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Dark Summit: The True Story Of Everest's Most Controversial Season



Synopsis

In early May 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 not singular: despite unusually good weather, 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. He introduces Russell Brice, the outfitter who has done more than anyone to provide access to the summit via the mountain's north side "and who some believe was partially responsible for Sharp's death. 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. Written by an experienced climber and outdoor writer, *Dark Summit* is both a riveting account of a notorious climbing season and a troubling investigation into whether the pursuit of the ultimate mountaineering prize has spiralled out of control. --This text refers to the MP3 CD edition.

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Customer Reviews

As an admitted acrophobic who isn't fond of cold weather, I have a hard time wrapping my head around the concept of climbing the highest mountain in the world. To me, it seems nothing short of insanity. So when I stumbled upon the Discovery Channel reality show about Russell Brice's 2006 expedition team and their attempt to summit Everest, I was completely enthralled (and horrified)...

enough so that I began to seek out books on the subject. The first, and probably best, account of an Everest expedition that I read was Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air." This, however was a close second. In both cases I found myself repeatedly asking "What is wrong with these people!? Are they insane?" Yeah, apparently. But mountain madness has taken a truly dark turn here, where we see the drive to push one's self to physical extremes tainted by mercenary expedition leaders, oversized egos, poor planning, the vicissitudes of nature, and amateurs who are paying their way to the top of the mountain rather than putting in the grueling years of training and preparation that used to be requisite on Everest. My criticisms are few: first, there are some copy editing errors that are kind of inexcusable for a widely-published book from a major house ("Sharp" instead of "sherpa," "marshall" instead of "martial," some grammar issues, etc.) Second... well, it's hard for this book to match the energy and intensity of Krakauer's since Krakauer's was written by a man actually on an Everest expedition. Both Krakauer and Heil are strong writers, both are elite climbers, both have a unique viewpoint and something new and interesting to bring to the table, but the immediacy of a first-hand account resonated more deeply with me than Heil's expert yet uninvolved perspective. The two are great companion pieces to each other, and I recommend them both. I still can't imagine why anyone would possibly do this to themselves, yet the subject makes for a fascinating-- and harrowing-- read.

The story is captivating and well-told, but the text needs a serious round of copy-editing. You may recall books like "Into Thin Air," which recounted the 1996 disaster on Mount Everest. From those accounts, we know the weather was a central factor in the horrific events that played out. In 2006, the body count was just as bad, but the weather was fine. With the weather not part of the death equation, why did so many people die on Mount Everest in 2006? Dark Summit holds many clues, because it provides a detailed narrative of about the various tragedies of 2006 and what led up to them. Given what went on, it's surprising that the body count wasn't even higher. In the ten years that followed the 1996 disaster, the two national governments (Nepal and China) that control access to Everest failed to institute such basic safety measures as limiting access to qualified personnel. In the industrial safety arena, a "qualified person" is one who meets certain minimum competence standards for the task at hand. This concept is conspicuously absent from the management of access to Everest. Another basic safety measure would be the formation of permanent rescue teams, which would be present and on standby during the climbing season. Nobody has set up a fund for this, though the sheer number of people shelling out money to climb Everest would easily make that possible. Nor do we find any formal contingency plans or evacuation plans. It seems that everyone involved is, every year, surprised that people show up. And they appear to be surprised

further still that danger exists on Everest--gee, what a concept. Apparently, the increasing number of corpses littering the mountain doesn't translate into the idea that it's dangerous to be on the mountain. Because of this failure to connect these really huge dots, the death toll in 2006 was on par with that of 1996. Same drill, different year. Construction safety managers like to say, "Safety is no accident." The thought behind this pithy saying is that safety occurs because you plan for it and follow your plan. Safety doesn't happen by accident. It happens because you follow a proper safety plan. On Everest, however, we see that the overall safety plan for 2006 wasn't even accidental--there wasn't one. Nor did all of the Everest "climbers" make their safety their personal responsibility. It seems clear (in hindsight) that most of the expedition companies put summiting first and worried about safety second. The high body count, then, is no surprise at all. A couple of expedition companies, such as Himex, put safety first and make a point of getting clients back alive. That's part of their DNA. Their philosophy is a bit more complex than the idea that real mountaineering is purely about summiting at any cost. Those very companies have been pilloried for not doing enough to "save" people whose own actions (or lack thereof) put them in their predicaments to begin with. The "logic" is that those who have planned are supposed to bail out those who gambled. Climbers are a particularly safe bunch (I know because I am one!). A climber follows certain rituals and procedures, period. For example, climbers check each other's harnesses before each ascent, even if they have already done so a dozen times that day. Except for a few risk-seeking superstars, a real climber asks, "What are the dangers and how do I protect myself?" A real climber is looking forward to climbing many more times in the future rather than dying on this one climb. The climbing culture involves layers of safety practices. The quickest way for a climber to be ostracized by other climbers is to act cavalier about safety. In many climbing settings, access is contingent upon following safety protocols. Violate these, and you are permanently banned. As we can tell from the bodies strewn on Everest, that isn't the case everywhere. Everest is increasingly populated with climber wannabes who have no business being there. They are climbing way beyond their ability level, both figuratively and literally. In doing so, they endanger not just themselves but others. They tend to compromise the expeditions of people who would otherwise have been able to summit and descend safely. And, as we are seeing, many of these wannabes go up but don't come down. A few Everest-related Websites tell stories about the various tragedies, near misses, and other consequences of the hubris that is now standard for Mount Everest expeditions (not all, but most). Unfortunately, many pundits blame a few specific people who, when you look at the actual facts, and circumstances, are not at fault. They weren't the ones who showed up unqualified, unprepared, under-equipped, and out of shape. Those sites, then, aren't helping

