Into Thin Air Study Guide

Into Thin Air by Jon Krakauer

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Into Thin Air tells the story of the disaster in which several climbers died on the slopes of Mt. Everest in 1996, as witnessed by Jon Krakauer, a journalist who is also one of the climbers to reach the summit that year. Led by Rob Hall, one of the most highly respected climbers in the world at that time, the team Krakauer climbs with becomes split up after a series of small incidents and a sudden change in the weather, leaving five of his teammates dead on the mountain. Another expedition led by the flamboyant Scott Fischer also loses climbers in the storm, including Fischer himself. Krakauer recounts the events of the ill-fated expeditions from his own personal experience and makes several suggestions as to what may have led to the climbers being caught high on the mountain when they might have turned back and remained safe. He also examines his own role in the events as they unfolded, and how much he himself is to blame for what happened.

In 1996, several commercial expeditions led by professional climbers set out to climb to the summit of Mt. Everest, the highest point on Earth. Outdoor journalist Jon Krakauer accompanies one of these teams of climbers as an assignment for Outside Magazine to write about the increased commercialization of climbing, in particular the climbing of Everest. Krakauer is an experienced climber, although not at high altitude, and it is a lifelong dream of his to climb Everest. His team, led by the well-known New Zealander Rob Hall, is made up of people of varying strength and ability, and from the beginning, Krakauer is doubtful that all will reach the top.

As the climbers get to know one another while making several acclimatization climbs up the mountain, they start to feel more like a team. Mountain climbing is still a solitary endeavor in many ways, Krakauer explains, however, and there are times when a climber must take care of himself first. Krakauer's position is even more complicated as he is along as a journalist, whose job is to report on the people he climbs with. As the expedition proceeds and begins to experience problems, Krakauer's role on the team begins to blur until he eventually becomes one of the guides after two of the group's leaders die on the mountain.

Despite various injuries and setbacks, Hall leads his team to the high plateau called the South Col, from which they will make their attempt on the summit on May 10, 1996. Hall tells his group that they will climb until 2 p.m., at which point they will turn back, whether they have reached the top or not. Some climbers, exhausted, turn back on their own long before reaching the top and return to Camp Four on the South Col. Krakauer is one of the few climbers that day who reach the summit before the 2 p.m. deadline. On his way down, he runs into a jam of climbers, including Hall, still on their way up. For some reason, Hall has ignored his own deadline and continued to climb, along with another climber in his group.

As Krakauer begins to descend, he notices clouds forming where the sky had earlier been clear. A thunderstorm sweeps in with high winds, reaching its peak just as Krakauer arrives at the relative safety of Camp Four. The other climbers above him on

the mountain are in danger. Some make their way back to within 1,000 feet of the camp, but become lost in the blinding snow and have to huddle together to stay warm. They are eventually found, but two of them are left behind for dead. Amazingly, one of these climbers later revives and finds his way back to camp, badly frostbitten, but alive.

Near the summit, the leader Rob Hall has stopped descending, staying with one his clients, a climber named Doug Hansen. They become stranded by the storm and cannot continue. Hansen dies on the mountain. Hall survives for a time and is in radio contact with others down below, but rescue attempts to reach him have to turn back when the bad weather continues. After speaking with his wife by satellite phone, Hall ends radio contact. His body is discovered by climbers several days later.

Krakauer takes on the role of guide to the remaining climbers in his group and helps them down the mountain to Base Camp. He writes about his own self-searching in looking for the events that led up to the disaster, but is plagued by uncertainty. Upon returning home to Seattle, Krakauer writes the magazine article he was hired to complete and faces open criticism of his role in the doomed expedition. He discovers after the article is published that he has made a critical error in describing the events. Due to his own disorienting lack of oxygen while on the mountain, he mistakenly thought that one of the guides had accidentally fallen from a mountain cliff during the storm when in fact the guide had set off up the mountain to help Hall, dying in the attempt. Krakauer is left to face this mistake and to ask himself repeatedly if he could have done more to help his fellow climbers.

Everest Summit: May 10, 1996 - 29,028 Feet

Everest Summit: May 10, 1996 - 29,028 Feet Summary and Analysis

Into Thin Air tells the story of the disaster in which several climbers died on the slopes of Mt. Everest in 1996, as witnessed by Jon Krakauer, a journalist who is also one of the climbers to reach the summit that year. Led by Rob Hall, one of the most highly respected climbers in the world at that time, the team Krakauer climbs with becomes split up after a series of small incidents and a sudden change in the weather, leaving five of his teammates dead on the mountain. Another expedition led by the flamboyant Scott Fischer also loses climbers in the storm, including Fischer himself. Krakauer recounts the events of the ill-fated expeditions from his own personal experience and makes several suggestions as to what may have led to the climbers being caught high on the mountain when they might have turned back and remained safe. He also examines his own role in the events as they unfolded, and how much he himself is to blame for what happened.

Krakauer opens the book at the top of Mt. Everest. He has reached the summit, the realization of a long time fantasy, but now he is too exhausted to care. Thin air, lack of sleep and illness have left him drained, and the low oxygen has affected his mental processes.

Krakauer takes photos of Anatoli Boukreev and Andy Harris, two guides who reach the summit about the same time, then turns to begin the long descent. Looking back down the mountain, he notices for the first time a cloud formation where the sky had been clear just an hour previously. Krakauer jumps abruptly to the end of the story. After the disaster, he says, people would ask why the climbers did not turn back after the sudden weather change. He says he cannot speak for the guides, but that he himself saw nothing threatening in the sky that day.

Krakauer has already written a magazine article outlining the events covered in the book, and the disaster that killed several climbers has received wide news coverage at the time of the publication. Krakauer is therefore able to assume that his readers are already aware of the basic details of the story and "give away" the ending. It is the details, along with Krakauer's personal observations, which are promised in the book.

Krakauer begins his descent, worries as his oxygen tank is running low. On his way down, he is "alarmed" to find a stream of climbers lined up to ascend to the summit. He must wait for them to pass before continuing down. Harris comes up behind him and Krakauer asks him to reach back and turn down the regulator on his tank to preserve oxygen while he waits. Harris does so. Krakauer unexpectedly begins to feel better, but then suddenly feels like he is suffocating. In his own confusion, Harris has turned the

tank all the way up instead of down. Krakauer is now out of oxygen. He grows impatient waiting for the other climbers to pass.

Among the ascending climbers, Krakauer sees members of his own guided group, including Rob Hall, the leader, Yasuko Namba and Doug Hansen. At the end of the line of climbers is Scott Fischer, the leader of another guided group. Krakauer notes that Fischer looks beat. Krakauer descends to the South Summit where he gets a new tank of oxygen. It begins to snow and visibility drops. K imagines his fellow climbers above him, taking time to stop at the summit for pictures, unaware that time is becoming increasingly scarce.

Dehra Dun, India: 1852 - 2,234 Feet

Dehra Dun, India: 1852 - 2,234 Feet Summary and Analysis

Krakauer backs up to give some history of the determination of Mt. Everest as the highest point on earth. The year is 1852, and the British government has undertaken a complete survey of India, which it controls as a colony. Data taken from the surveys is computed by hand by mathematicians to determine elevation. The measurement of the peak of Everest, then called Peak XV, had been made three years earlier. Now the measurements had been compiled and computed and its height estimated at 29,002 feet. In a footnote, Krakauer explains that modern techniques using satellites and lasers have revised this measurement by 26 feet to 29,028 feet. Sir Andrew Waugh, the Surveyor General of India, named the peak after Sir George Everest, his predecessor.

