
Buxton, William (2004). Review: *Where the Mountain Casts its Shadow* by Maria Coffey. *Canadian Alpine Journal*, 87, p. 148.

Review: Coffey, Maria (2003). *Where the Mountain Casts its Shadow – The Dark Side of Extreme Adventure*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 243 pages.

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It was a quiet January Saturday afternoon. My wife passed me the book section of the *Globe & Mail* and said, "You should read this." What she was referring to was a rant by the feminist writer Laura Robinson, in the guise of a review of Maria Coffey's new book, *Where the Mountain Casts its Shadow*. The "review" revealed almost nothing about the book, and too much about Robinson's own agenda. Perhaps because of the intensity of the reaction that it had triggered, I had to read the book. It was ordered within five minutes, through the good graces of the Internet.

What arrived two days later was a thoughtful and very readable book. But also, a book that was somewhat unsatisfying – that felt in some ways "easy", picking the low-hanging fruit, while avoiding the hard stuff. (I'm still not sure if this last point is to its credit, or a weakness.)

With seven books for adults and four for children, Coffey is settling into her second career as a writer. What she sets out to do in this most recent volume is broach the "taboo" subject of the impact that elite mountaineering has on the immediate family – parents, children, spouses, lovers etc. – of those who partake in it.

This is something of which Coffey has first hand knowledge. She had been with Joe Tasker for the three years before he disappeared on Everest with Pete Boardman. It is also something that she has previously written about. Her book, *Fragile Edge*, describes their relationship and its aftermath. This leads to one of my criticisms of *Where the Mountain Casts its Shadow*, namely, the extent to which she dwells on that already-covered material. After all, that was 1982. Isn't it time to get over it? Or, perhaps the whole point of the current book is that you don't. Which makes me feel uncomfortable, not because of the "taboo" of the topic, but rather from thinking about her current partner living with someone who is still so obsessed with someone with whom she had a relationship twenty-two years ago.

Regardless, overall, Coffey deals with her topic rather well. Her approach is mainly based on a broad base of interviews with elite climbers and members of their families. On top of this foundation, she builds a thoughtful, respectful and most significantly, non-judgmental portrait of what she heard. In this, I need to balance my earlier criticism of her over-reliance on her own experience with the degree to which she, nevertheless, retains a fairly objective approach to the topic. One could argue that it was her previous experience that gave her the sensitivity and understanding of the climbing culture that enabled this objectivity to hold.

Of the interviews themselves, they cover the range of questions that many wonder about, yet few ask. How do the climbers themselves, or their spouses deal with the risk, the time away, and in general, the competition with this other love of their life? How do attitudes change with marriage? With children? And in the cases where it is survivors that she is speaking with, she explores the inevitable questions around coping, lingering resentment, and the not infrequent instances of remaining within the mountaineering culture and even remarrying into the same type of situation.

With a few exceptions, and understandably given the statistics, the climbers are men. Too bad. Perhaps going deeper into the case of elite female climbers would help avoid the

potential blinders of feminist dogma that so clearly emerged in the aforementioned “review” by Robinson.

There are other things that I wished that she had explored further, as well. Her focus was on elite climbers. Yet, I don’t think that she establishes or pursues the differentiation between them and the climbing world in general, those who make up the other ninety percent. If they are distinct, where is the line? Or is the line more one of obsession and/or willingness knowingly to accept risk – something not restricted to the elite.

I also think that Coffey could have perhaps done a better job had she broken her topic down a bit more. There is very little explicit separation of the issues of obsession and life-threatening risk. The fact is that the neglect of family, the travel, the affairs, the preoccupation, and yes, the buzz and excitement that accompanies such a passion or compulsion are not restricted to climbing. They are there in sport, science, art, politics, business and even religion. One of the more troubling things emerging from this book is to be, once again, reminded that almost every institution of our culture, almost every “great” achievement in our society, has come at a similar cost to the families of those who “made” them.

The spouses of climbers have no monopoly on such stories of neglect, resentment, and the burden of raising a family alone. Yes, Coffey touches on this. But that is all. I think that she misses the opportunity of broadening the relevance of her efforts as a consequence.

And, as for that second issue, consciously assumed risk, again, I think that distilling things to a finer granularity of analysis could have made the book more insightful, albeit more difficult to research and write.

How different was the exposure that someone like David Thompson assumed while exploring and mapping the Canadian west, compared to those of the elite alpinist? Sure, you could say that one was productive and opened up a nation, while the other is self-indulgent and creates nothing. But does anyone believe that that distinction makes a particle of difference to the surviving families if anything happens? And, my reading of history suggests that what drove people such as Thompson had far more in common with the climbers in Coffey’s book than some public-spirited ideal that we learned about in school.

As with the “selfishness” of our obsessions, this conscious assumption of risk on the part of those doing extreme things has a long history that predates climbing. And again, it is something upon which our culture and society is built and depends, a fact that people like Robinson conveniently ignore. In many ways, Coffey helps open the door to exploring the topic, but doesn’t walk through.

In a way, that is fine. The issues are as interesting as they are far-reaching. That Coffey did not explore them all is less a criticism, and more a comment that the ground still contains much to be explored.

Overall, the book is well worth reading, despite its shortcomings. As I have already stated, Coffey has approached this difficult topic with respect, openness and competence. That the book is not perfect simply says that she is human – which makes her all the more qualified to write it.

References:

- Coffey, Maria (1989). *Fragile Edge*. London: Chatto & Windus.
Robinson, Laura (2004). Women who love men who love mountains. *The Globe and Mail*, Saturday January 17, p. D5.