

The Crystal Horizon Everest-the First Solo Ascent Study Guide

The Crystal Horizon Everest-the First Solo Ascent by Reinhold Messner

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Plot Summary

The *Crystal Horizon: Everest—The First Solo Ascent*, by Reinhold Messner, translated from the German by Jill Neate and Audrey Salkeld, is an account by a famous climber of his successful and solo assault on the world's tallest mountain. In 1980, without the aid of oxygen bottles or other "high-tech" assistance, the thirty-five-year-old Messner became the first person ever to reach the summit of Mount Everest while climbing alone. Later in his career, the Italian adventurer became the first man to climb all 14 of the world's mountains that are taller than 8,000 meters or 26,247 feet. Messner, who had written a number of books prior to the publication of this one in 1989 and who since has written many others, fashions a tale rife with curiosity, awe, fear, and determination. He offers a selected history of previous attempts to climb Everest through the decades, including a number of successful group efforts as well as several famous failures and two previous solo expeditions that ended short of the summit. Those accounts are adapted from books by other authors. Messner's text, interspersed with photographs taken by him and assembled from other sources, also discusses the history, culture, and contemporary state of Tibet, which had been closed to foreigners until the year before Messner undertook his expedition.

He is accompanied part of the way by two Sherpas but his main companion is a young American woman named Nena Holquin who became his girlfriend shortly before the Everest climb. Nena is Messner's only companion on the trek to the upper base camp at an altitude of 6,500 meters where she waits for four days while Messner completes the final climb to the summit at 8,848 meters and the descent. The heart of the book is Messner's description of the slow deterioration of his physical and psychological condition as he labors ever-upward, through air so thin that only a few steps can be taken before rest is required. The indomitable will required for such an effort, especially without contact with anyone else and with the constant danger of avalanches or of falling into a crevasse, is powerfully drawn. At the height of the drama, Messner must struggle not only with exhaustion but with voices and other mental aberrations that often assail mountaineers at high altitudes. Excerpts from the diary of Nena Holquin are scattered throughout the text, adding valuable insight into the personality and moods of the mercurial Messner. His own reflections on why people climb and what drives him are also revealing. In providing a glimpse into the mind and personality of an intrepid mountaineer as he achieves a tremendous feat, the book demonstrates how pure willpower can carry a person beyond what normally would be the limits of physical and emotional capacity.



Everest—South—North—Solo

Everest—South—North—Solo Summary and Analysis

The *Crystal Horizon: Everest—The First Solo Ascent*, is a chronicle of Italian mountaineer Reinhold Messner's solo climb of Mount Everest in 1980. He is the first person to accomplish such a feat. The book is also a rumination on why people climb mountains, a look at Messner's fractious relationship with his girlfriend and companion, Nena Holquin, during the expedition, and a presentation of the author's research and impressions concerning previous attempts to scale Everest, the past and present cultural and political life of Tibet and China, and the impact of Buddhism on Tibetans. The book's first section, "Everest—South—North—Solo," opens with a signed preface by Messner that begins with a 1921 quote from British mountain climber Sir Francis Younghusband, which indicates that standing on the summit Mount Everest has been in men's mind for decades. Messner asks rhetorically about his own motivations, given that he already has climbed the mountain once and many others have done so. His answer is a longer quote, apparently from Younghusband, that to reach the limits of an individual's capacity is what drives achievement. Messner writes that his daydreams and his extensive reading about early mountaineers who challenged Everest eventually matured into a resolve, which the book will describe as it answers the question, "Why?" The next pages are color and black-and-white photographs of the mountain, maps, equipment used on early attempts to scale Everest, and pictures of Tibet. In small print, long captions summarize these early climbs, seven of which were undertaken by British teams between 1921 and 1949, plus two solo attempts that were illegal under Tibetan law. Messner mentions that the 1911 Chinese revolution rid Tibet of almost all Chinese influence until 1949, during which it was an autonomous state under leadership of the Dalai Lama. Messner calls this a "theocratic-lamaistic rule," an apparent tautology that gives the first hint that the author's expertise is mountain-climbing rather than world politics. Another early problem, which will prove to recur throughout the text, is Messner's failure to credit sources within the body of the writing, although he does mention key sources in a short reference section at the back of the book.

This technique sometimes creates an impression that information has been "cut-and-pasted" from other sources, which hampers the flow of the text and undermines its authority. For example, in the opening pages Messner fails to explain that the Dalai Lama kept Tibet closed to foreigners until 1920, which is why no attempts to climb Everest were made before 1921. This vital information is given in a later section. The first section also fails to give a clear explanation of Mount Everest's location on the border between Tibet and Nepal, although one map shows this positioning. Another map fails to label Nepal, which makes it look like India is the country on its southern border. The text mentions that China invaded Tibet in 1950 and established a military presence under ostensible Tibetan autonomy, and it explains that a Tibetan uprising was crushed the Chinese in 1959, which sent the Dalai Lama into exile and ended the Tibetan government. These facts are offered in elongated captions separated by other material, and must be pieced together by the reader who wishes to get a clear picture of



how politics influenced access to Mount Everest by climbers from other nations. After this first section, it is apparent that the book will blend Messner's personal experience with historical accounts of Everest climbs and with political and sociological information about the region but it is also evident that the arrangement of this material could be haphazard.



Pages 21-33, Mount Everest—Fairytale and Reality

Pages 21-33, Mount Everest—Fairytale and Reality Summary and Analysis

The second section, "Mount Everest—Fairytale and Reality," switches to a narrative style of writing as Oswald Oelz, nicknamed Bulle, and other people on Messner's climbing team awaken in a Sherpa hut. They have to get to a place called Syangpoche to catch a plane to Kathmandu and it becomes apparent that the group has failed in an attempt to climb a mountain called Ama Dablam. Most readers would be familiar with Kathmandu, but maps in the book's previous section fail to show any of the place names in this early part of the second section. Messner mentions that Ama Dablam is in the region of Solo Khumbu but only when the group reaches the airplane does it become apparent that they are in Nepal, which Messner says has become the "Switzerland of Asia," because of tourism. He says Nepal was forbidden to foreigners thirty years ago, but the text has not yet indicated the current year. The climbing group goes to the Everest Hotel for a meal, where Messner is accosted by tourists who question his achievements and motivations. Messner answers patiently, and then Bulle says the climbing team must leave. The group learns that it is only on the waiting list for their next flight, to somewhere called Khumde, so they walk and run all day to the next airstrip. In Kathmandu, Messner is stunned to learn from a well-connected journalist named Elizabeth Hawley that a Japanese adventurer he knows named Naomi Uemura has received Nepalese government permission attempt to be the first to climb Everest solo, in the winter of 1980-81.