Shortly after this determination, Krakauer says, people started to think about climbing Everest. This would not happen for another 101 years, however, after fifteen expeditions and the deaths of 24 people. Krakauer gives a brief history of some of these expeditions, including one in 1924 in which two British climbers may have reached the summit. They did not return to camp, however, so there is no evidence. The first climbers known to reach the summit are Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, who complete the climb in 1953.

Krakauer relates his own personal connection to the climbing of Everest. Born shortly after the first ascent, he grows up idolizing the climbers who tackle Everest, dreaming of climbing it one day himself. A man from his hometown, Willi Unsoeld, becomes the first to climb Everest by the West Ridge, a route that had never been used before.

As Krakauer grows, he becomes an avid climber, working as a carpenter and fisherman to finance his climbing trips. Like many other "serious" climbers, he says, he begins to look at Everest differently, as a non-technical climb that is given more attention than it deserves. His "snobbery" is deepened, he says, when in 1986 a guide escorts an inexperienced climber named Dick Bass to the summit. Prior to this, Krakauer says, Everest was an exclusive goal. Now, it appears that anybody can climb it.

The numbers of climbers begins to increase rapidly, many of them clients of professional guided groups who have only moderate climbing experience. The governments of Nepal and China begin to sell permits to capitalize on the increased traffic, and the Sherpas of Nepal find steady work as guides.

Krakauer, a journalist, proposes to Outside Magazine that he write an article about this increased commercialization of Everest by joining a guided climbing group. The magazine is interested, but balks at paying the $65,000 in fees and expenses to send Krakauer on the climb. Krakauer is an experienced climber, but in recent years has scaled back. He is now married and is making a living as a writer. He is not in as good

condition physically as he has been. He knows that common sense would dictate that he not try anything as difficult and dangerous as climbing Mt. Everest. Nevertheless, when the magazine editor calls him to agree to send him with a guided group led by Rob Hall, he accepts immediately.

Over Northern India: March 29, 1996 - 30,000 Feet

Over Northern India: March 29, 1996 - 30,000 Feet Summary and Analysis

Krakauer is in an airliner, flying over the Himalayas to Katmandu, Nepal. He looks through the small plane window at the high peaks, including the summit of Everest. It seems absurd, he thinks, to be planning to climb to the height of a cruising airplane, nearly 30,000 feet.

He is greeted at the airport by Andy Harris, a tall man from New Zealand. Harris is one of the guides of the group Krakauer will climb with. As they wait for another member of the group to come through customs, the two men talk. Krakauer learns that Harris has not climbed Everest before.

At the hotel where the group is booked to stay, Krakauer meets Rob Hall, their leader. Hall is a very tall man from New Zealand with a full beard. He is gregarious and funny, and Krakauer likes him right away. Hall is the head of Adventure Consultants, a company that leads groups like this on climbing trips.

Hall is a school dropout who became a professional climber, using his organizational skills and publicity savvy to attract sponsorship from corporations to support his climbing. With a partner named Gary Ball, Hall climbed the highest points on the seven continents within seven months. Realizing that to continue in the field means continually increasing the difficulty of the climbs, the two men decide to go into professional guiding.

They reach some success as professional guides, but soon attract criticism from Sir Edmund Hillary, a fellow New Zealander who believes that the increasing commercialization of Everest is disrespectful. Hall is hurt by the criticism. He is dealt another blow when his climbing partner, Ball, dies from cerebral edema brought on by climbing at high altitude. Hall continues to build his business and soon has one of the best success rates of the professional guide companies. He also charges the highest fees.

Two days after arriving in Katmandu, Hall's group gathers to fly by helicopter to Lukla, a village from which they will hike to Everest Base Camp. On the cramped flight, Krakauer evaluates the other climbers in his group. Lou Kasischke is a lawyer who has climbed six of the seven summits of the continents. Yasuko Namba is an executive from Japan who has also climbed six of the seven summits. Beck Weathers is a pathologist from Texas. Stuart Hutchison is a Canadian cardiologist. John Taske is an anesthesiologist from Australia. Frank Fischbeck is a publisher from Hong Kong who has made three attempts at Everest before, never reaching the summit but coming with a few hundred

feet before turning back. Doug Hansen is a postal worker who climbed with Hall the previous year, but also turned back close to the summit.

Krakauer likes the people he will be climbing with, but is uneasy about having to rely on their unknown climbing ability. Trusting one's climbing companions is crucial, Krakauer says, as a mistake made by one can easily affect the whole group. Part of Hall's job, Krakauer realizes, is to make up for the different levels of experience among the group members. Here, Krakauer is setting up a slightly false trail, hinting that the disaster that will beset the group might be the result of inexperienced climbers when in fact, by his account, the guides may be more to blame.

Phakding: March 31, 1996 - 9,186 Feet

Phakding: March 31, 1996 - 9,186 Feet Summary and Analysis

From Lukla, the group hikes to a small village called Phakding to spend the night. From there, they travel to Namche, the home of many Sherpas. They stay in an inn called the Khumbu Lodge, where Krakauer meets Mike Groom, a quiet Australian and the third of the guides for his group.

Krakauer describes the Sherpa culture. There are about 20,000 Sherpa people in Nepal he states, many living in the Khumbu region where his group is staying. They were traditionally herders and traders, but after the first major Everest expedition used Sherpas as helpers, their economy shifted to serving as guides and helpers to climbers. Sherpas that have reached the summit are highly respected in the community, Krakauer says, and can demand the highest fees. The job is dangerous, however. Sherpas make up a third of all deaths on Everest, according to Krakauer.

Western culture is being transferred to Namche, Krakauer notes. Young people wear T-shirts with American sports logos and families watch American movies on video players. Krakauer states that the Sherpas do not seem to resent the cultural influences. Money brought to the region through commercial climbing has also improved schools and medical facilities in the area.

The group hikes at a slow pace from Lukla toward Everest Base Camp. Hall has them walk for only a few hours a day so that they can become acclimated to the thin air. Along the way, they stop at a Buddhist monastery. They visit an elderly lama who blesses them by tying a silk scarf, called a kata, around their necks. Krakauer, Hansen and Kasischke have tea with the lama, who shows them photos of his trip to America.

With Sherpas carrying most of their gear, the group continues walking to Base Camp. Krakauer often walks with Harris and Hansen. He gets to know Harris, who is married to a physician named Fiona McPherson. They have just built a house, and Harris was reluctant to leave home, but the chance to climb Everest with Rob Hall was too big a chance to miss. Harris has not climbed Everest before, but is an experienced high altitude climber.

Harris and his wife had helped run a clinic at Pheriche, which is on the way to Base Camp. The clinic was founded in 1973 after four Japanese climbers died from complications from the high altitude. Since then, the clinic has played an important role in treating local trekkers as well as residents, and educating people about the dangers of high-altitude climbing. The group stops at Pheriche for the night.

