while training, and pursued mountaineering routes in the nearby Palisades.

I also camped at Joshua Tree for bouldering, and lived in friends' garages in Boulder, Colorado, to access rock climbing. Here life's currency wasn't money; none of us had any! It was all about the experiences we had that held value for us in our lives. What route we climbed or designed, how we did it, when and with whom. This was what life was all about, and if we could afford food and drink, life couldn't be better. After savoring the freedom of this life, along with some of the mountaineers interviewed in this book, a door opened to big-game mountaineering, high-profile, sponsored expeditions.

I was sponsored by *National Geographic* magazine, and climbed and skied off the summit of Muztagata in the Chinese Pamirs with Ned Gillette and Galen Rowell, setting the women's high altitude skiing record. I had no idea this record was up for grabs and didn't know I had done so until *National Geographic* researched it as part of the article we wrote for the magazine. Setting records was not my motivation to climb. Ned and Galen had previously set a record, climbing and skiing Denali in one day, so I knew I had strong teammates, and that climbing great gulps of 5,000 feet a day above 20,000 feet, then skiing back down, was normal for those two. My motivation was to experience the joy of the heights ... and not lose sight of those two. Let it suffice to say I was pleased not to be the weakest link. When I threw up on Galen's skis, he gave me the last of his water, and when Galen fell down, I gave him the last of my food. To me, this exchange epitomizes the commitment to each other, and the teamwork demanded to reach the summit. Mountaineering at its best.

When Ned Gillette and I completed the Everest Grand Circle expedition, with a winter ascent of Pumori thrown in, and five passes above 20,000 feet crossed all on one expedition, I was launched into the world of news and press conferences, interviews with the likes of Tom Brokaw on the *Today Show* and Joan Lunden of *Good Morning America*. The line blurred between being a professional mountaineer and a professional writer and photographer, much like some of the interviewees of this book. Just what was I? I experienced the loss of close friends in the mountains. I reflected on the cost of high-profile, high-altitude mountaineering, and all the responsibility that came with it, and the statistic of one in eight not coming home.

My response to this was to make the U.S. Biathlon Team. Here I learned to take the previously adrenaline-induced focus of climbing, and access this focus at will, while calm, and on the run, or ski I should say, and hit a thumb-nail-sized target with five bullets at 50 meters. Time seemed to stop, my heart

was pounding, and I was shooting. I loved it. But the mountains never left me alone. I returned to the Himalaya to do perhaps the most dangerous expedition of my life. I took a hot-air balloon over Everest with some British and Australian pilots and mountaineers, and crashed. The expedition did, however, set a record, and became an award-winning film.

But I also continued to design and organize more personal experiences in the mountains, soloing over the Himalaya near Cho Oyu, to document what was left of the ancient salt trade, climbing and skiing 26,000 vertical feet of Mount Ararat in one day, by mistake! Doing the first ski descent of Otgon Tenger in Mongolia, skiing Mera peak in the Himalaya on cross country skating skis. Many of those interviewed here in this book have done similar creative explorations, and have an array of experiences under their belts, while some are more focused, and have stuck solely to particular disciplines. Most of those interviewed in this book are acquaintances, friends, or intimate buddies of mine. Many have families as I do, and juggle the balance of life.

My balance was to spend time with the indigenous people living in these mountain environments around the world. They had a reverence for the peaks that I felt should be shared. I wrote and photographed a book series entitled *Vanishing Cultures*. These people taught me that a young child could be wrapped in a carpet, tied on the back of a yak, and crossed over a crevasse-ridden 20,000-foot pass in the Himalaya: no problem. A baby could be tied on his mother's back and cross the Sahara on camelback; a baby could be born in an igloo. They inspired me to cross a portion of the Sahara while in early pregnancy, climb and snowboard Toubkal in the Atlas Mountains while six months pregnant, and shoot video in the Himalaya until my eighth month, while my climbing friends demanded I go home! Despite my protest that babies are born in Namche Bazaar in the Khumbu all the time, and despite my Sherpani friend delivering her baby days before I left, I agreed to go home to my midwife and my home birth in Vermont.

I have come full circle, back to Vermont farm country and our charming Green Mountains. My boys hike and ski our mountains regularly as a way of life. Soon we'll be skiing hut to hut in the Alps and exploring trekking peaks of the Himalaya as a family. Some of the interviewees in this book have done the same. It is enough for me to share the joy of the simple heights with my loved ones, there are no expectations to go further. Like George Leigh Mallory, I can only hope that my family will find joy, high on a mountain "because it's THERE."

Jan Reynolds is an author and mountaineer. She has been a member of expeditions to China, Tibet, Nepal, New Zealand, Australia, Lapland, Amazon Basin, Canadian Arctic, Mongolia, and the Sahara. She also set the women's high altitude skiing record on an expedition sponsored by *National Geographic*.