Messner wants to beat Uemura to the top. He talks to Hawley about getting permission to climb the North Face from Tibet during the monsoon season, which is from May to mid-September. Messner reflects that his solo climb of a mountain called Nanga Parbat in 1978 proved to him that a solo ascent of Everest was possible. The reader learns that it is now autumn of 1979 and the Nepalese government plans to hand out more than its usual two to four Everest climbing permits for the winter. Messner goes to the Nepalese Ministry of Tourism and secures permission to climb Everest's West Ridge solo in the autumn of 1980. The West Ridge is a long and difficult route, and Messner knows his chances of success would be poor. Liz Hawley tells him that the Nepalese border with Tibet is to be opened shortly, but he is not sure if the Chinese government would allow him to climb the North Face. Messner begins daydreaming about Tibet. One night, he dreams about climbing Everest with Mallory with early mountaineers John Noel, George Mallory, and Bruce, the latter of whom led early expeditions but has not yet been introduced in the text. Now the reader learns that the Dalai Lama opened Everest to climbers in 1920. Messner explains that Everest is concealed behind another range of mountains. He traces early foreign interest in climbing Everest to Sir Francis Younghusband's military mission to Tibet in 1904 when India was part of the British

Empire. In 1913, Noel sneaked into Tibet and got within 60 kilometers of Everest. In 1921, Mallory and two others reached the 7,000 meters on the first expedition, during which the group's doctor died of a heart attack.



Mount Everest—Fairytale and Reality

Mount Everest—Fairytale and Reality Summary and Analysis

Messner continues his history of early attempts on Everest with an account of the second expedition, in 1922, led by Brigadier General Charles Bruce. A member of the party, a Captain Finch, experimented with artificial oxygen in England before the climb. He and Capt. Geoffrey Bruce, a nephew of the general, reached 8,321 with oxygen supplies. Mallory, Norton, and Somervell reached 8,230 meters without oxygen. Another try on that expedition was aborted after an avalanche killed seven porters, which Messner describes with long quotes from Mallory's account. Messner describes the next attempt, in 1924, again led by Bruce, with Mallory, Norton, and Somervell on the team. Norton reached 8,572 meters without oxygen, a record that stood for more than fifty years. Messner discussed what came to be called "fair means," which eschews the use of technical aids to climbing, and which Messner strongly supports. He then describes the next assault on Everest in 1924 when Mallory and Andrew Irvine were briefly spotted from the upper camp by a team member named Odell as the two pushed toward the summit. Odell was not sure if they were on the so-called "first step" or the "second step," two ridges before the summit. Neither man was ever seen again, and controversy still rages over whether either or both made it to the top. Messner describes Mallory as a major figure in Everest lore, and quotes unattributed descriptions of the skills and physical power of Mallory and Irvine by their "comrades." These quotes indicate that Mallory and Irvine had decided to use artificial oxygen on their final climb.

Messner writes that the mystery of whether Mallory or Irvine reached the top slowly began to interest him more than his own solo attempt on Everest. He reads in a book that future expeditions would be well-advised to forego Mallory's North Face route. He then recounts that Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay both finally reached Everest's summit in 1953, the ninth English expedition. Next, Messner returns the story to his hotel in Kathmandu where he is reading a mountaineering book that reminds him of his recent failed attempt to climb Ama Dablam with Bulle and others. At breakfast, he speaks to another tourist who cannot understand why Messner climbs, and suggests that this obsession is why Messner is divorced. At dinner, he sees Nena Holquin, who had been with at Ama Dablam with the New Zealand climber, Peter Hillary, whom Messner had rescued. Messner asks Nena if she will be his assistant in an upcoming lecture tour in Europe and she agrees. In the first excerpt from her diary, Nena recounts that she was getting over an unrequited crush on Hillary. She is powerfully drawn to Messner but late that night she is surprised when he announces his love for her because they hardly know each other. She debates whether to accept his offer concerning the lecture tour and decides she has nothing to lose. Two days later, the two fly to Munich.



Kanchung—Taboos and Mysteries

Kanchung—Taboos and Mysteries Summary and Analysis

Back in Europe, Bulle feels helpless among the crowds and Messner sympathizes. He has a long lecture circuit to undertake and can hardly wait to get back to the Himalayas. Even so, he enjoys the tour's question-and-answer interchanges with audiences, who often want to know about his plans for the future. They also ask why he climbs, and if he is running away from something, and he is happy to explain his pursuit of the challenge to be his best. He does not like signing autographs, and his mood toward his fans soon turns sour. He thinks they pursue him mostly because they are lonely and frightened, and want fantasy in their lives. Halfway through the lecture tour, he reads that eight mountains in China, including Everest, will be open to foreign alpinists, and he knows he will travel to China. Messner contacts Jurgen Lehman, who produced a documentary film on Messner's Ama Dablam attempt. Lehman pulls strings and a few weeks later, Messner and Lehman are on a plane to Peking (Beijing), where a delegate picks them up from the government's Chinese Mountaineering Association. Messner describes Beijing, including a few comments about Maoism, poverty, and the challenges of the contemporary socialistic society. These opinions do not have the ring of authority that accompanies Messner's thoughts on mountaineering. He gets a permit from the CMA for a solo climb of Everest, although he has to pay high fees for transport and accommodation that will raise his expedition costs to about \$50,000.

Back at home in Villnoss, Italy, Messner tells his old friend Jul about the permit. Jul reads his Tarot, and tells Messner he thinks he is mad to climb Everest alone. Messner doesn't mind. He thinks of another "madman," Englishman Maurice Wilson, which leads to a long summation of Wilson's attempt to climb Everest alone. This account, which the references on the book's last page indicate was taken from a book by Dennis Roberts, tells about Wilson's birth in 1898 and his early career as a soldier. Wounded in World War I, he then goes to London, America, and New Zealand. On a mail boat back to London, he meets several yogis who teach him meditation. He becomes convinced that praying and fasting would give him a purpose in life, which resolves in a plan to climb Everest solo. Wilson has no climbing experience, but he will not listen to those who warn him that his idea is mad. In 1933, he buys a Gypsy Moth biplane, which he intends to fly without oxygen from Freiberg, Germany, to the Himalayas. When he reached Cairo a week later, the press becomes excited. He finishes the flight to India but is refused permission to cross Nepal by foot, so he disguises himself as a Tibetan monk and enters Tibet illegally, with the help of three Sherpas. On his first assault of Everest, he reaches 6,250 meters but is turned back by a snowstorm. At camp, he rests for days, exhausted. He tries again, and almost dies from exposure. Incredibly, he tries a third time several days later and freezes to death.