On Saturday, April 6, the group leaves Pheriche and after a few hours reaches the Khumbu Glacier at 16,000 feet. There is no greenery, now, only rock and snow. The trail

is covered in many places with snow, which has slowed down many expeditions on the way to Base Camp, creating a bottleneck at the small settlement of Lobuje, located at the foot of the glacier. Conditions here are filthy. The few lodges are full, and people are camping in tents crammed together. The toilets are overflowing, and people are simply defecating on the ground. Inside the lodge, Krakauer makes up a bunk. The lodge is heated by a small stove that burns yak dung, which creates a thick, bad smelling smoke. Krakauer develops a cough that will stay with him for the entire climb.

Halls plan is for the group to spend just one day at Lobuje to acclimate before continuing on the final day's trek to Base Camp. News comes from Base Camp, however, that one of the Sherpas that Hall has employed to go ahead and scout a route beyond Base Camp has fallen into a crevasse and possibly broken his leg. Hall tells the group that he and Groom will go ahead to Base Camp to arrange to get the Sherpa to medical help, and that the group will have to stay in Lobuje until they do.

Krakauer relates a conversation he has had with Hall, where Hall emphasizes the crucial role of the Sherpa and how important it is that the guides take care of them. Krakauer tells of a young boy the previous year who had been allowed to climb high on the mountain. Carrying a load up a steep face, he neglected to clip onto a safety rope and fell 2,000 feet to his death. This incident is in Hall's mind, Krakauer imagines, as he and Groom leave on the morning of April 8th for Base Camp.

Lobuje: April 8, 1996 - 16,200 Feet

Lobuje: April 8, 1996 - 16,200 Feet Summary and Analysis

Later that day, the group at Lobuje receives word by radio that the Sherpa has been retrieved and brought down to Base Camp to be evacuated by helicopter. Hall gives the word for the group to leave Lobuje and make way to Base Camp. The group is delighted to be leaving the filthy encampment. Some have already become ill, including Andy Harris, the guide.

The group leaves for Base Camp. Krakauer and Helen Wilton, the Base Camp manager for the group, walk at the rear with Harris, who is having a hard time from his illness. The climbers pick a route through scattered rocks and icy patches of exposed glacier to Base Camp, a makeshift village of over 300 tents. Hall walks down to welcome them as they locate their camping area. Krakauer looks at his altimeter, which reads 17,600 feet.

Base Camp is located in a natural amphitheater surrounded by steep walls. When the sun is shining, it is warm enough for short sleeves, but at night, the temperature drops into the teens. The compound for the group is relatively luxurious compared to the harsh environment, Krakauer explains. There is a large canvas tent with electricity, hot water, and a fax machine and satellite phone.

Krakauer describes Base Camp as a "fairly tidy place," (p. 60) but notes that it was not always so. In the 1970s and 80s, it was practically a garbage dump. In the 90s, commercial guides including Hall led an effort to clean up the camp and hauled tons of garbage out of it. They worked with the government of Nepal to make regulations encouraging expeditions to haul garbage down from the mountain.

Hall's compound is central to the Base Camp, and Hall acts as a sort of mayor. Climbers from other groups, including other guides, approach him for advice and to settle disputes. One of these other guides is Scott Fischer, leading his first group up Everest. Fischer has climbed Everest four times, reaching the summit once. Although Hall and Fischer are business rivals, they are also friends and are planning a climb together after the Everest season.

Fischer is 40 and from Seattle where his wife and two children live. A lifelong climber, Fischer started his guide operation, called Mountain Madness, in 1984. In contrast to Hall's organized, methodical approach, Fischer has a reputation for a full-speed-ahead attitude to climbing. This has caused him to suffer some serious accidents, Krakauer explains, including several falls that could have killed him.

Krakauer includes quotations from friends of Fischer describing him as a very driven and generous person with great enthusiasm. This attitude attracts people to Fischer, including many women, Krakauer suggests.

In his early days as a professional climber, Fischer craved attention and recognition, Krakauer explains. After climbing Everest in 1994 without oxygen as part of a cleanup expedition, as well as a charity event centered on climbing Kilimanjaro, Fischer did garner a good reputation and at the time of the 1996 climb is a well-known guide.

Fischer describes himself as a smarter climber than he was in his youth. His climbing career strains his family life, Krakauer claims, taking him away from home for long periods. His guide operation does not make much money and he is dependent on his wife for financial support, which adds stress to his relationship, his friends say.

Also from Seattle, Krakauer explains that he is acquainted with Fischer from the local climbing community. Fischer had approached Krakauer previously about coming on his guided climb of Everest to write an article for Outside Magazine. Krakauer had declined, citing his lack of high-altitude experience, to which Fischer replied, "It's not the altitude that's important, it's your attitude, bro." (p. 66).

Fischer's invitation plants the seed in Krakauer's head, and outside initially agrees to send Krakauer with Fischer's group. A month before the expedition, the plan changes, however, when Hall makes the magazine a better offer. Krakauer does not know Hall and is reluctant to agree, but after checking his reputation, decides to continue.

At Base Camp, Krakauer asks Hall about the deal and learns that Hall took only part of his regular fee in cash and traded the rest for advertising space in the magazine, hoping to attract a larger portion of the American market, where Fischer had an advantage. When Fischer learned of the change of plans, he was furious, but could not match Hall's offer. Krakauer meets up with Fischer at Base Camp, and is pleased to find that he has not held a grudge. Fischer welcomes him, happy to see him.

The high altitude of Base Camp begins to affect Krakauer. He feels winded after even short walks, and the cough that started at Lobuje worsens. His sleep is disturbed and his appetite disappears. Other climbers suffer from intestinal problems and severe headaches.

Doug Hansen is one of the climbers who have terrible headaches. Hansen had been with Hall's expedition the previous year but had to turn back at the South Summit, just a few hundred feet from the top. Hall had felt bad about it, and had discounted his fee to entice Hansen to try again this year. Hansen spends much of his time at Base Camp writing postcards to an elementary school that had helped him raise money for the trip, sending faxes to his new girlfriend, and corresponding with his grown children.

Krakauer spends his time worrying about his ability to adapt to the high altitude. He is confident of his climbing abilities, but is already higher than he has ever been before. Hall explains that he has an efficient plan for acclimating the climbers to the thin air. He will lead them on three successively longer climbs from Base Camp, which will allow them to adapt enough to make the summit. Krakauer is doubtful, but Hall reassures him.

Everest Base Camp: April 12, 1996 - 17,600 Feet

Everest Base Camp: April 12, 1996 - 17,600 Feet Summary and Analysis

Krakauer gives a brief description of the method of climbing Everest, which he likens to a giant construction project. Sherpas will establish four camps above Base Camp, carrying supplies and equipment to each one. The highest camp, Camp Four, will be at 26,000 feet and will serve as the base for the final climb to the summit.

The group prepares their climbing equipment on the afternoon of April 12 in preparation for the first acclimatization climb. Krakauer is somewhat alarmed to see that some of his fellow climbers unpack brand new boots that have not been broken in. He knows from experience that new boots can injure the feet if they are not first broken in. He learns that many of the others have not done much climbing recently, and is concerned that they may not be in good enough shape. He catches himself, however, telling himself he is perhaps being a snob.