prevent future calamities. But, they have the power to do so. They can post articles that point out the system problems, and they can provide a means for people to collaborate on implementing the solutions. It seems a shame that they don't use that opportunity. Solutions to the major deficiencies are reasonable and achievable. For example, why haven't the larger expedition companies formed an Everest Association that has rules for participation? And that provides full-time rescue teams? If there's one thing you can say about governments, it's that they like to suck up money. So such an association could kick a percentage of its membership fees to the two national governments that control access to Everest. Those two governments could then make association membership a mandatory condition for access. Heil doesn't prescribe this in his book, and given both his in-depth knowledge and high credibility that seems like a wasted opportunity. Unlike most commentators, Heil avoids finger-pointing as he brings us his account of the 2006 fiasco. He focuses on accurately portraying the events. What emerges is a dark tale of the dark summit, with details that allow the reader to have a clear picture of what transpired. Unlike some others who have told the story, Heil does very solid reporting. Reading his account, I could not help but feel the tagline under the title means just what it says--the true story. And what a story it is. When you look at some of the people who were there, it's small wonder that this particular season was so tragic. Some examples include: *A double amputee. *A guy whose bones had been screwed together following a motorcycle accident. *An out of shape guy with a condition that renders him blind at high altitude. *A guide with only one previous 8,000 meter ascent (and that one didn't go well). During climbing season, Everest is so crowded that people pile up dangerously at points all along the climbing routes. Unqualified "climbers" are struggling, due to a lack of expertise, a lack of preparation, a lack of fitness, a lack of experience, or some combination thereof. Increasingly (as Heil shows), the population on Everest represents a slice of upper middle class dreamers and thrill-seekers rather than real climbers. When these dilettantes get in trouble, they can't just snap their fingers for assistance. Which is why so many of them suffer profound disfigurement or even die. Whose fault is that? Who should assist them? Heil brings up some interesting questions, regarding responsibility for others on Everest. Here's one to ponder. Suppose you spent several years to prepare to summit Everest. You've climbed several 8,000 meter peaks, thus earning your stripes. Now you've trained especially hard for the past several months and spent \$50,000 in expedition fees for this one climb. It's your fourth attempt. Another person, who has only negligible mountaineering experience, shows up with little preparation and even less equipment. This person paid a no-name expedition company \$7500 for a no-frills package and that means pretty much no support. You have a one-day window to summit before a storm hits, and you know you can make it.

But as you start out on your final day, you encounter Mr. No Frills. He's catatonic and can't move. Do you stop to help him down? The short answer is no. Not because you will blow \$50,000 that this person probably can't pay back, but because you are barely surviving at that altitude yourself. At 29,000 feet, your body is eating itself up and you have the most dangerous part--the descent--ahead of you. Your coordination, strength, and mental focus are all way below par. Nobody carries a dead body or a non-moving person down from the higher altitudes, because they can't. Which is why the dead are just left there. So you can choose to do what you came to do, or you can choose to give it up for a rescue effort that has almost no hope of succeeding. You know that the attempt could cost you your fingers, even if you manage to survive. The other person, who shouldn't be there, will probably die anyhow. By understanding the challenges facing people on Everest, you better understand those whose behavior might otherwise seem as cold and unfeeling as the mountain itself. Heil tells the story as it happened, giving the reader a sense of actually being there. He provides plenty of detail about what happens to the human body and the mind at the higher elevations, so that you get a sense of just how incapacitating it is to be there. Everest is not a test of climbing skill so much as it is a test of endurance at the outer limits of possibility. I found the book engrossing and highly informative. The author didn't take any cheap shots at anyone or push his personal agenda. Nor did he sensationalize--given what really went on, he didn't need to. The reality was sensational enough. Heil provided rich detail and told the story in a way that kept me turning the pages. Dark Summit could have been an excellent book, but it misses the mark due to mechanical errors in the text. I close this review with an explanation of my opening remark about the need for copyediting. I encountered mistakes like: "Sharp" used in place of "sherpa" (capitalized as shown). "marshall artists" instead of "martial artists" A large number of misspellings. Some parallel sentence structure, which is confusing. Some composition errors that rendered a few sentences incomprehensible. Miscellaneous scraps of text appearing completely out of place (copy and paste errors?). Heil worked as a magazine editor. In the enthusiast magazine industry, the title "editor" doesn't mean "one who edits." It means "subject matter expert who writes articles that someone else must edit." That editing work should have been done on this manuscript before publishing it. Heil comes across as a great verbal story teller and a solid researcher with high standards of editorial integrity. But a good copyeditor should have cleaned up this text to prevent the mental gymnastics that interrupted the flow of this intriguing story.

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