Kanchung—Taboos and Mysteries

Kanchung—Taboos and Mysteries Summary and Analysis

Messner discovers the story of another attempt, by Canadian-born Earl Denman, who previously had climbed all eight Virunga volcanoes in Africa, barefoot and in shorts. In 1947, he attempted to climb Everest without oxygen. He intended to be accompanied on the climb by Sherpas Tenzing Norgay and Karma Paul, but the three were insufficiently equipped for fierce storms that thwarted their attempt. Denman never tried again. More than four years later, a Dane named Klavs Becker-Larsen also attacked the North Face. Larsen's Sherpas retreat because of a storm and the threat of falling stones. Edmund Hillary and Tensing Norgay finally reached the summit in 1953. Reviewing these efforts causes Messner to reconsider his own motives, one of which is to beat Naomi Uemura, but he writes that to experience a feeling of oneness with the world, he must challenge his physical limits. To live his life to its fullest, he must overcome his fear. In May of 1980, Messner reads about a successful climb of Everest's North Face by Japanese teams using two routes. Climbers, media, and Chinese support staff made a total of 93 people in the party, of whom one man climbed the last 200 meters. Messner explains that the last 2,500 meters accomplished alone define a solo ascent. A week later, two other Japanese climbers in the expedition reached the summit, using artificial oxygen.

Back in Italy, Messner begins training with steep uphill runs. One day, he reads an article about him that was written by a politician, Alexander Langer. It notes that Messner writes about his adventures to express himself rather than to tell a tale. Langer writes that Messner has been involved in thirty climbing expeditions and that he lost his brother, Gunther, on the Nanga Parbat climb. Messner continues to climb because of the challenge of the new. Messner is happy to see that, for once, it is accurate. Often, he writes, people who interview him twist his words to satisfy their own ideologies. The Langer is in an opposition political party, and some people object to Messner having spoken with him, but Messner shrugs this off. He studies his maps of Tibet. Nena, who has not been mentioned for some time, writes in her diary that she is delighted to be going to China but that Messner has erected a wall around himself ever since his divorce three years earlier. This makes her feel that her own inner strength is beginning to falter.



Tibet—The Yak Nomads

Tibet—The Yak Nomads Summary and Analysis

A journalist asks Messner and Nena to take walkie-talkies with them to Everest, which prompts an entry in Nena's diary. She writes that it would not make her feel better to talk from base camp with Messner while he climbs, because she knows it's important to him to have no technical aids. What's more, she wants to face her own fear for him, rather than anesthetize it through communication. Finally, she thinks that his absence from her might cause his feelings for her to clarify. About a week later, the two travel from Italy to Munich, where Messner's publisher gives him an article in which mountain climbing and Messner's efforts are described as a waste of courage. Messner is both amused and shocked by it. He then receives a telex from China saying that his request for an extension through September of his permit has been denied. He ignores it. On the flight to Peking, Nena writes in her diary that Messner is saying it was a mistake to bring her, and he even suggests that she agree to never see him again after the expedition. At this point, the hopelessly one-sided nature of their relationship is clear, and it is interesting that Messner never describes this feeling in his own text. He lets Nena's diary say it all, as if he is incapable of such frankness. When they land in Peking, Messner describes the city at some length, focusing on externals in the manner of a magazine travel article. He mentions that he and Nena are in a miserable psychological condition.

Nena's diary makes clear that the pressure they feel is from being alone with one another, cut off linguistically from others and forced to speak English with each other, a language with which Messner is not well-equipped. Messner continues his description of modern-day China, and adds a section about the history of Chinese attempts to climb Everest. The first attempt in 1960 was claimed to be successful, but the world did not believe the Chinese. The second attempt, in 1975, had photographic proof that nine people reached the summit. Messner and Nena fly to Chengdu, which is the next stop before Tibet and Messner indulges in a picturesque description of the rice paddies and peasants. He becomes very excited by the sight of the mountains when they reach Lhasa, Tibet. He gives a summary of Tibetan history since the Chinese takeover in 1951 that focuses on the Tibetan allegiance to Buddhism. He, Nena, and their interpreter, Tsao, visit the Dalai Lama's magnificent Potala palace and he tells how the Tibetans believe the Dalai Lama is a Bodhisattva, and enlightened redeemer of humankind. Messner expresses to Tsao his support of Tibetans who he believes are ill-suited, socially and religiously, for communism, an argument that saddens Tsao.



Tibet—The Yak Nomads

Tibet—The Yak Nomads Summary and Analysis

Messner, Nena, and Tsao leave Lhasa with a Chinese liaison officer named Cheng. As their two vehicles pass the ruins of a monastery and grazing yaks, Messner is delighted to be in Tibet, but he becomes indignant when they reach their primitive accommodations in Shigatse, Tibet's second largest city. In the morning, they visit a monastery and a market, and the next day they travel 300 kilometers to Shekar Dzong, an old fortress from which they can see Everest. The next day, they reach a pass at 5,000 meters and see a Tibetan hunter, which sends Messner on a rumination about Tibet's story of the creation, which began with rain that created the ocean that then frothed up to create land. Gods populated the land, but when they drank a juice that flowed from the earth, they lost their powers and became humans. In awe, Messner regards the mountains from the road constructed by the Chinese 15 years earlier. Far below he sees a valley leading to their destination, the ruined Rongbuk monastery. They pass through a very poor village where they buy a sheep for meat and arrive at Rongbuk, but the rubbish left there by former Everest expeditions depresses Messner. They travel farther into the wilderness to set up camp.

Messner describes the position of Everest at the narrowest part of the 2,000-kilometer-long Himalayan chain, where it is especially exposed to the rainy winds of the monsoon season. On the first morning from base camp, Messner hikes up to reconnoiter. Tsao has altitude sickness, so Nena sends him and Cheng back to Shigatse in the two vehicles. Messner, excited and humbled by the mountain, can hike only about 40 meters before he must rest, because of not yet being acclimated to the altitude. He thinks of his friend Bulle, a doctor who deals regularly with people suffering from the effects of sedentary lifestyles. The weather is terrible, so Nena and Messner hike to the base of another mountain called Lamna La that Messner wants to reconnoiter for a future climb. They walk all day to the mountain and part of the way back, without enough water or food. When they set up camp, they see Tibetan nomads nearby, who feed them. Back at base camp, they sleep deeply. The next day, they walk for four hours toward a glacial pass between Nepal and Tibet called the Nangpa La. They are picked up by a yak caravan, and then meet several Sherpas whom Messner knows from the Ama Dablam expedition. He explains that the Sherpas are a Tibetan race that centuries ago, traveled over the mountain passes into Nepal. They tell Messner that the Nangpa La has become dangerous to travel. Messner and Nena set up their tent at the edge of the glacier and return to base camp the next day.



North Col—Stuck in the Monsoon Snow

North Col—Stuck in the Monsoon Snow Summary and Analysis

Messner writes that he feels restless and takes a walk alone, but a diary entry from Nena provides a much different view. She writes that it was her idea to take a walk, but Messner was reading and told her to wait for him. She waited an hour-and-a-half, and when they were getting ready to go, he rushed out while she was changing into thicker socks. She ran after him a minute later, but he already was far ahead and moving quickly. She could not catch him. He gave her a look from a distance and disappeared, convincing her that he did not care if she was with him or not. Later, depressed, she sees a wolf, and in its eyes she sees Messner's eyes, but she writes that she is no longer sad because he went without her. Tsao returns from Shigatse and orders yaks to pack the gear to the advanced base camp, at 6,500 meters. Messner writes about his enjoyable walk and his look at Chomolungma, the Tibetan name for Everest. He talks about being captivated by the landscape and horizons. A short diary entry from Nena shows her disgust at the detritus left in the valley by previous expeditions. The next day, the group ascends through ice walls and sets up the advanced base camp. Messner's next objective will be to reconnoiter the North Col, a slope of Everest at 7000 meters that is full of crevasses and the danger of avalanches. He considers that no solo climbers ever have gotten beyond the North Col, and wonders if he is crazy to attempt this climb in the treacherous monsoon season.