Their route is over an undulating part of the Khumbu Glacier called the Western Cwm (pronounced coom,) then up through a dangerous region called the Icefall, where the glacier fractures into large chunks called seracs as it moves down the mountain side. The path through the Icefall is laid out each year by one of the expeditions who then charges each of the other expeditions $2,200 to use the route. It involves a series of ropes and aluminum ladders spanning wide crevasses and steep sections of ice.

Krakauer finds that he must adapt his previous climbing experience to these conditions. Unlike other climbing trips he has made, the climbers do not rope themselves together for safety, but use static ropes with a short safety line attached. Krakauer also must learn to carefully cross aluminum ladders in his climbing boots across deep crevasses.

Fighting shortness of breath, Krakauer makes his way slowly to the top of the Icefall to Camp One. At 10:00 a.m., Hall gives the order for everyone to turn back to make it safely back through the Icefall before the sun begins to warm the ice. Only Hall, Krakauer, Fischbeck, Taske and Hansen have reached Camp One by this time. The others are about 200 feet below when they all begin the return.

Krakauer has now seen his fellow climbers in action and evaluates their ability. Hansen and Taske look solid. Krakauer is most impressed by Fischbeck, who maintains a steady pace. Hutchison, who had seemed the strongest, quickly wore himself out after starting off on a quick pace. Kasischke, battling a leg injury, is slow. Weathers and Namba look unsure. Hall announces to everyone that they have all done well for their first climb.

Krakauer descends the Icefall over the next hour. As he walks back into Base Camp, he develops a debilitating headache, possibly from severe ultraviolet radiation's effect on his eyes. For several hours, he lies in his sleeping bag, eyes covered, unable to sleep. The expedition doctor gives him some codeine, which calms the pain enough for him to sleep.

Krakauer wakes the next morning as he is called to the telephone to speak with his wife, Linda. His wife had been a climber as well when they first met, but had stopped climbing after being injured. Krakauer had intended to stop climbing as well, but could only stay away for a year. His climbing eventually led to a near break-up with his wife. After a few years of trouble, she had reached a level of acceptance of his need to climb. It was then that the Everest trip materialized. Krakauer had tried to pretend that it was in the line of his job as a journalist, not out of his need to climb that he would go, but his wife saw through this. As she was taking him to the airport to leave on the trip, she emphasized how much she would suffer if he were killed. He insisted to her that he would not be killed.

This flashback illustrates the overconfidence that Krakauer perhaps felt about his abilities. After his first short climb, he now knows more about the situation. Of course, writing after the disaster that takes place, the reader knows that Krakauer might indeed have been killed.

Camp One: April 13, 1996 - 19,500 Feet

Camp One: April 13, 1996 - 19,500 Feet Summary and Analysis

Krakauer considers himself to perhaps be delusional, along with many of the other climbers on the mountain at the same time, in thinking that he has what it takes to be successful at climbing Everest. He writes about the unexplainable pull that the mountain has for many people, including Tenzing Norgay, who had accompanied an unsuccessful mission with a Canadian named Denman in 1947 despite knowing that it would not be successful. In an excerpt included by Krakauer, Tenzing describes how he could not pass up the opportunity even though he knew it would fail. The team made it to 22,000 feet before turning back.

Krakauer describes the attempt of an Englishman named Wilson who made an attempt earlier, in 1933. Despite physical and legal obstacles, Wilson sneaks into Tibet, treks to the mountain, and doggedly reaches an altitude of 21,000 feet where he finds a cache of supplies left behind by a previous expedition. From there, he attempts to reach the summit. His frozen body is found the following year by another expedition, which buries him in a crevasse.

Like Denman and Wilson, Krakauer says, many of the people on the mountain with him are "marginally qualified dreamers." (p. 90) This is not true of all the paying climbers, however, Krakauer says. Some, such as Pete Schoening on Fischer's team, are actually legends in Himalayan climbing. Schoening is a veteran of the same era as Hillary who was part of an unsuccessful mission to climb K2, the second highest peak in the world, during the same year that Hillary climbed Everest. On that expedition, Schoening had saved the lives of five of his climbing companions.

Several other members of Fischer's group are also experienced climbers, Krakauer notes, in contrast to those in Hall's group, none of whom had ever climbed a peak as high as even 8,000 meters. Even they are not the least qualified climbers, however, Krakauer claims. An Englishman with doubtful abilities is leading one group. Krakauer has witnessed firsthand the inexperience of a group of climbers from Taiwan, which already has a reputation for incompetence after having become lost on a climb the previous year during a climb of Mt. McKinley. One climber died.

Their presence at Everest concerns the other climbing groups, who fear that they may blunder into another disaster and endanger everyone's chances of reaching the top. Others seem equally troublesome. A young Norwegian man with little experience is trying a solo ascent along a difficult route. A South African team sponsored by a newspaper is also a matter of concern.

Krakauer devotes several pages describing the political and personal tensions surrounding the formation of the team, led by a British man named Ian Woodall.

Woodall is a difficult man who, according to Krakauer, has deceived many people and created several enemies. Hall is concerned that the South Africans, the Taiwanese or the Norwegian man will run into trouble. "I think it's pretty unlikely that we'll get through this season without something bad happening up high," he tells his group. (p. 100) This is an ironic comment, given that it is Hall's group that will require the most help.

Camp One: April 16, 1996 - 19,500 Feet

Camp One: April 16, 1996 - 19,500 Feet Summary and Analysis

The group rests in Base Camp for two days before starting on its second acclimatization climb. Krakauer notices that he is breathing more easily than on the previous climb. Krakauer reaches Camp One, where the group will stay for two nights before climbing again to Camp Two for three nights, then back to Base Camp.

At Camp One, Krakauer helps Ang Dorje, one of the Sherpas helping the group, to dig out platforms for their tents. The work exhausts him, and Ang Dorje teases him while he continues to work, joking that at 6,000 meters the air is still "thick." Ang Dorje is the "climbing sirdar" of the group, the head Sherpa while they are on the mountain. He has worked his way up from a cook's helper on Himalayan treks by virtue of hard work and a reputation for his intelligence and strength. He has worked for Hall since 1992 and has been to the summit three times.

The group makes camp as a snowstorm approaches. The following morning, there is a foot of new snow. The weather clears and the following day they set off for Camp Two. It is very cold, but as the sun rises, the temperature rises dramatically. Krakauer removes most of his outerwear and puts a handful of snow under his cap to stay cool as he climbs. Along the way, he encounters something large, wrapped in a blue sheet. It takes him a moment to realize that it is a body. Later, he asks Hall about the body. Hall tells him he thinks it is a Sherpa that died three years before. This disturbs Krakauer for some time.

At Camp Two, Krakauer begins to feel the effects of the altitude as weakness and a headache. He takes to his tent. The next day he feels better and decides to make a short climb above the camp. He encounters another body, this one probably having been there for over a decade. The shock from seeing it wears off "almost immediately," (p. 107) in contrast to the deeply disturbing effect of the first body. Krakauer notes that other climbers move past the body without paying much attention. It is as if they have all agreed not to acknowledge the reality of the danger.

The group returns to Base Camp. Krakauer and Harris visit the camp of the South Africans, intending to find out first hand why the team is so disliked. The leader, Woodall, is away on a climb, but they meet some of the other team members, who they invite back to their camp for a drink after dinner.

