INTO THIN AIR
BY
JON KRAKAUER

SUMMARY ............................................. 1
ABOUT THE AUTHOR ............................. 2-3
BOOK REVIEWS .................................... 4
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ....................... 5-6
AUTHOR INTERVIEW .............................. 7-8
FURTHER READING .............................. 9-10
Reeling from the brain-altering effects of oxygen depletion, Jon Krakauer reached the summit of Mt. Everest in the early afternoon of May 10, 1996. He hadn’t slept in 57 hours. As he turned to begin the perilous descent from 29,028 feet (roughly the cruising altitude of an Airbus jetliner), twenty other climbers were still pushing doggedly to the top, unaware that the sky had begun to rail with clouds.

This is the terrifying story of what really happened that fateful day at the top of the world, during what would be the deadliest season in the history of Everest. In this harrowing yet breathtaking narrative, Krakauer takes the reader along with his ill-fated expedition, step by precarious step, from Kathmandu to the mountain’s pinnacle where, plagued by a combination of hubris, greed, poor judgment, and plain bad luck, they would fall prey to the mountain’s unpredictable fury.

Source: http://www.manitowoc.lib.wi.us/readers/guides/intothinair.htm
JON KRAKAUER
is the author of *Eiger Dreams*, *Into the Wild*, and *Into Thin Air*, and is editor of the Modern Library Exploration series.

Born in 1954, Jon Krakauer grew up in Corvallis, Oregon, where his father introduced him to mountaineering as an 8-year-old. After graduating from Hampshire College in 1976, Krakauer divided his time between Colorado, Alaska, and the Pacific Northwest, earning his living primarily as a carpenter and commercial salmon fisherman, spending most of his free moments in the mountains. In 1977 he traveled alone to the remote Stikine Icecap in Southeast Alaska, went three weeks without encountering another person, and climbed a new route on a graceful, intimidating peak called the Devils Thumb. In 1992 he climbed the West Face of Cerro Torre in the Patagonian Andes (a mile-high spike of granite sheathed in a carapace of frozen rime, Cerro Torre was once considered the most difficult mountain on earth.)

In May 1996 Krakauer reached the top of Mt. Everest, but during the descent a storm engulfed the peak, taking the lives of four of the five teammates who climbed to the summit with him. An analysis of the calamity that he wrote for Outside magazine received a National Magazine Award. The unsparingly honest book he subsequently wrote about Everest, *INTO THIN AIR*, became a #1 New York Times bestseller and has been translated into 24 languages. It was also honored as the "Book of the Year" by TIME magazine, one of the "Best Books of the Year" by the New York Times Book Review, a finalist for a 1997 National Book Critics Circle Award, and one of three finalists for the 1998 Pulitzer Prize in General Non-Fiction.

In 1998 Krakauer established the Everest '96 Memorial Fund at the Boulder Community Foundation, endowing it with royalties from INTO THIN AIR. Created as a tribute to his companions lost on Everest, the fund provides humanitarian aid to the indigenous peoples of the Himalaya and supports organizations working to preserve the natural environment throughout the world. Krakauer also serves on the boards of the American Himalayan Foundation and the Alex Lowe Charitable Foundation.

In 1999 Krakauer received an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters—a prestigious award intended "to honor writers of exceptional accomplishment." According to the Academy's citation, "Krakauer combines the tenacity and courage of the finest tradition of investigative journalism with the stylish subtlety and profound insight of the born writer. His account of an ascent of Mount Everest has led to a general reevaluation of climbing and of the commercialization of what was once a romantic, solitary sport; while his account of the life and death of Christopher McCandless, who died of starvation after challenging the Alaskan wilderness, delves even more deeply and disturbingly into the fascination of nature and the devastating effects of its lure on a young and curious mind."

Krakauer's latest book, which he has spent the last four years researching and writing, is UNDER THE BANNER OF HEAVEN: A STORY OF VIOLENT FAITH, published by Doubleday in July 2003. As a child in Oregon, many of the author's playmates, teachers, and athletic coaches were Latter-day Saints. Although he envied the unfluctuating certainty of the faith professed so enthusiastically by these Mormon friends and acquaintances, he was often baffled by it, and has sought to comprehend the formidable power of such belief ever since. The upshot of this lifelong quest is UNDER THE BANNER OF HEAVEN, in which Krakauer examines the nature of religious passion through the lens of Mormon Fundamentalism.