Cheng and Tsao have gone back to the first base camp. Messner observes the North Col through binoculars for many hours over the following days. He will need four days of clear weather to reach the summit. While he and Nena get acclimatized to the height, Messner makes short training climbs. He begins thinking about who was first to reach the summit, and revisits the mystery of Mallory and Irvine, who disappeared on this North Face. He recaps the uncertainty over whether Edmund Hillary or Tenzing Norgay reached the summit first in 1953, and writes that he detests such claims of "victory" on mountains. Messner waits for three days to reconnoiter the North Col, and when he finally goes up, he struggles for hours but finally gets above it. The distant view awakens memories of his childhood in the Italian alps. He descends and goes with Nena to stay with Cheng and Tsao at the lower base camp. Nena writes in her diary of her admiration for Messner's restless energy. Messner makes another short climb to help him decide which route to take to the summit. Nena writes to her parents about the thrill of the adventure, her admiration for Reinhold, and her love for them.



Rongbuk—In the Wake of the Cultural Revolution

Rongbuk—In the Wake of the Cultural Revolution Summary and Analysis

Messner declares that the silence and loneliness of Everest are helping his relationship with Nena. All his tension prior to the start of the expedition has disappeared, he claims. As Messner waits for the right weather conditions, Tsao procures a jeep and the four of them, including Cheng, travel to a mountain called Shisha Pangma, which Messner has a permit from the Chinese government to reconnoiter. On the 100-kilometer drive there, Messner describes the landscape and people, who have been rarely seen by foreigners. Nena asks why Messner is interested in climbing Shisha Pangma, and in a question-and-answer exchange that reads like an interview, he describes himself as a sort of Sisyphus, the man in mythology who was condemned to roll a boulder up a hill, after which it would roll downhill, and he was start again, repeatedly. For Messner, his own psyche is the boulder, he says. He thinks about the repression of the Tibetans by the Chinese and argues that people who believe in past lives and karma should not be ruled by reason alone. On the way back from Shisha Pangma, they stop in a village and are invited into the tent of semi-nomadic people who give them barley beer. On a whim, they drive to the border of Tibet and Nepal. The Tibetan plateau here is lush greenery, with waterfalls and abundant birdlife, quite unlike the stark landscape they have left. Messner is enchanted.

The landscape reminds Messner of his South Tyrol homeland in Italy, especially because the people there are an ethnic minority that have suffered enforced foreign infiltration from Germany, as the Tibetans have from China. After two days in the forests north of Kathmandu, they return to the village of Shekar and buy provisions. The poor people crowd around the newcomers in fascination and Nena writes in her diary that she feels as if she is in a circus. She writes that when they return to Rongbuk, they both have stomach disorders, the weather has not changed yet, and Messner is depressed. They both practice climbing on big rocks to stay fit. Messner has diarrhea but will not take antibiotics because they would weaken him. After five days on August 13, Nena notes that the weather is finally becoming colder. Messner is delighted. His diarrhea is going away just as the monsoon stream from the Bay of Bengal is meeting with the monsoon from the Arabian Sea to create his anticipated break in the weather as the two cloud fronts meet. In the next day or two, he may have the clear conditions he needs. Throughout that long night, he is afraid, but also hopeful.



Chomolungma—Ascent and Descent

Chomolungma—Ascent and Descent Summary and Analysis

This major section describes Messner's solo assault on Everest. The meeting of the storm fronts has caused a suspension in the monsoon and Messner is acclimatized now. He realizes he cannot preplan or rehearse this unpredictable climb. Nena writes that she, too, is ready, and she feels now that she understands Messner better. He is a sensitive man behind a rough shell, and she loves traveling with him. As they pack, Messner thinks about scientific reading he has done on Himalayan weather. Excerpts from that material, define monsoon wind systems and indicate that shifting winds can cause an interruption of up to two weeks in the summer monsoon. Messner is convinced that the break has arrived. They hike to 6,000 meters and discover that their tent from their previous visit is still standing. They eat, and Messner declares that his restlessness is gone, but Nena writes in her diary that he is in a foul mood. Messner then writes that his newfound peace of mind is disappearing. He leaves the next morning before Nena has finished packing the tent. He opines that people cannot climb together above 6000 meters without disturbing each other's energy flow. They reach their tent at upper base camp and re-anchor it. Observing the melting landscape in the sun, Messner thinks that landscapes bring him closest to personal enlightenment. The next day, he ascends the North Col, the most dangerous part of the solo climb. He climbs quickly, feeling great, secures his rucksack below the ridge and returns to camp.

The next morning, Messner leaves early. Nena writes that he gave her a light kiss, and that was all. In the dark, the snow gives way under Messner and his headlamp goes out. When he comes to rest, he gets the headlamp working and sees that he has fallen into a crevasse. He panics, and promises himself that he will never climb again if he can get free. He then sees a small ramp on the opposite wall. He falls forward to make an arch over the crevasse, gets onto the ledge and follows it to the surface. He immediately ignores his promise to quit, and keeps going. He now must climb a steep snowfall to cross the crevasse. He keeps going, and fantasizes about seeing the tiny figures of Mallory and Irvine up ahead. Below, Nena writes that she watches Messner until he disappears, and feels great love for him. Messner goes slowly, tracing the route up the North-East Ridge. He is at 7,220 meters. He feels peaceful but must take frequent rest stops at this height. At 7,500 meters, he sees a fixed, red rope probably left by a Japanese expedition, which makes him think about being alone, equipped like a nomad. Now he is resting very often, and cannot find an appropriate bivouac spot. Exhausted, he finally sets up his tent and cooks, at 7,800 meters.



Chomolungma—Ascent and Descent

Chomolungma—Ascent and Descent Summary and Analysis

Resting, Messner mind clears and he feels confident that he can reach the summit in two more days. His tent is just big enough to lie in with his knees bent, but it will withstand storms up to 100 kilometers per hour. He wonders if Maurice Wilson would have made it to the top if he had gotten this far, and thinks it probable. Messner feels both peaceful and powerfully aroused. He feels as if he is with an invisible companion, and even finds himself speaking Italian, although his native language is South Tyrol German. He melts water for tea and eats cheese, but the effort is extreme even for this. A storm arises but abates, and he sleeps tolerably well. In the morning, the wind drops again. He makes coffee, and must force himself to go on, although he knows he would not descend now. The weather is fine, but after he has gone 50 meters, it suddenly worsens. Each step becomes an ordeal; he feels lonely and homesick. He gets into a rhythm of climbing, resting, and breathing that completely absorbs him. At 7,900 meters, the weather is good, and he sees that snow slabs have gone from the North Face. He immediately begins to cross the face, moving toward a feature called the Norton couloir that he can follow tomorrow to the summit. He feels detached now, rather than isolated. At this point, he feels convinced that Mallory and Irvine made to the "first step" or ridge below the summit, but died on the "second step."