Returning to Hall's camp, Krakauer finds the group's doctor, Caroline Mackenzie and Ingrid Hunt, the doctor for Fischer's group, on the radio to someone at Camp Two. A Sherpa named Ngawang Topche has become ill with High Altitude Pulmonary Edema, abbreviated as HAPE, in which the lungs begin to fill with fluid. The only treatment is to descend quickly to a lower altitude. Mackenzie is giving instructions over the radio to

help the Sherpa, but nothing seems to be working. Two of Fischer's climbers begin to drag the Sherpa down the mountain while a team sets out from Base Camp. They meet at the top of the Icefall, and the Sherpa is brought back to Base Camp.

Ngawang is expected to improve once at the lower altitude, but he does not. Dr. Hunt, who is in charge of making medical decisions for Fischer's group, is a young woman with no high-altitude medical experience. She is also the Base Camp manager for the group, and Krakauer suggests that she is too overloaded with work to be entirely effective at either role. A specialist arrives from Pheriche and Ngawang is carried back to the medical clinic there. He continues to worsen, and eventually stops breathing for several minutes, causing brain damage. After several weeks he dies. Hall is critical of the response by Hunt, saying that if it had been a client instead of a Sherpa who was sick, she would have evacuated him by helicopter immediately.

Krakauer notes that while many of the people on the mountain do not know about Ngawang's illness, the rest of the world does, owing to the number of journalists dispatching reports from the mountain that are then disseminated on the internet. Many of the expeditions maintain websites. There is also a film crew making a movie about the climb. Fischer has two journalists on his team, one who reports from Base Camp, and another who will climb with the group. The latter is Sandy Hill Pittman, a wealthy socialite on her third attempt to climb Everest.

Pittman generates a good deal of gossip among the climbers. She brings along gourmet food and heavy equipment such as laptop computers, video players and an espresso machine. She has the latest fashion magazines brought to her at Base Camp by Sherpa from Katmandu. She enjoys being the center of attention, which irritates some of the other climbers. She is always enthusiastic and positive, however, Krakauer says, and gets along with the others on her team. To some, however, she is the symbol of the decline of Everest, as if anyone with enough money can buy the summit.

Camp Two: April 28, 1996 - 21,300 Feet

Camp Two: April 28, 1996 - 21,300 Feet Summary and Analysis

Krakauer awakes in his tent at 4:00 a.m. at Camp Two. The group is scheduled to climb to Camp Three at 24,000 feet to spend a night to acclimatize to the altitude. It is very cold, and Krakauer and his tent mate Hansen have difficulty getting out of their warm sleeping bags. They dress quickly and are soon on the slope of the mountain, climbing. Krakauer has dressed relatively lightly, expecting the sun to beat down after it rises, but there is a steady wind that makes him colder.

The wind increases, and ice begins to form on his goggles. He is climbing at the head of the line, just in front of one of the guides, Groom. Groom gets a radio call from Hall calling off the climb because of the bad weather, and they return to Camp Two. One of the climbers has suffered some minor frostbite. Hansen has some more significant frostbite on his toes. Hansen also has a problem with his throat. His voice has disappeared, possibly from a frozen larynx. He is despondent, thinking that he will not be able to continue. Hall disagrees, telling Hansen that he will probably recover and will have a good chance to reach the summit once he does.

Here Krakauer lays the foundation for one of the possible motivations that leads to the disaster. Having failed to take Hansen to the summit the previous year, Hall has convinced him to return for another try. Now, Hall is encouraging him not to give up in the face of his physical problems. Later, Krakauer will suggest that Hall makes an unwise decision based on his desire to get Hansen to the top, which will lead to their deaths.

At Camp Two, there is tension among the different expeditions. The South Africans refuse to help the other crews string a line up the next climbing face, and Hall gets into an argument with the South African leader Woodall over it. They are also receiving news about Ngawang and his declining condition. The Sherpas have theorized that Ngawang is being punished because one of the Fischer's climbers has angered Sagarmatha, a sky goddess, by having sex on the mountain. Sherpa superstition is ever present on the mountain, Krakauer explains. Each expedition has a stone chorten, a kind of altar, built for it, where Sherpas chant Buddhist prayers and burn incense.

Krakauer learns about the superstition against sex between unmarried couples on the mountain from Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa, the climbing sirdar for Fischer's group. Lopsang is a world-class high altitude climber, having climbed Everest three times without the use of oxygen. This is even more remarkable considering he has only been climbing for three years. He has joined Fischer's group, and tells Krakauer that Fischer has plans to make him famous.

Lhotse Face: April 29, 1996 - 23,400 Feet

Lhotse Face: April 29, 1996 - 23,400 Feet Summary and Analysis

The day after weather turns them back from Camp Three, the group makes another attempt. Hansen stays behind to allow his throat to heal. Krakauer slowly and laboriously makes his way up the Lhotse Face, taking two deep breaths for every step. He explains that the notion that mountain climbers are only seeking adrenaline rushes is false, as this kind of climbing is the opposite of that kind of thrill. Instead, he theorizes, climbing Everest is more about enduring pain.

Krakauer speculates on the motivations of some of his teammates. Beck Weathers, he feels, is not simply another overachieving doctor, but is actually hooked on climbing for its very real challenges. Taske, a retired colonel, climbing provides a sense of mission missing from civilian life.

Krakauer confides that he is becoming less comfortable in his role as a journalist the more he gets to know the other clients in his group, none of whom had been told there would be a journalist present. After the disaster, Weathers is interviewed on television. Krakauer inserts some of the transcript of this interview where Weathers speculates that having a journalist in the group perhaps made the others push themselves harder than they might have otherwise, and may even have pushed the guides to go too far. Krakauer presents these opinions almost without comment. He is suggesting yet another contributing factor to the disaster, his own presence.

Krakauer reaches Camp Three and begins to help the Sherpas chop a platform from the ice for the tents. For the first time, Krakauer gets the sense that he is really near the top of the world, as he looks down on the tops of 22,000-foot peaks while he waits for his teammates to arrive at the camp. He begins to feel lightheaded, which he hopes is just from the heat, and not from High Altitude Cerebral Edema, or HACE.

HACE, Krakauer explains, is even more dangerous than HAPE, although not as common. It involves a swelling of the brain and gradual unconsciousness until the sufferer enters a coma a dies unless taken to a lower altitude. A climber on Fischer's team named Dale Kruse had a case of HACE the previous day. He woke from a 24-hour sleep confused and unable to dress himself or properly secure his climbing equipment. He describes as feeling as if he was very drunk. Fischer gets him dressed and lowers him down the mountain. Kruse returns to Base Camp and takes several days to fully recover.

The group spends two days at Camp Three, then descends to Camp Two and finally back to Base Camp to rest for the final climb to the summit. Krakauer is pleased to find that after spending three weeks on the mountain, the air at Base Camp now seems rich with oxygen. Although he has acclimated to the thin air, his body is in poor shape. He

has lost most of his fat and a good deal of muscle mass. The cough that has been with him since Lobuje continues to bother him and he has torn some cartilage in his rib cage, causing severe pain when he coughs. His fellow climbers are in similar shape.

Hall's plan is to reach the summit on May 10. The regular weather pattern on Everest often creates calmer weather at the summit in early May, and most of the expeditions are aiming to reach the top during the same period. At Base Camp, Hall meets with the leaders of the other expeditions to decide how to manage the traffic to the summit. It is decided that Hall's and Fischer's groups will share a summit date of May 10. Woodall of the South African group refuses to cooperate, saying he will go to the summit whenever he feels like it, infuriating Hall. Once again, Hall exclaims that he wants to be nowhere near the South African group at the top.

