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Re: Review

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High Reviews

**'Perhaps historical accuracy no longer counts for anything, but this kind of wolliness makes me wonder...'**

Ultimate High

My Everest Odyssey

Göran Kropp with David Lagercrantz

Discovery Books

£12.99

In 1990 Tim Macartney-Snape climbed Everest from sea level, starting by foot from the Bay of Bengal. Six years later an ex-paratrooper called Göran Kropp took the stunt a stage further by bicycling 7000 miles from his native Sweden with everything he needed to climb Everest strapped to his bike. From the Jiri roadhead he continued by foot to the Khumbu base camp, with all his high altitude food and gear now piled onto his back. He then climbed without oxygen almost to the South Summit, retreated to base just before the big storm of May 12th 1996, then went back up again, after the carnage, to make a successful summit bid, again without oxygen. After that all he had to do was bicycle home again.

All of us, hearing that astounding tale of endurance and determination, must think, 'I wonder if I would be able to do that?' My own answer is, 'probably not' and I can only marvel incredulously at the man's perserverance. I just wish that he had left the achievement as it stood, and not written such an awful book about it.

Perhaps he has been done a disservice by the journalist co-author and by Ola Klingberg's American translation, but even allowing for those distortions, I find it hard to like the character who emerges from the written page. Take for instance this little pen-sketch of his gorgeous girlfriend Renata: 'it wasn't long ago that she didn't know anything about mountaineering. Then she met me and was drawn into a new world - a classic life story for a woman, perhaps.' I know he's a paratrooper, but where has this man been?

Egotism screams from every hammed-up page. That in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, you must have to have colossal personal drive to pull off such an achievement. However, when Kropp starts moralising about other climbers, for instance in his reference to a false ascent claim on K2 - 'it was a miserable lie, of course, one that poisons mountaineering' - he does rather set himself up for some close analysis. If he is so keen on accuracy, why does he allow his publishers to claim fatuously on the dustjacket that in 1993 he was the second person to reach the summit of K2 without 'supplemental' oxygen. (The first two were Roskelley and Ridgeway in 1978 and just about every other subsequent ascent has been gasless).

Why does he claim inaccurately that before he recently climbed the Muztagh Tower 'only four people had scaled it'? Why the preposterous statement that on the world's four highest

mountains it is 'more or less, still standard practice' to use bottled oxygen? True on Everest; patent nonsense on K2, Kangchenjunga and Makalu. Perhaps historical accuracy no longer counts for anything, but this kind of woolliness makes me wonder how accurate is Kropp's account of his own activities.

At base camp the author treats us to some prurient gossip about various adulterous couplings. No names mentioned of course, but enough clues to make the pairings obvious, with an arch 'excuse me for gossiping.' Pass the sick bag, someone. There is deserved self-congratulation on completing his own route through the icefall, bravely eschewing the fixed ropes and ladders, but that is all rather negated in the following paragraph, when, 'I took the standard route back to base camp.'

Those official Everest pariahs, the South Africans, are roundly abused for their apparent incompetence, dishonesty and self-delusion, but then, a few weeks later, we discover our hero using their tent on the South Col and announcing brazenly, 'the sleeping pad I'd borrowed from the South Africans was covered with the contents of my bowels. I took great pains to clean it.' Oh, how thoughtful of you, Göran.

That choice extract just about sums up the prose style. Certain phrases keep returning like jolly leitmotifs: our self-deprecatory hero has all his admirers call him 'crazy bastard' at every opportunity; on the mountain there is endless melodramatic reference to 'body bags'; whenever his doomed hero Scott Fischer appears the word 'cool' is banded about a great deal. Later, having lamented Fischer's death, Kropp reminds us that the following autumn Fischer's 'friend and protégé' Lobsang Jangbu also died on Everest and concludes, 'Lobsang always followed his mentor.' Is this meant to be a joke?

Göran Kropp plans next to travel single-handed by yacht and ski all the way from Sweden to the South Pole. Judging by the skill, thoroughness and sheer guts of his Everest venture, I am sure that he will succeed in this even tougher challenge. If Discovery Books commissions an account of his new adventure I hope that they will find a good ghost writer to impart a little wit, modesty, style and accuracy into the story; but perhaps that is too much to ask for in the brave new world of Planet Murdoch.

Stephen Venables