Messner thinks he hears someone speaking to him, perhaps Mallory and Irvine. He senses their spirits. A mist envelopes everything, but he knows the way and does not panic. He saw a route leading above the second step, and he follows it, even though he cannot tell how far he has gone. The ascent seems endless and he is numbed. He realizes that he is above the second step, but is disappointed to see the altimeter showing only 8,220 meters. It is late afternoon, and he finds a place to bivouac on a rock outcrop. He gets into his sleeping bag with his loosened boots on, to keep them from freezing overnight. Nena writes of her concern for Messner, and of how possessed he is. She shouts her support for him toward the mountain, knowing he cannot hear. Messner is so tired that he feels he is hardly living, only vegetating. He can barely make soup, and he cannot sleep. Ice is lying in the tent. In the morning, he leaves his rucksack behind and climbs on all fours. The voices are there again, which also happened to him on Nanga Parbat and he knows is from insufficient oxygen. Light powder makes the climbing easier, but it gets steeper, and he feels in danger of falling. He creeps along for hours, moving like a zombie, and then suddenly comes upon an anchored tripod that he knows was left by the Chinese in 1975. It marks the summit.



Chomolungma—Ascent and Descent

Chomolungma—Ascent and Descent Summary and Analysis

A light snow falls on the summit, it is windless, and Messner has no view, but he does not mind. He feels like a corpse. He wonders if he must roll his mythical stone all his life, and thinks perhaps he himself is the summit. After 45 minutes, he has the strength to stand and begin the descent, which is much easier than the climb. His energy seems to be concentrated in his sight, hearing, and sense of smell. He is so tired that he sits and slides on the snow. After a rest, he tries to stand but almost steps into a crevasse. He dodges it, slips, and slides down the middle of an avalanche cone to the foot a glacier. He rises, slips again, and slides farther. He is at the bottom, and Nena appears from around a glacial ridge. Messner's vision goes black. He feels transparent, made of glass, hardly able to stand. He begins to weep, and Nena takes charge of him. In her diary, she writes that Messner was no longer consciously present when she found him, but she could sense all his feelings. His first question is, "Where are all my friends?" Nena replies that she is her friend, and she brings him back to camp, the strongest person she knows, yet leached to the soul. Over the next days, he recuperates, they go down to base camp, and Messner becomes more gruff again.

Nena writes that Messner screams at people over the poor accommodations in a village as they return to Lhasa, and he goes berserk at a driver who splashes mud on him, but then regains his composure and is happy again. Messner writes that it takes a week for him to recover. After the descent he is "infinitely melancholy," but that feeling slowly fades. He believes that the struggle has made him more of an individualist, detached from humanity. He feels merged with the elements. On the return to Lhasa, a small banquet is held for them in Shigatse, at which Messner tries to talk Tibetan politics, but the Chinese officials do not respond. The same thing happens at a banquet in Lhasa. He sees the Potala and wonders what will happen to Tibet. In Munich, he answers questions again from the media about why he climbed Everest alone, and reads a subsequent magazine article that characterizes him as an anti-hero. He goes back to Villnoss, visits his parents, and then returns to Munich. Reflecting that he was not meant for a contemplative life, he buys an air ticket for Kathmandu, intending to be in Nepal on September 17 for his 36th birthday. On the flight, he sees the Himalayas below him and beyond them, Tibet in the haze. No mention is made of Nena. This section ends with photos of the expedition, maps, images of Tibet and its people, and a letter in German to Messner from his mother.

Mount Everest—Chronicle and Reading List

Mount Everest—Chronicle and Reading List Summary and Analysis

This section offers a description of Mount Everest that reads like a short encyclopedia entry, followed by a chronological summary of plans, reconnaissances, attempts, and ascents of the mountain from 1892 to 1988. The first attempt was made in 1921. The most significant of the attempts summarized here were discussed at more length in the body of the text, but the chronicle has value as a quick reference, and because it mentions all attempts and ascents in order. The book's translators interrupt the chronicle after 1981 by an "Afterthought," penned in 1982. In third person, it describes a 1982 meeting between Messner and two participants in the 1924 Everest expedition on which Mallory and Irvine were lost. One of these participants, Professor Odell, agreed with Messner that he probably spotted the two climbers on the mountain's first step rather than its second step, but he still thought they might have cleared the second step. The translators note that Messner argues in the book that they could not have surmounted the second step without an intervening bivouac, which itself would have taken too much energy for them to reach the summit. An ice pick belonging to Mallory or Irvine had been found in 1933 below the first step, but in 1982, the Chinese announced that they had found other equipment above the second step in 1960. Messner agreed that if these items were found, Mallory's fiery spirit would not have allowed him to give up before reaching the summit. No photographic evidence of the find was provided, or explanation of why the information was withheld for two decades. The translators then continue with the chronicle of attempts and climbs through 1988, when Stacy Allison became the first American woman to reach the summit. At the end of the book, an alphabetized reading list is followed by picture credits, and a list of reference sources.



Characters

Reinhold Messner

The author, Reinhold Messner, is at the center of this book although he willingly shares the stage with Mount Everest. Above all else, Messner comes across as a driven man. He admits that even he does not fully understand why or how he manages to persevere in the face of exhaustion and fear. He does not portray himself as heroic, going so far as to describe himself at one point as timid, yet he also recognizes he has a drive to conquer mountains that is so unremitting, it is rarely found even in other mountaineers. Messner is reflective, although perhaps not profoundly so. He is appreciative and respectful of cultures that are foreign to him and he has a deep reverence for Nature. Several times in the book he suggests that his personal strength might somehow derive from the landscape, as if it arose from the rocks themselves. He is not religious but he seems to be quite spiritual. Messner also can be a difficult companion as the book's excerpts from the diary of his girlfriend, Nena Holquin, clearly show. His moods are mercurial, ranging from lightheartedness to warmth to surliness and cold indifference. He seems have a deep need for the love and support of people that is countervailed by an equally deep need at times to get away from them. He can become distracted and introspective to the point of non-communication and when he wants to do something or go somewhere, he often has trouble waiting for anyone who wants to accompany him. At times, he is languorous and at other times, he cannot be held down. Messner, who was thirty-five when the events in this book occurred, seems to be a complicated man with a good heart, a powerful ego, and an incomplete understanding of himself.