Base Camp: May 6, 1996 - 17,600 Feet

Base Camp: May 6, 1996 - 17,600 Feet Summary and Analysis

On May 6, the group leaves Base Camp on its attempt for the summit. Krakauer is climbing at the front of the group with Andy Harris. The intense heat again bothers him, and as he reaches Camp Two, he is feeling lightheaded and exhausted.

Coming down the mountain through the camp is Goran Kropp, the solo Swedish climber. Kropp is at the end of his mission to travel under his own power from sea level in Sweden to the top of Everest. He is an experienced climber and has ridden a bicycle across Europe and Southeast Asia and made it to within an hour's climb of the summit, where he decided if he were to continue he would be too tired to make it down safely, and turned around. As he descends through the camp, Hall is impressed with Kropp's discipline to make the right decision for the circumstances, even though he was so close to the top.

Hall has repeatedly stressed the importance of not pushing the clock when near the summit. Climbers should have a turn-around time at which they will turn back, no matter how close they are to the summit. This is to preserve strength for the return descent. "With enough determination, any bloody idiot can get up this hill," Hall says. "The trick is to get down alive." (p. 147)

The group spends May 7 resting at Camp Two. Krakauer speaks with Hansen about the terrain at the summit. Hansen, despite his throat trouble, seems eager to reach the top, no matter what. Scott Fischer comes through the camp looking exhausted and worried, Krakauer observes. Fischer's relaxed approach to letting his clients move up and down between camps on their own has required him to make several climbs himself to help them.

Fischer had climbed ahead of his group to camp two and instructed one of his guides, Boukreev, to climb at the back. Boukreev instead slept in and left Base Camp several hours after the last climber. When a client of Fischer's becomes ill, possibly with HACE, Fischer has to descend and help him down because Boukreev is not there to help. Fischer is furious with Boukreev when they meet on the way down.

Fischer has paid Boukreev, one of the world's best climbers, a large fee to act as a guide. Krakauer explains that Boukreev's idea of guiding is different than Fischer's. Boukreev does not go out of his way to help the others who are in trouble, seeing his role as a technical one. This puts more of the burden on the other guides in Fischer's group, and on Fischer himself. At Base Camp with the ailing climber, Fischer calls his publicist and business partner and complains about Boukreev.

Krakauer foreshadows Fischer's death by mentioning that it is the last time he will speak to them. He is also suggesting another contributing factor to the disaster, Fischer's eventual exhaustion and inability to make clear decisions because of Boukreev's possible negligence.

The next day, both teams begin to climb the Lhotse Face toward Camp Three. Along the way, Harris is hit in the chest by a small boulder, leaving him stunned and hanging from his safety line for several minutes. Arriving in camp, Harris claims he is not badly hurt.

At Camp Three, which is on a narrow ledge, the group camps without Sherpas and must cook for themselves. To provide for the high water needs, they chop snow and melt it in plastic bags in the tents. Krakauer volunteers to chop snow, and comes to realize the hard work that the Sherpas usually do.

As night falls, Hall's entire group is in camp except Kasischke, Fischbeck and Hall, who is bringing up the rear. Hall calls Groom by radio and asks him to come down to help the last tow climbers, who are moving slowly. Groom sets out down the mountain. An hour later, the two climbers are back in camp, completely exhausted. Krakauer is concerned, because the two men had seemed like two of the strongest climbers.

At Camp Three, the climbers receive oxygen tanks and masks and are told they will be using it for the rest of the climb. Krakauer digresses into a discussion of the controversy over using oxygen on the climb. Some climbers feel as if it is "cheating" to use it. Reinhold Messner, one of the best-known climbers in the world, led the group calling the use of oxygen unfair. In 1978, he and Peter Habeler are the first to climb Everest without oxygen. Some called it the first real ascent of Everest. Many Sherpas did not believe that it happened, thinking that the climbers must have hidden canisters on them. The evidence is in Messner's favor, however, and to prove his ability, he climbs Everest again two years later, without oxygen and completely solo. Once it was shown that it could be done without gas, Krakauer explains, many climbers began to believe that this is the way it should be done.

Hall's group take some time to adapt to wearing the face mask and breathing the oxygen, which Hall encourages them to do at night while they sleep. Krakauer feels as if the mask is suffocating him. He takes it off as he tries to sleep.

Below Hall's camp are several other expeditions, also camped on narrow ledges. One of the climbers from Taiwan has an accident and slips down the slope into a crevasse. He is rescued and does not appear to be badly injured. Makalu Gau, the leader of the Taiwan team, takes his group up the mountain, leaving the injured climber, a man named Chen, in his tent to recover. Gau tells Hall and Fischer that he has changed his plans and intends to reach the summit on May 10, the same day as they.

A Sherpa named Jangbu checks on Chen later in the day and finds him in much worse condition. He and two other Sherpas begin to take him down the mountain. On the descent, Chen suddenly loses consciousness. The Sherpas radio to Camp Two for help. David Breashears and Ed Viesturs from the IMAX team come up to help, but Chen is

dead. Breashears radios Gau to give him the news. Gau takes the news in stride and assures his team that it will not change their plans. Breashears is astonished at this response.

Krakauer explains that up to this point, nobody has actually died, although there have been several accidents. He says that the anticipation everyone feels to reach the summit outweighs any need to grieve for a fellow climber.

Camp Three: May 9, 1996 - 24,000 Feet

Camp Three: May 9, 1996 - 24,000 Feet Summary and Analysis

Krakauer emerges from a poor sleep on May 9 and slowly prepares to climb. By the time he begins, most of his group has already started. He is surprised to see Kasischke and Fischbeck continuing, assuming that they would be too exhausted to continue.

The face they are climbing has small rocks continually rushing down, creating a dangerous situation. There is one rope leading up the face, and Krakauer tries to move as quickly as possible to avoid the long line of climbers behind him. This requires him to carefully pass other climbers on the rope by unclipping his safety line briefly as he moves around them. This tires him quickly. He is still not used to the facemask, and takes it off several times feeling he is suffocating, to find the breathing without it is even harder.

Krakauer makes his way to the front of the line of climbers and slows his pace. He pauses at 25,900 feet and looks up toward the summit through his telephoto camera lens. He sees four climbers moving toward the South Summit, and guesses them to be from the Montenegrin expedition. Krakauer continues on to the South Col, the location of Camp Four. The South Col is a broad plateau with steep drops on two sides, littered with hundreds of discarded oxygen canisters from previous expeditions. The wind is funneled by the mountain through the area, creating harsh winds. As Krakauer arrives in camp, several Sherpas are setting up tents in the high wind. Krakauer helps them erect his own tent, and then climbs inside to wait for his team.

As the others arrive, they climb into their tents immediately. Some climbers are in bad shape, including Bruce Herrod, one of the leaders of the South African group. Doug Hansen has also continued to get worse, but is still determined to press on. Krakauer reflects that while he is on the same team as Doug and the others, it does not mean much, as each person is climbing for his own reasons and as an individual. He thinks that if Hansen decides to turn around, he himself will have no problem continuing on, for example.