SOURCE:
HTTP://WWW.RANDOMHOUSE.COM/FEATURES/KRAKAUER/AUTHOR.HTML
From Booklist
A handful of people have stood atop Everest, and Krakauer is one of them. Sent to Nepal in May 1996 after his success with *Into the Wild* (1995), he was to report on the commercialization of ascents of the mountain but was instead compelled to tell an icy story of survival and death. As an inquiry into the outer limits of human strength and into the inner turmoil of survivor's guilt, Krakauer's narrative leaves a reader virtually breathless, sweating as he sweats, gasping as he gasps, crying as he cries over dying friends. The disaster made worldwide headlines last year, and its immediate cause was natural--a freak blizzard caught dozens of people near the summit. But the enabling condition was the mere presence at Everest of amateurs, some with minimal mountaineering skill. Guides, Sherpas, and $65,000 was all one needed to make the attempt. At the summit, the pressures of the guide-client relationship were immense, even overwhelming the imperative to flee the storm that overwhelmed the victims. Krakauer's eyewitness to the unfolding tragedy makes a transfixing drama of hubris, responsibility, and sacrificial heroism, which will mark the memory of all who read it.

From Kirkus Reviews
And onto thin ice--Krakauer's (*Into the Wild*, 1995) hypnotic, rattling, firsthand account of a commercial expedition up Mt. Everest that went way wrong. In the spring of 1996, Krakauer took an assignment from Outside magazine to report on the burgeoning industry of commercially guided, high-altitude climbing. Many experienced alpinists were dismayed that the fabled 8,000-meter summits were simply "being sold to rich parvenues" with neither climbing grace nor talent, but possessed of colossal egos. From childhood, Krakauer had wanted to climb Everest; he was an expert on rock and ice, although he had never sojourned at Himalayan altitudes. While it has become popular to consider climbing Everest a lark and the South Col approach little more than a yak route, Krakauer found the altitude a malicious force that turned his blood to sludge and his extremities to wood, that ate his brain cells. Much of the time he lived in a hypoxic stupor, despite the standard acclimatization he underwent. As he tells of his own struggles, he plaits his tale with stories of his climbing comrades, describes the often outrageous characters on other expeditions, and details the history of Everest exploration. The writing builds eerily, portentously to the summit day, fingering little glitches that were piling up, "a slow accrual, compounding imperceptibly, steadily toward critical mass," when a rogue storm overtook the climbers; typical by Everest standards, it was ferocious in the extreme. Time collapses as, minute-by-minute, Krakauer rivetingly and movingly chronicles what ensued, much of which is near agony to read. Unjustly, Krakauer holds himself culpable for aspects of the disaster, but this book will serve an important purpose if it gives even one person pause before tackling Everest. A brilliantly told story, and one that won't go begging when the year's literary honors are doled out.

Source: http://www.amazon.com


Discussion Questions

1. After reading Krakauer’s account of his summit push, as well as his general overview of Everest’s climbing history, how much has the pursuit of the mountain summit changed over the years? Has it changed at all?

2. Each year, clients pay large sums of money for the chance to climb to the top of Mt. Everest. Krakauer points out that many of them are ill-suited for the expeditions due to lack of relevant climbing experience. What role does money (and the subsequent sense of entitlement that goes along with it) play in the events that unfold on Everest?

3. Krakauer lays a large portion of blame on himself for the misinformation regarding the whereabouts of Andy Harris. Given the altered condition that the human brain undertakes at that altitude combined with his lack of oxygen for an extended period of time, should Krakauer shoulder the amount of blame he does or is it more survivor’s guilt?

4. With Krakauer’s insistence that Harris had returned to camp, there is speculation that rescue efforts may have been more effective had they known to try and utilize his help. Given the multiple accounts of Harris’s unusual behavior and his insistence that there was no oxygen left in the supplementary canisters high on the mountain, how much could he have effectively aided Rob Hall, Scott Fischer and Doug Hansen?

5. Why do you think neither Hall nor Fischer ever stressed a firm turn-around time for their teams on the morning of the summit push?

6. How do you think Krakauer’s role as a journalist impacted the events that unfolded? With both Hall and Fischer angling to have him on their teams and the free publicity that would go along with it, might both men put the potential for success ahead of the teams that were actually on the mountain with them?

7. Sandy Pittman was widely criticized for her actions on Everest after she returned to New York City. Many reporters and columnists demonized her approach to the summit, with one going so far as to blame the entire tragedy on her. How much responsibility, if any, do you feel she should shoulder?