Nena Holquin

Nena Holquin is Messner's girlfriend and helpmate during his assault on Everest. She is the only one who goes with him to the upper base camp and welcomes him when he returns, depleted and almost incoherent after his successful climb. When Nena first enters the book, she is just getting over an unrequited crush on the mountaineer Peter Hillary, who has gone back to New Zealand after an unsuccessful attempt to climb Ama Dablam during which he and his partner were rescued by Messner and his climbing partners. When Messner asks her to accompany him as an assistant on a lecture tour in Europe, she agrees. She admits to being surprised when he says he loves her because they hardly know each other. The romance that obviously develops between them is never described, although Nena's diary entries give a clear picture of her growing attachment to him. She sees herself as a person who could not be a conventional housewife and who needs to be challenged by an exceptionally strong-willed man. A fit and accomplished climber in her own right, she has determination and the ability to withstand hardships without complaint. Even Messner expresses his admiration for her strength of character. Her bonding with Messner increases as they travel together, although she frequently mentions how difficult he can be and how she worries that he has no need for her personally. He just needs someone to help him as he prepares for



the solo climb. Nena admits that she deliberately overlooks these warning signs and she feels deeply attached to him while he is on the climb and after he returns. The breakup between Nena and Messner after the climb is implied but never directly addressed. How Nena copes with it remains a mystery.

George Mallory

George Leigh Mallory, one of the best British mountain climbers of his day, was in the first party ever to attempt to scale Mount Everest in 1921. He died during a subsequent attempt in 1924. Messner recounts the story of Mallory's several attempts to climb Everest and describes Mallory as an early hero of his, especially because Mallory was among the first to oppose the use of artificial oxygen by climbers. In 1921, Mallory and two others forged through violent weather on Everest to 7,000 meters, and saw a route to the top before they descended. The next year, he and others ascended to more than 8,000 meters. Mallory and a man named Somervell launched another effort but were caught in an avalanche that killed seven porters. In 1924, Mallory was with a party whose lead climbers reached 8,572 meters before turning back. Mallory, an early opponent of the use of artificial oxygen in mountaineering, was an early hero of Messner. In 1924, Mallory and his climbing partner, Andrew Irvine, were briefly observed by another expedition member as they made for the summit, but neither man returned. Whether either one or both made it to the top has long been debated. Messner's thoughts are periodically occupied with this mystery throughout the book.

Andrew Irvine

Andrew Irvine is the climber who accompanied Mallory on the ill-fated assault of Everest's second step in 1924. Irvine was an expert in the use of artificial oxygen, which the two opted to use during their ascent, based on a unanimous vote of the entire party before the pair began their climb.

N.E. Odell

N.E. Odell was a participant of the British attempts on Everest in the 1920s, who from advanced base camp saw Irvine and Mallory briefly near the first step before they disappeared forever.

General C.G. Bruce

Brigadier General C.G. Bruce was the leader of all three British attempts to climb Mount Everest in the early 1920s.



Captain Finch

Captain Finch is a member of the British expeditions who experimented with artificial oxygen in England before the second attempt in 1922.

Captain Geoffrey Bruce

Capt. Geoffrey Bruce, a nephew of the general who led the expeditions, climbed with Captain Finch on the second attempt, during which they reached 8,321 with oxygen supplies.

Dr. Somervell

Dr. H. Somervell was one of the climbers in the three British expeditions of the 1920s. On the third attempt in 1924, Somervell reached 8,540 meters without artificial oxygen.

Major E.F. Norton

Major E.F. Norton was another key climber during the British expeditions of the 1920s. He took over leadership of the third expedition after General Bruce fell ill with malaria on the approach march and fell out of the party. Major Norton reached 8,750 meters without artificial oxygen on that third attempt in 1924, which remained a height record without oxygen until 1978.

Peter Hillary

Peter Hillary is a New Zealand mountaineer, and the son of Sir Edmund Hillary, one of the first two men to reach the summit of Everest in 1953. Before Messner's solo climb of Everest, Peter Hillary and a companion get stranded on the Himalayan mountain Ama Dablam, and Messner rescues both men. This event is alluded to in the book but is not described in detail. Hillary does not appear in the book.

Oswald Oelz

Oswald Oelz, nicknamed Bulle, is a doctor and a climbing companion of Messner who was on the Ama Dablam expedition. After the climb, Bulle returns with Messner to Europe, where he has trouble readjusting to everyday life.

Tenzing Norgay

Tenzing Norgay is a famous Sherpa climber who accompanies Sir Edmund Hillary to the summit of Everest in 1953. Later, there is some debate concerning which of the two



men was first to reach the top, and therefore was the first person ever known to complete the climb.

Maurice Wilson

Maurice Wilson is an Englishman with virtually no mountaineering experience who attempts to climb Everest solo in 1934 and freezes to death on its slopes. Messner, who is deeply impressed by Wilson's courage, relates this tale in detail, adapted from a book by another author.

Elizabeth Hawley

Elizabeth Hawley is a journalist based in Kathmandu who gives Messner important information about the availability of mountaineering permits from the Chinese government and the imminent opening of roads into Tibet.

Naomi Uemura

Naomi Uemura is a well-known Japanese alpinist who gets permission to attempt a solo climb of Everest in the winter of 1980. News of this plan prompts Messner to move up his plans for a solo attempt to the monsoon season in August of 1980, so he can beat Uemura to the summit. Later, Uemura's solo attempt fails.

Tsao

Tsao is the interpreter for Messner and Nena on the Everest expedition.

Cheng

Cheng is the liaison officer for the Chinese Mountaineering Association who accompanies Messner and Nena on the expedition.

Gunther Messner

Gunther Messner is Reinhold's brother, who died during a climb on Nanga Parbat in 1970. Messner does not address this tragedy in the book, although he reprints a newspaper article about him that mentions it.

Alexander Langer

Alexander Langer is an Italian politician who writes the profile of Messner that is reprinted in the book and which mentions Gunther Messner's death.



Earl Denman

Earl Denman is a Canadian-born adventurer who sneaked into Tibet in 1947 and tried but failed to climb Everest solo, without oxygen.

Klavs Becker-Larsen

Klavs Becker-Larsen is a Dane who tried and failed to climb Everest in 1951. He also sneaked into Tibet but his Sherpas refused to set up camp on the North Col, and Larsen had to abandon the effort.

Karma Paul

Karma Paul is a Sherpa who helped many early climbers including Denman and Becker-Larsen.

Sir Francis Younghusband

Sir Francis Younghusband is a British mountaineer who was an early proponent of trying to climb Everest, and seems to be much admired by Messner.

The Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama is the monk-king of Tibet, exiled by the Chinese. Messner sees his photograph everywhere he goes in the country but the Dalai Lama does not appear in any scenes in the book.



Objects/Places

Mount Everest

Mount Everest, called Chomolungma by the Tibetans, which approximately means "Goddess Mother of the Snow." Everest is the world's tallest mountain and the focus of Messner's effort as depicted in this book to climb it solo, without artificial oxygen or other "high-tech" aids. Located in a section of the Himalayan range that forms the border between Tibet and Nepal, the mountain is 8,848 meters tall. Its changeable weather, threat of avalanches, dangerous crevasses, snow and ice, and sheer height pose formidable challenges to Messner and make the mountain a central player in the drama of the book.

