

Review: Boukreev, A. (2001). *Above the Clouds: The Diaries of a High-Altitude Mountaineer*. New York: St. Martins Press. Collected and edited by Linda Wylie, with a Foreword by Galen Rowell.

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Anatoli Boukreev is a climber who is best known in the role of villain, as cast by Krakauer in *Into Thin Air*, rather than for his performance in the mountains, and even then, opinions have largely been based on only a few months on Everest in 1996. He is a man about whom the number of people who have strong opinions varies inversely with the number who know much about him, or have personal high altitude experience.

While no book can give you the latter, this volume - assembled, edited and introduced by his partner in the last years of his life, Linda Wylie - goes a long way towards addressing the former.

Other than a few articles in the *American Alpine Journal*, and Krakauer's book, the only way that most people had to know much about Boukreev is through *The Climb*, the book that he wrote with the journalist DeWalt. But *The Climb* was not about Boukreev. It was an effort to explain his side of what happened on Everest in 1996. Little of the man penetrated through this book, due to its narrow focus, and the emotional context in which it was written.

This is not the case with *Above The Clouds*. Nevertheless, I can hear a lot of prospective readers thinking, "I'm sick of hearing about Everest 1996. Why should I care about him or what he has to say?"

First, this book is not about 1996. Second, this is an outstanding book that gives some extremely good insights not only into Boukreev the man, but also mountaineering in the former Soviet Union, and how the break-up of the USSR affected this culture. For me, at least, the descriptions of the entire organizational structure of Soviet mountaineering training, schools, levels, exams, and competitions was new, fascinating, and a marked contrast to my understanding of how mountaineering is positioned and practiced in North America.

If most people would not have known about Boukreev had it not been for the events of 1996, so much the worse for us, for he was and exceptional man. His performance was almost unbelievable. In 1997, for example, he summated four 8,000 metre peaks in 80 days, two of them alone, and on the fourth, Gasherbrum II, he went from base camp to the summit in 9 ½ hours, and did the return trip from base camp in thirteen hours!

Clearly the man had good genes. But he was not superhuman. To attribute his performance to that, or to assume that he was some kind of freak is a cop out, and this is what I found most interesting in the volume. Boukreev did what he did *despite* the cards dealt to him, such as suffering meningitis in his 20's, and a number of accidents and medical issues that would have been career-ending to most people. He did what he did due to a balance between determination and an extremely rigorous training regimen.

It wasn't magic behind his performance, and he wasn't the superman he has been made out to be. That is what makes him so outstanding, and why this book is so welcome.

Does it answer any outstanding questions about Everest in 1996, or help shed any insight on his decisions there? Directly? No. Indirectly, very much so, in how the broader life, character, and skills can better inform any analysis of his actions that year. It is a welcome contribution.

I have only one complaint about this book: in this age of word processors and computers, it is totally unacceptable, annoying and incomprehensible to produce a book with no index. This is an insult to the reader, and makes it extremely frustrating for anyone wanting to revisit the book to look something up.