The Montenegrins return from higher up and report that the weather has kept them from reaching the summit. The weather gets worse and worse, and Krakauer believes the signs are not good for their own attempt to following day. They only have enough oxygen to wait for 24 hours before either trying for the summit or descending.

Miraculously, the wind suddenly stops at about 7:30 p.m. It is still cold, but the lack of wind makes for good climbing conditions. Hall calls out from his tent to be ready to start climbing at 11:30. Hall's group of 15, including guides and Sherpas, begins climbing. Hall instructs two Sherpas to stay at Camp Four in case they are needed for help. Fischer's group leaves Camp Four for the summit half an hour after Hall's. Fischer has

generously allowed all his Sherpas to come with the summit group, but Lopsang secretly tells one of them to stay behind. Gau also begins to climb, in violation of his promise that he would not climb on the same day. The South Africans had also intended to climb that day, but they are exhausted and stay in their tents. Krakauer counts 33 climbers heading toward the summit that day. Although they are on different expeditions, he reflects, their fates are becoming more closely connected as they get higher.

As they climb, Fischbeck stops and turns around, deciding not to continue. He descends to Camp Four. Doug Hansen does the same. He meets Rob Hall coming up at the back of the line, however, and the two men have a short conversation, after which Hansen gets back in line. This small episode, which Krakauer delivers in just a few lines, is perhaps the most damning event in laying blame for the disaster. Krakauer will eventually suggest that Hall's desire to get Hansen to the top made him overturn his own best judgment. Here, it seems that Hall has also overruled Hansen's best judgment as well. Although Krakauer does not say it explicitly, had Hansen returned to the Camp Four at this point, he would have survived.

While still at Base Camp, Hall had given his group direct instructions that he must be obeyed while attempting the summit, and that nobody must question his decisions. While he had allowed Krakauer and the others to climb at their own pace elsewhere on the mountain, on summit day, he tells them to stay close to one another. Krakauer is again ahead of the line, with guide Mike Groom. At 3:45 a.m., Groom stops him and tells him they must wait for the others. In the moonlight, Krakauer looks down the mountain at the other climbers. He sees that some of Fischer's group have come up behind Hall's group. He sees a climber being "short-roped" by a Sherpa, a technique to help injured or weak climbers by pulling them along with a short length of rope. Krakauer recognizes them as Lopsang Jangbu pulling Sandy Pittman.

After half an hour, Groom tells Krakauer he can begin climbing again. He and Ang Dorje break a trail through the snow to the Southeast Ridge, arriving at a place called The Balcony at 5:30 a.m., just as the sun is rising. They are at 27,600 feet. Hall's instructions are to wait until the whole group arrives. As Krakauer waits, members of the Taiwanese team and Fischer's team pass him by, frustrating him. He reflects on the lack of independence and self-reliance he has as a guided client, the things that have always attracted him to climbing. He is delighted when Hall arrives at 7:10 and tells him he can continue climbing.

As he does, he passes Lopsang, doubled over and throwing up. He is exhausted from pulling Pittman and carrying her heavy gear, including a 40-pound satellite phone. After the expedition, Krakauer writes, many people wonder why Lopsang short roped Pittman. Pittman claims that she never asked him to do it. Lopsang tells Krakauer that he thought Pittman was the weakest climber in Fischer's group but that it was important for her to reach the top for the sake of Fischer's reputation. It is out of devotion to Fischer, Krakauer suggests, that pushes Lopsang to do what he does.

At the time, Krakauer says, the event does not seem significant. It is one of many small events that lead to the final disaster, however. Here, Krakauer hints at his overall view of

the cause of the disaster. Although certain events can be pointed to after the fact as crucial moments, no single one of them causes the final disaster.

Southeast Ridge: May 10, 1996 - 27,600 Feet

Southeast Ridge: May 10, 1996 - 27,600 Feet Summary and Analysis

Krakauer covers some of the technical aspects of the final summit push. There is enough oxygen to last until about 4:00 or 5:00 p.m., after which the danger of contracting HAPE or HACE increases rapidly, along with the risks of frostbite and hypothermia. Hall's intention is to put up fixed ropes to help his climbers reach the top safely. Because no expeditions have been to the summit yet this season, Hall must arrange to put up many of these lines over the hardest parts. The plan had been to send two Sherpas from each expedition ahead of the teams to place the lines, but for some reason this has not happened. Krakauer writes that there are conflicting reasons given for this failure, and nothing is known for certain. What is important, he says, is that there are no fixed lines placed above 27,400 feet.

Krakauer writes that as he waited for the rest of his team at the Balcony that morning with Ang Dorje, he could have helped set up the safety ropes. He chose instead to wait per Hall's instructions. Ang Dorje also could have gone ahead, but instead he sat and waited for Lopsang. Krakauer suggests that a rivalry between And Dorje and Lopsang prevents him from doing any extra work on his own.

Because of the lack of ropes, the climbers get backed up at the Balcony while the guide Beidleman goes on to attach the lines. Impatient at waiting, Yasuko Namba tries to start climbing on the rope before Beidleman has secured it, which would have pulled him off the rock face had Groom not stopped her. The backup of climbers continues to deepen.

At Base Camp, Hall had told the climbers that there would be a turn-around time of either 1:00 or 2:00 p.m. Hall never tells them which time it is, which Krakauer interprets to mean that Hall will wait to see what conditions are like at the summit before deciding. At 11:30 a.m., Kasischke, Taske and Hutchison reluctantly decide to turn back after Hall tells them that they are on a pace to reach the summit at about 2 p.m. Krakauer speculates on the difficulty of this decision for the men, who are very driven and have paid tens of thousands of dollars for the opportunity to climb Everest. This is the paradox of climbing, Krakauer writes. To succeed, one must have drive, but too much drive will get one killed. Krakauer takes an admiring tone toward the men's' decision, and notes that on this day in particular, it was the right one to make.

Krakauer continues to climb to the top of the fixed ropes, near the Hillary Step, a steep rock face near the summit. He sits with Beidleman and Boukreev to wait for the Sherpas to fix the lines along the summit ridge. Krakauer notices that Boukreev is climbing without oxygen, or even a pack. He is surprised that a guide, who must be ready to help

his clients, would not carry extra rope and first aid supplies. Boukreev explains that after deciding to climb without oxygen, he left his pack behind to reduce his weight.

As Krakauer and the others sit and wait, they do not immediately notice that the Sherpas are not proceeding to fix the ropes any higher. They are instead sitting alongside them, sipping tea from a thermos. Beidleman asks them if they are planning to fix the ropes, and Ang Dorje replies that they are not. Alarmed, Beidleman gets Harris and Boukreev and suggests they quickly get the ropes up themselves. Krakauer offers to help. They get started at about noon.

Half an hour later, the four men reach the foot of the 40-foot high Hillary Step. Boukreev takes the rope lead and is the first to climb, fixing the rope. Krakauer checks his watch and calculates how much oxygen he has left. His first canister lasted seven hours. He estimated that his second canister would last until about 2:00 p.m., which he initially thought would give him enough time to reach the summit and return to Camp Three, where he has a third bottle stashed. It is now 1:00 p.m., and he realizes this timetable is unreasonable. When he reaches the top of the Step, he asks Beidleman if he can go forward to the summit instead of waiting. Beidleman agrees.