# Preface

Some years ago, the authors of this collection of interviews, Frederic Hartemann and Robert Hauptman, who for more than 15 years had climbed together in various parts of the world, published *The Mountain Encyclopedia*, an enormous compilation of terms, people, and ideas related to the world's mountains; it contains more than 2,300 entries and some 500 images, 400 in color. We were so inspired by this work that we decided to seek out some of the premier mountaineers whom we had included in order to interview them. We proceeded to contact people and get permission to visit them; Hauptman read some apposite material and constructed a set of questions tailored precisely to each individual. We then flew to their cities and met with them either at their homes or in motel rooms. Hauptman posed the questions and Hartemann recorded each interview in high definition video and on a digital audio device, and then took some still photographs. Hauptman transcribed the CDs that Hartemann made from his recordings. We then supplemented these with a number of additional in-person interviews and others done either through electronic mail or telephonically. An introduction and glossary were added. When we were done and the manuscript was ready, we contacted all of the interviewees and requested appropriate photographic images. These all arrived electronically. Hartemann arranged, collated, and transferred them to a disk. The result is a collection of mountaineering interviews unlike any other; earlier book length collections that do exist are now extremely dated.

The interviews are very lightly edited transcriptions of the recordings. When something was impossible to decipher, ellipses indicate that it is missing, at the beginning or in the middle of a sentence thus: ... but if the hiatus comes at the end of a sentence then a fourth period is added: .... Whenever a speaker breaks off and does not complete a thought, and then recommences, a dash is used, e.g., In 1967, I climbed a lot in—and I was very successful. If it is necessary to intercalate a word in order to make matters clear, then square brackets are used: Once, on Denali, I dropped my [ax] and I could not go on alone. The editors silently expunged words or phrases that are repeated frequently but have little meaning, e.g., you know, obviously, certainly, well.

The many trips that one or both of us took to San Francisco, Seattle, Spokane, Golden, Aspen, Lexington, and other locations were especially enjoy-

able because we were able to spend time with each other and we often began or ended with some climbs. It was also an extremely rewarding privilege to speak with these glorious people, many of whom not only climb but give of themselves in their quest to help others, e.g., those Nepalese who have vision problems or the poorer peoples in the Himalaya.

# Introduction

Mountains allure, seduce, and demand, though this was not always the case. Indeed, in the past, they repelled because of real and imaginary dangers, but during the past 300 years, they have worked their magic on an ever-increasingly large group of climbers, people who often seem to have little choice: they see a geophysical extrusion and they are compelled to clamber or climb or claw or crawl their way up in order to stand on the summit.

Taxonomies of climbing can be constructed in various ways, but the simplest is the most effective: One either climbs sheer, vertical rock (from small boulders to 3,000 foot big walls) using one's hands and feet, with few accouterments other than a bag of chalk; or one does the same thing on vertical ice (frozen waterfalls) using crampons and small ice axes; or one climbs big mountains (peaks in ranges and free-standing volcanoes) sometimes alone or with a partner, sometimes as part of an enormous expedition or more recently in a guided group, many of whose members are ill-prepared for the demands that even a smaller peak places on them. Those who venture into the Alaskan wilds, the Andes, the Himalaya, or the Karakorum should spend years honing their skills. Lamentably, many people fail to serve their apprenticeships; even when they do, tragedy can strike because it is impossible to predict who will succumb to poor decisions, tiny mistakes with devastating consequences, acute mountain sickness, bad weather, vicious storms, or avalanches.

A taxonomy of climbers is also a simple matter. One may climb professionally, under sponsorship; one may climb in order to write, photograph, or film; one may climb as a guide; or one may climb purely for pleasure and often pay a hefty monetary price for his or her amateur status (\$60,000 for a guided Everest attempt). It is also possible for a professional to have other occupational affiliations, and many fanatically devoted mountaineers earn a primary or secondary living as builders, physicists, lawyers, doctors, or scientific researchers.

Certain points and ideas, including dangers, the use of oxygen, environmental pollution, and gender discrimination, come up with some frequency. This last has had an impact on some of the interviewed women, whereas others felt they were accepted by their male counterparts. This is partially due to a change in attitude on the part of male climbers. It is interesting to look back at Arlene Blume's experience in the late '60s and early '70s. (She is not one of the interviewees.) Those in charge at the time often refused to take her on expeditions or even to allow her to climb simply because she was a woman and

women are weaker than men. As it turns out, women are sometimes stronger, acclimate better, and reach the summit while their male counterparts retreat to the safety of a tent. Attitudes toward many (though not all) other recurrent themes have also changed for the better during the past hundred years.

Finally, one of the truly positive results of the mountaineering life is that many committed people realize that though climbing is personally and even socially rewarding (it brings work and revenue to a diverse group of people in many parts of the world), there can be something more: In visiting third world countries these people discover for themselves that life can be difficult even in Chile, let alone in Nepal (one of the poorest countries in the world). Taking their lead from Sir Edmund Hillary, who eventually devoted his life to helping the Sherpa, many of the interviewees in this collection have transcended what some outsiders erroneously view as a selfish and unnecessarily dangerous pursuit, and give of themselves in the most altruistic of ways. For example, Dr. Kenneth Kamler provides medical assistance to people he encounters in many different environments. Pete Athans ("Mr. Everest") assists Dr. Geoffrey Tabin in Nepal in his work for the Himalayan Cataract Project. Erik Weißenmayer advocates for the blind and aids the disabled. Rick Ridgeway, as a Patagonia executive (vice-president for marketing and the environment), helps to protect the environment. And Brent Bishop cleaned up much of the trash left behind high in the Himalaya and Karakorum. For all of this and so much more, we give thanks.