8. Pittman is one of a handful of people on the mountain who feel they were not presented in a balanced manner. While Krakauer is definitely critical of certain individuals, do you feel he presents an uneven picture of the people and events that transpired?


9. After Into Thin Air was published, Anatoli Boukareev and Krakauer had a public battle over the guide’s actions on the summit day. Boukareev’s actions, as described in the book, resulted in many other professional climbers picking sides as to whether a client, such as Krakauer, is in a position to criticize an experienced Everest climber. What do you think?

10. Some critics have labeled Into Thin Air as a telling look at the business behind high-altitude climbing while others feel it was simply a means for Krakauer to cash in on the tragedy of others. Do you feel this is a worthwhile, cautionary tale or an exploitative tattle-tale book?

**Source:**
http://www.manitowoc.lib.wi.us/readers/guides/intothinair.htm
excerpt from an interview with Jon Krakauer that pertains to the everest expedition. for the entire interview go to:

http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0697/krakauer/interview.html

INTERVIEWER: Most people who have read Into Thin Air would be shocked to hear that you've gone climbing again since returning from Everest.

KRAKAUER: Well, I came back from Everest with serious doubts about the whole business of climbing, but it's real important to me. I'd give up writing before I gave up climbing. I had this invitation to climb with the best, and to go to this amazing place with these beautiful, huge fins of granite sticking out of the ice that had never been climbed before. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I took it. I committed with a little anxiety, and when I went I had greater anxiety, but it ended up being one of the best trips I've ever done. It was uneventful, the climbing was the kind of climbing I know how to do--technical, steep, vertical and overhanging granite. There was nothing higher than 11,000 feet.

INTERVIEWER: Were you fearful of climbing again after Everest?

KRAKAUER: It wasn't like, 'Am I afraid of this?' It was more like, "Is this right? Is it too selfish?" I won't go back to Everest, I'm afraid of that.

INTERVIEWER: Is there an altitude ceiling you've set for yourself--a height you won't climb above again?

KRAKAUER: Well, probably 23,000 or 24,000 feet. Below that you can acclimatize so it's really not so dangerous. Above that, everything changes.

INTERVIEWER: What was the reaction by your family and friends to the news that you were going climbing again after Everest?

KRAKAUER: They understood. But my wife, and she didn't tell me this until I got back, it was harder for her in some ways than it was when I went to Everest. On Everest I could call her on the satellite phone, in Antarctica there's no communications at all for six weeks. And it seemed to be escalating: first Everest, then Antarctica, which in her mind was worse because it was more remote.
INTERVIEWER: How would you explain to a layperson what it is about climbing that is so appealing, that is worth the tremendous risk?

KRAKAUER: It fascinates me because it matters. Unlike most of life, what you do really matters. Your actions have real consequences. You have to pay attention and focus, and that's very satisfying. It forces you to pay great attention and you lose yourself in the task at hand. Without the risk, that wouldn't happen, so the risk is an essential part of climbing, and that's hard for some people to grasp. You can't justify the risk when things go wrong and people die. The greater the risk, the greater the reward in most aspects of life, and in climbing that's certainly true, too. It's very physical, you use your mind and your body. It's like full-body chess, and it gets you to beautiful, beautiful places.

INTERVIEWER: What are some other activities you enjoy and pursue, besides writing and climbing?

KRAKAUER: I love being outdoors, being in the mountains and the desert, and my wife enjoys that too. That's one of the things that sustain our relationship. I snowboard, I read and I write. I'm not gregarious. I don't really have many friends, because I'm away a lot, and I feel like when I'm home I want to spend time with my wife. I'm just not social to begin with, so I'm entirely happy being alone for long periods of time.

Source:

http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0697/kraukaer
Further Reading

If you liked “Into Thin Air” you might try:

Mountain Madness: Scott Fisher, Mount Everest and a Life Lived on High by Robert Birkby
Mountaineer Scott Fischer and outdoors expert Birkby (author of trail maintenance standard Lightly on the Land) were friends and trekking companions from their 1982 meeting until Fischer's tragic, controversial death on a 1996 expedition up Everest, leading a tour group from his Mountain Madness adventure travel business (from which his clients all descended safely). Combining his memories with those of Fischer's family, friends, fellow mountaineers and other alumni of the National Outdoor Leadership School in Lander, Wyo., where Fischer worked, Birkby chronicles Fischer from his New Jersey childhood through his years teaching with NOLS, his drive to perfect his skills and reach the highest peaks, and the struggles to establish his travel company.