Tibet

Tibet is the long-isolated country on the northern side of Everest and surrounded by China whose troops occupy it. Messner gets permission from the Chinese government to make his assault on Everest from the Tibetan side. Throughout much of the book, Messner marvels at the majesty of the Tibetan landscape, admires the gentle Buddhism of the people, and fears for their future if tourism should take hold there.

Villnoss

Villnoss is in South Tyrol, Italy, within the Dolomites mountain range, where Reinhold Messner was born and keeps a house. He returns there occasionally during the book, to visit his parents and to stay in his home as he prepares for a lecture tour or a mountain-climbing expedition. Messner credits the mountainous landscape of Villnoss and his early climbing experiences with developing his fascination for mountaineering.

Lhasa

Lhasa is the major city of Tibet where the Dalai Lama keeps his palace, called the Potala and where Messner goes with Nena before and after the Everest adventure.

Rongbuk

Rongbuk is a valley in Tibet that contains the ruins of an old monastery and is the starting point for expeditions to climb the North Face of Everest.



The North Col

The North Col is a 7,000-meter-high icy pass furrowed with avalanche cones on the North Face of Everest that no solo climber has ever traversed before Messner. It is the most difficult and dangerous part of his climb.

Nanga Parbat

Nanga Parbat is a mountain in the Himalayas that Messner climbed solo in 1978, which demonstrated to him the possibility of repeating the feat on Everest.

Kathmandu

Kathmandu is the largest city in Nepal, where Messner gathers information, obtains permits, and does other business related to organizing his mountain-climbing expeditions.

Shigatse

Shigatse is Tibet's second largest city after Lhasa where Messner and his helpers gather supplies. It has the remains of a major fort, destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution.

Munich

Munich is a city in Germany where Messner's publisher has offices and where Messner goes before and after his climbs and before speaking tours.

Ama Dablam

Ama Dablam is a Himalayan mountain that Messner and companions had attempted to climb prior to the Everest expedition. During that attempt, Messner had to rescue New Zealand mountaineer Peter Hillary and his climbing companion.

Shisha Pangma

Shisha Pangma is another Himalayan mountain that Messner and Nena reconnoiter while they await a break in the weather to begin Messner's solo assault on Everest.



Nangpa La

Nangpa La is a mountainous pass between Nepal and Tibet that Sherpas have used for centuries. Messner and Nena go there while they await the weather to change for the Everest climb, but are told that the pass is dangerous nowadays.

Everest View Hotel

The Everest View Hotel on the Nepalese side of the mountain is frequented by tourists when Messner is there early in the book. He answers questions tourists ask about climbing but believes that they cannot understand how he feels about what he does.

Darjeeling

Darjeeling is an Indian city which was a staging point for early expeditions to Everest, especially by British climbers when India was part of the British Empire. Messner mentions it in his historical accounts of climbs.

Chinese Mountaineering Association

The Chinese Mountaineering Association or CMA is a government body that issues permits for climbing or visiting Himalayan mountains. Messner finds his dealings with the CMA to be difficult because of his hatred of bureaucracy but he manages to get along with the organization.

Monsoon

The monsoon is a wind system. It comes from two directions during the monsoon season at Everest and when the cloud banks that form from the two systems meet one another, a break occurs in the monsoon weather. This is the period for which Messner awaits to begin his solo climb.



Themes

Man against Nature

A famous triad of literary themes is man against nature, man against man, and man against himself. It is hard to imagine a more classic expression of man against nature than the first solo climb of the world's tallest mountain. Part of what makes the theme compelling is the notion of Nature as the great mother or nurturer of all living things including humans. Through much of recorded history, at least until the age of high technology and advanced science revealed the damage humans have done to the earth, Nature was regarded as too big to harm. It was inexhaustible, unpredictable, and all-powerful. It was an opponent to be conquered. The notion of stewardship of Nature's resources played little part in people's thinking. In this book, Messner has a profound regard for Mount Everest, the Himalayas, and the isolated and religious world of the Tibetans. He sees all this as a treasure to be honored and protected yet he is driven to climb the mountain, even while acknowledging that trailblazers such as he is bring tourists, development, and change in their wake. Messner is appalled at the trash that other Everest expeditions have left in the valley and he abhors the news that the Chinese intend to build a hotel for climbers near the foot at the mountain. None of this is enough to keep him away from Everest. He puzzles over his compulsion to climb, offering several explanation that revolve around facing his personal fears and feeling fully alive only when he has exhausted and challenged himself to his absolute limits. Even so, when the time comes to climb, all such considerations disappear. His philosophizing evaporates in the thin air of man against nature. It is a primal experience, perhaps beyond description or even complete understanding.

Man against Man

The literary theme of man against man is often about combat, but such wars do not necessarily require armaments or take place on the battlefield. In the case of this book, it is actually man against woman in the well-known battle of the sexes. The twist is that Messner's girlfriend and companion, Nena Holquin, is a strong climber in her own right, who understandably sees herself as anything but a stay-at-home partner. She longs to attempt the summit with him even though she recognizes that the feat is probably beyond her skill level and that Messner must climb Everest alone. She agrees that he should not carry a walkie-talkie, in part because she rejects the comfort it might provide to her as she waits alone for him at upper base camp. The relationship between the couple is rocky and Nena is not even sure whether Messner will want to remain with her after the expedition. She hopes that his solo ordeal on Everest will help him to clarify his feelings for her. She writes in her diary that Messner has expressed love for her and can be tender but he also is prone to selfishness, emotional cruelty, and dismissal of her. She tries to withhold part of her own commitment to him as a form of self-protection but this is obviously difficult for her to do. The push-and-pull nature of this relationship is enhanced by the threat and majesty of Everest. It is as if the battle between them, the



battles within them, and the battle with the mountain are intertwined in all their terror and beauty.

Man against Himself

Man against himself is a literary theme of internal conflict that can take many forms. A person might wrestle with powerful effects of his or her past, including physical or emotional traumas. Someone might try to change or develop psychologically. Usually, the person must face fear or aversion and the story's drama then lies in whether this demon will be overcome. In this book, Messner frequently considers his need to face and conquer his fear of death by climbing mountains. For him, this fear is related to a sense of loneliness or isolation from others. He freely admits that he needs the company of people. On several occasions, he mentions that he admires the Buddhist monks who isolate themselves for years in remote monasteries patiently seeking enlightenment but Messner admits that he could never do this. Even so, he often becomes impatient and difficult in the presence of other people. This contradictory attitude toward others derives from conflict between his need to be alone and his fear of loneliness, which is an emotion that could be described as the death of society for him. Messner compounds the risk to his life in climbing Everest by doing it alone without reliance on any companion to throw him a rope or a word of encouragement at a critical moment. This increased risk to his life, which comes from the lack of companionship forces Messner to rely entirely on himself. Only in that way can he confront and defeat his fear of loneliness, which manifests on the mountain as fear of death.