# PART I.

## MOUNTAINEERS

The first section of this collection consists of interviews with well-known North American mountaineers, some with important first ascents. We have tried to strike a balance among many different variables and so we have included older, seasoned climbers and younger people who are still actively making history; professionals and amateurs; men and women; those with one truly outstanding achievement and others who have had many conquests. Some of these wonderful people have passed away. We are grateful to all of our interviewees for inviting us into their homes, coming to us in out-of-the-way locations, and spending time talking or corresponding via electronic mail. We would also like to thank Greg Glade, owner of Top of the World books, for his frequent invaluable help.

# Stacy Allison

(October 18, 1958–)

Mountaineer, motivational speaker, builder

*Date of interview:* July 5, 2006. *Location:* Clackamas, OR. *Interviewer:* Robert Hauptman. *Method:* In person: taped and videotaped. *Videographer:* Frederic Hartemann.

Stacy Allison, the first American woman to stand on Everest's summit, has been called "America's premier female climber." She led a K2 expedition and summited Ama Dablam on an all-women's climb.

The climbing community has never had a lot of patience with women.

—Stacy Allison



*RH: Thank you for agreeing to talk with us. It was a most enjoyable experience reading Beyond the Limits; your extraordinary exploits are overpowering and extremely inspirational.*

SA: Well, thank you.

*You have been called "America's premier female climber." Do you do any climbing or mountaineering now?*

I am no longer climbing big, dangerous mountains. I have two children and right now it's not about me, it's about my children, and raising my two sons to be healthy, productive, kind, caring male adults.

*In Jon Krakauer's Into Thin Air, Scott Fischer is depicted in what one might consider an unflattering light. He appears much more human in your memoir, although even you admit that he was a risk-taker. At one point you wonder: "... Was Scott ever going to wield his authority to bring us together?" How would you describe him in retrospect?*

Scott was a very charismatic person. He was like the older brother that I never had: very supportive of me personally. I had a lot of respect for Scott. He was a risk-taker and when I made that statement what I really meant by that is that he was not a leader. He was able to organize people, get them to

come together around his vision of climbing, his vision of an expedition, but once that expedition was underway, he was not the person to lead [it] and our expedition should actually have been led by someone else.

*In 1987, after months of hard work, you failed to reach the summit of Everest. Instead of giving up, you continued to climb and then returned once again to Everest. You really wanted to summit and, at one time, to become the first American woman to achieve this honor. Most people do not have such a strong drive. Is that one of the main differences between those who succeed generally and in the high mountains and those who fail?*

I believe having a strong drive is certainly how you make it to the tops of mountains. If you don't have that strong drive, you'll give up part way because it's tough. The physical, the mental, the emotional demands that are put upon you in order to reach the summits of most mountains is tremendous. If you don't have that drive you probably won't be willing to put out the energy that it takes to get there. And for me, it wasn't about—what I realized after failing on the first expedition—it wasn't about being the first American woman to reach the top. It was more about, was I physically, mentally, emotionally capa-



Looking down Everest North Face, Cho Oyo in the background (photograph by Stacy Allison).



ble of climbing Mount Everest. What would it be like to stand on top of the world's highest mountain? And I'm very driven; if I don't reach a goal the first time and I fail, it's, what can I learn from that failure, and then I go back and I try it again.

*If you were in a different position today, do you think both that you would be interested in climbing big mountains and capable of climbing them?*

If I did not have children, absolutely. I'd still be climbing big mountains. ... Climbing is my passion. I miss being in the mountains; I miss standing on those big mountains. And, yes, if I didn't have children, I'd still be climbing.

*An interesting sociological phenomenon is the way in which male athletes react to and treat their female peers. Here, I do not mean a male baseball player's attitude toward players on an all-women's team. Rather, I wonder how, for example, the Yankees' Mickey Mantle would have reacted to a talented women playing alongside him in left field. Have things changed in the last decade? Can the great male mountaineers cope with female success? Can they admit that a 100-pound woman may be stronger and more talented than they are? (Sexism is reflected in the building trades, where men discriminated against you.)*

Yes, first of all, I look at myself as being a person first and I just happen to be a woman and so I never think of being a woman and doing the things that I do. I just choose my hobbies; I choose my career and that's who I am and that's what I'm about. I am not a threat to the men that I climb with. I'm not a threat to my subcontractors or other contractors because I'm not out there trying to prove that a woman can do it. They're not threatened by it. Therefore, I tend to have great support with the men that I climb with and the men that I work with. Only one time in my life did I ever run up against a problem in the construction company. ... I will never be as strong down here at sea level as someone who is 50 to 60 pounds heavier than I am, but when you climb at high elevation you tend to level out, and the higher I go in elevation the stronger I get.



Stacy Allison (photograph by Fred Hartemann).