Adrift: Sixty Seven Days Lost at Sea by Stephen Callahan
Before The Perfect Storm, before In the Heart of the Sea, Steven Callahan's dramatic tale of survival at sea was on the New York Times bestseller list for more than thirty-six weeks. In some ways the model for the new wave of adventure books, Adrift is an undeniable seafaring classic, a riveting firsthand account by the only man known to have survived more than a month alone at sea, fighting for his life in an inflatable raft after his small sloop capsized only six days out. "Utterly absorbing" (Newsweek), Adrift is a must-have for any adventure library.

Dark Summit: The True Story of Everest’s Most Controversial Season by Nick Heil
On May 15, 2006, a young British climber named David Sharp lay dying near the top of Mount Everest while forty other climbers walked past him on their way to the summit. A week later, Lincoln Hall, a seasoned Australian climber, was left for dead near the same spot. Hall’s death was reported around the world, but the next day he was found alive after spending the night on the upper mountain with no food and no shelter. If David Sharp’s death was shocking, it was hardly singular: ten others died attempting to reach the summit that year. In this meticulous inquiry into what went wrong, Nick Heil tells the full story of the deadliest year on Everest since the infamous season of 1996. As more climbers attempt the summit each year, Heil shows how increasingly risky expeditions and unscrupulous outfitters threaten to turn Everest into a deadly circus.

The Perfect Storm by Sebastian Junger
Junger's carefully researched and sympathetic book is a mesmerizing chronicle of man's struggle against nature. Davidson's unassuming, slightly nasal tone subtly captures the drollery of the salty New England attitude. "People often get premonitions when they do jobs that could get them killed ... the
trick is knowing when to listen to them.” He makes listening to The Perfect Storm seem like you're bearing witness to a natural disaster. You're powerless to help, but the awesome spectacle has such an emotional hold that it's nearly impossible to turn away.

**The Children's Blizzard by David Laskin**

That 1888 January day on the northern plains was bright and warm—the first mild weather in several weeks—leading many children to attend school without coats, boots, hats, or mittens. A number of students were caught in the sudden storm that hit later that day. Laskin details this event—the worst blizzard anyone in those parts ever encountered. It not only took the lives of hundreds of settlers, but also formed a significant crack in the westward movement and helped to cause a movement out. The author introduces five pioneer families, beginning with why they left the old country. The personalization of these settlers breathes life into this history and holds readers spellbound.

**Alive: the Story of the Andes Survivors by Piers Paul Read**

On October 12, 1972, an Uruguayan Air Force plane carrying a team of rugby players crashed in the remote snowy peaks of the Andes. Ten weeks later, only sixteen of the forty-five passengers were found alive. This is the story of those ten weeks spent in the shelter of the plane's fuselage without food and with scarcely any hope of a rescue. The survivors protected and helped one another, and came to the difficult conclusion that to live meant doing the unimaginable. Confronting nature at its most furious, two brave young men risked their lives to hike through the mountains looking for help -- and ultimately found it.

**Left for Dead: My Journey Home from Everest by Beck Weathers**

A survivor of the disastrous Mt. Everest expedition described in Jon Krakauer's bestseller Into Thin Air, Weathers is the climber many readers will remember from searing media photos of a man with heavily bandaged hands and a face so badly frostbitten it scarcely seemed human. In fact, Weathers had been abandoned by his fellow mountaineers as dead and spent some 18 hours on the mountain in subzero temperatures before miraculously regaining his senses and staggering into camp. Back in the U.S., Weathers, who is a physician, lost both hands and underwent extensive facial reconstruction. But there were other wounds to heal: he had neglected his family so much in pursuit of his hobby that his wife had decided to end the marriage once he returned. Co-written with Michaud (The Evil That Men Do; The Only Living Witness), this book deals in part with the climb but mainly with Weathers's life before and after the catastrophe. The man who wrote this book doesn't seem any less self-absorbed than the one who climbed Mt. Everest. In the years before the disaster, Weathers spent every spare moment pursuing his own interests as his wife and children became strangers to him. Now he claims to have rediscovered his family, but, unfortunately, the reader learns very little about them. Ultimately, this engrossing tale depicts the difficulty of a man's struggle to reform his life.

**Source:**

HTTP://WWW.AMAZON.COM