Style

Perspective

This story is principally told in the first person from Reinhold Messner's point of view, although other viewpoints enter in several ways. The most significant variation on Messner's first person is the regular interruption of the text with excerpts from Nena Holquin's diary. Also in first person, these entries provide interesting breaks from Messner's ideas and emotions because Holquin's thoughts are frequently much different than those of Messner concerning the same events. Indeed, it seems that Messner includes these diary entries for just that reason, even though Nena's opinions sometimes make Messner look mean and selfish. Journalistic-style segments that describe topography, weather, or political issues provide other interruptions of Messner's narrative. These segments are sometimes separated in boxes and sometimes are integrated into the main text. One other deviation for Messner's first-person perspective occurs at the end of the book, when the translators add a third-person account of Messner's meeting, two years after his solo ascent of Everest, with two members of the British expeditions in the early 1920s. The chronicle of all ascents and attempts to climb Everest that is provided toward the end of the book is also in the reportorial style of journalism. This combination of first-person opinions from Messner and Nena with objective accounts of events succeeds in creating a multidimensional effect that balances what otherwise could be a narrow and perhaps monotonous view from Messner alone.

Tone

The book's tone varies with the author's fluctuating mood throughout the story. At times, he is irritated by bureaucracy or by what he sees as the inability of others to appreciate why he risks his life to climb mountains. Sometimes, he is impatient with Nena or annoyed by what he says is her ill temper. At other times, he is hopeful and buoyant. He is frequently awed by Mount Everest and by the calm dignity of the politically repressed and poor Tibetan people. Sometimes he battles fear, loneliness, and homesickness. On the mountain, his state of mind varies from exhilarated to frightened to exhausted. All these emotions give the book a shifting, unpredictable mood, which, curiously, reflects the highly changeable nature of the weather and climbing conditions on Mount Everest. Most often, though, the book's tone is contemplative. Messner works hard to understand his own motivations and those of mountaineers who preceded him in attempts to climb Everest. He thinks hard about why people push themselves to their physical limits and risk death on mountainsides. He also tries to understand the history of the Tibetan people and their deep attachment to the Dalai Lama. He contemplates his own affinity with landscapes, wondering what role they play in his self-image. Such thoughts permeate the book, and if any one adjective best describes the tone, it would probably be "questing." While challenging himself physically and mentally, Messner is trying hard to figure out who he is.

Structure

The book has no chapters but is divided into eight sections, each with its own title. Subtitles within each section further subdivide the text. The book also is broken up throughout its length by photographs, maps, and boxes of information. Most of the illustrations are black-and-white but two sections of color plates also are included near the front of the book and near the back. Each section begins with a double-page and black-and-white photo over which the title of the section appears. A short and inspirational quote, usually from a Tibetan poem or proverb, follows each double-page spread at the start of a section. Copies of newspaper articles, posters, maps, and letters also are scattered throughout the text. Nena Holquin's diary entries are set in a different typeface from Messner's text in order to clearly differentiate the two contributions. Overall, the effect of these graphic design and structural elements is of a coffee table book or an elongated magazine article rather than a conventional non-fiction book. In that sense, the structure and design play significant roles in directing and maintaining the reader's attention.

Quotes

"Of the twenty highest mountains in the world thirteen stand completely or partly within the boundaries of Nepal" (Fairytale and Reality, pg. 27.)

"In us all the longing remains for the primitive condition in which we can match ourselves against Nature, have the chance to have it out with her and thereby discover ourselves" (Fairytale and Reality, pg. 40.)

"How should such a person, to whom pleasant well-being and feeling of security in a society are important, understand that I have my most intense feelings of existence only when, through strain and most extreme exertion, I achieve the bounds of human possibility, and attempt to push these bounds still further?" (Fairytale and Reality, pg. 51.)

"Only when an idea has become a passion does it become independent and seek an outlet, at any price" (Fairytale and Reality, pg. 53.)

"I want to have the feeling of being stronger than my fear, that is why again and again I place myself in situations in which I meet it in order to overcome it" (Taboos and Mysteries, pg. 87.)

"I write not so much from the need to tell a tale, but because I want to express, to fashion, to design" (Taboos and Mysteries, pg. 93.)

"With its white monsoon snow cloak on its shoulders, on which the still, dark rock head of the summit pyramid sits, it looks like a wonderful bird with outstretched wings. Now I understand the old wisdom of the lamas: 'Everest is a bird which no other bird can fly over'" (Stuck in the Monsoon Snow, pg. 147.)

"I can see that this high plateau is alive like the sea, that it smells like hide, that it vibrates like a sea of lava" (Stuck in the Monsoon Snow, pg. 150.)

"All these noises remind me of synthesized music. The glacier groans, snorts and squeaks" (Ascent and Descent, pg. 198.)

"Nothing in life has brought me closer to enlightenment than landscapes. They have stamped me and are my mentors" (Ascent and Descent, pg. 203.)

"The sweat of fear breaks from all my pores, covers my body with a touch which is as icy as the iridescent blue-green ice walls between which I am imprisoned" (Ascent and Descent, pg. 207.)

"Day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, step by step I force myself to do something against which my body rebels. At the same time this condition is only bearable in activity" (Ascent and Descent, pg. 228.)



"The bridge of wife and friends, the embodiment in a community—supports which I need—I experience now for what they are: aids to endure the awareness of loneliness" (Ascent and Descent, pg. 232.)

"I have not lost the mastery of my feelings, there are actually no more feelings. I consist only of will" (Ascent and Descent, pg. 244.)

"He has so expended himself that only reaching the summit could have given him the strength to survive, to return. Here he is, the strongest person I know totally at an end, leached even to the soul" (Ascent and Descent, pg. 252.)



Topics for Discussion

In the book, Reinhold Messner frequently considers why he climbs mountains. What do these thoughts about challenging himself, facing his fears, and being the first to reach Everest's summit while climbing solo tell us about Messner's personality? Do you think there is anything he does not fully understand about himself or about what is most important in life?

At the end of the book, Messner does not mention what happens between him and Nena Holquin. Do you think they stayed together? How would you describe their relationship and the ways they interact with each other?

Messner is worried about the potential impact of tourism on the people and landscape of the Himalayas. How would you describe his attitude toward the region and its people. Do his impressions seem in any way contradictory or problematic, coming as they do from an outsider?

Why do you think Nena goes on the expedition? What does she get out of it? In what ways would you say her attitudes are conventional, and in what ways are they unconventional?

Sometimes Messner seems to enjoy the company of others and sometimes he does not. Describe what you think is going on in his mind about the advantages and disadvantages of being solitary.

At one point when he is climbing Everest, Messner declares that he has come closest to enlightenment through landscapes, which are his mentors, than from any other influence. What does he mean? How does he relate to landscapes?

Messner has achieved many difficult feats and is famous. What qualities does he discuss in this book that are necessary for great achievements? Do you think these qualities are sufficient to become a successful person or do you think there is there difference between achievement and success?