Krakauer plods on, feeling as though time is passing very slowly. Almost unexpectedly, he arrives at the summit. He does not feel elated as he expected he would upon completing this goal. Instead, he is anxious about the descent.

Summit: 1:12 p.m., May 10, 1996 - 29,028 Feet

Summit: 1:12 p.m., May 10, 1996 - 29,028 Feet Summary and Analysis

Krakauer has brought an Outside magazine flag and some other small souvenirs he had intended to pose with at the summit, but concerned about his low oxygen, he does not take them out. He takes some quick pictures of Harris and Boukreev at the summit and starts down, passing Beidleman and another climber named Martin Adams on their way up. He notices the clouds forming below, but is unaware of any danger. Krakauer makes his way to the top of the Hillary Step, where he must wait for the train of ascending climbers to pass.

Harris arrives behind him and asks him to clear the ice from his oxygen equipment. Krakauer asks Harris to turn down his tank to save oxygen while he waits. This is the event described earlier in the book, where Harris accidentally opens the tank instead of closing it. After his oxygen has run out, Krakauer begins to slow down mentally. His memory of the situation is fuzzy, he says. He can recall some of the climbers who pass him, including Pittman and Namba. He meets Hall coming up the mountain, who tells him about the other climbers who have turned back. Hall is obviously disappointed that they have turned around, Krakauer recalls.

Adams and Boukreev come up behind Krakauer on their way down. Doug Hansen and Scott Fischer are the last two climbers to come up the Step. With the way clear, Krakauer begins to descend. He has gone an hour without oxygen, and fears he will pass out before reaching the South Summit, where more oxygen is stashed. Near the South Summit, he sees Harris rummaging through some oxygen canisters and calls to him, asking him to bring one to him. Harris replies that the tanks are all empty. Krakauer is alarmed, but the guide Mike Groom, who has climbed without oxygen before, arrives and gives Krakauer his tank. They move on to the South Summit.

When they arrive, they learn that the tanks of oxygen are indeed full. Harris does not believe them, however. Krakauer explains that the only way to tell if a tank has oxygen in it is to hook it up to a regulator and check the gauge. He speculates the Harris' regulator had perhaps been plugged with ice, blocking the flow of oxygen and making the tanks seem empty. This might also explain his apparent confusion from lack of oxygen, Krakauer writes, although the possibility that Harris might be suffering from oxygen deprivation does not occur to him until long afterwards.

Krakauer states that he himself is in a state of confusion because of the thin air. This, and the fact that the climbers are taught not to question the word of their guides, causes him not to try to go further with the situation. He simply hooks up a good air canister and continues down the mountain, leaving Harris there. This moment, Krakauer says, now

haunts him. He gives up responsibility when he should insist that Harris is wrong and get him help.

As Krakauer descends, he enters the now thick clouds. It begins to snow, and the conditions deteriorate as he goes on. He climbs just ahead of Groom and Namba, who is having difficulty. They stop, and Groom tries to reach Hall on the radio but cannot. The only climbers from their team still above them are Harris, Hall and Hansen. They assume that all is well, and Groom allows Krakauer to go on ahead. At 4:45 p.m., he reaches The Balcony and is stunned to find Beck Weathers, alone. Weathers is having trouble with his eyes and cannot see well enough to go on. In fact, Krakauer later learns, Weathers has been having trouble with his vision on the mountain for some time, and has simply been following close behind another climber. He has not mentioned how bad it is to anyone prior to this.

Upon reaching The Balcony on the way up, Weathers had told Hall about the problem. Hall had told him that if his vision did not improve after half an hour, he was to go down. Hall told him he would send a Sherpa to help. Other climbers had passed Weathers on the way down, but he had not gone with them, hoping he would be able to go on. Krakauer tries to convince Weathers to come down with him, but also mentions that Groom is shortly behind him. Weathers decides he will wait for Groom. This, Krakauer suggests, is another case where he should have taken responsibility but did not. He moves on.

As the wind picks up the tracks of the climbers from the ascent are blown away and Krakauer has difficulty in keeping on the right path. He sits to rest for a moment and is startled by a loud boom, which he immediately thinks is an avalanche above him. After he hears it again, he realizes it is thunder. Krakauer relies on his earlier memorization of the route to help find his way onto the right track across the dangerous section, and finds a fixed rope just as the weather begins to get even worse. On the way down the rope, his oxygen runs out again.

Krakauer begins to experience hallucinations. He feels as if he is floating outside his body, watching himself climb down. Despite the freezing wind, he feels warm. He slowly makes his way to within 200 vertical feet of Camp Four. He can see the tents dimly through the blowing snow, but in between is a steep, slick ice that he will have to descend with no rope. He sits down to focus on the situation.

Once sitting, he finds it difficult to get up again. It seems easier to him to simply stay put. He lets his mind drift for nearly an hour. Krakauer does not make the direct connection between this episode and the eventual death of Hall higher up on the mountain, but the circumstances are similar. Hall sits down and cannot move on. The implication is that Krakauer might easily die here, in sight of the safety of the tents, because his mind has fooled him into thinking there is no reason to hurry on.

As Krakauer sits, Harris comes up behind him. His face is covered with ice and he looks horrible, Krakauer writes. He asks Krakauer to direction to the camp. He points the way and warns him of the steep slope. Krakauer begins to suggest that he should perhaps

go down first and bring up a rope, but Harris moves on, eventually slipping on the ice and sliding down the slope out of control. Krakauer watches in horror as he falls, but at the bottom of the slope, he gets up and waves that he is all right, and moves on toward the tents. Krakauer watches him until he is within about 60 feet of the tents before the snow blocks his view. Assuming Harris is safe, Krakauer throws his pack down the slope to lighten his load for his own descent. He carefully makes his way down, finds his pack, and moves on toward the tents, telling himself that he was now safe, that they had all made it. It would be several hours before he learned otherwise, he writes.

Krakauer engages in a deliberate deception here, as the climber who passes him at the top of the slope is not Harris at all. This mistake, which Krakauer does not reveal at this point, will add to the dramatic ending of the narrative and contributes to the theme of uncertainty.

Summit: 1:25 p.m., May 10, 1996 - 29,028 Feet

Summit: 1:25 p.m., May 10, 1996 - 29,028 Feet Summary and Analysis

By 2:00 p.m., Beidleman, Adams, Harris, Boukreev and one of Fischer's clients have reached the top. Beidleman is concerned that neither Fischer nor any of his other clients have reached the summit by this time, as it is growing late.

Beidleman is patient guide and a strong climber, Krakauer explains, but because of the status of the other two guides in his group, Fischer and Boukreev, he is relegated to a junior role. Afterward, Beidleman admits that because of this he perhaps did not always speak up to the other guides when he should have. According to Beidleman, Fischer's plan for his group that day is for Lopsang to be at the front with a radio to place ropes for his clients. The two guides were to climb near the middle or the front of the clients, with Fischer bringing up the rear, also with a radio. Fischer's job would be to decide if and when his climbers should turn around. Fischer and Hall both decided that 2:00 p.m. was the turn around time, but only the five climbers have reached the top by then. Lopsang, who was supposed to lead, had fallen behind by assisting Pittman. When Beidleman passed Lopsang earlier, he took his ropes, but not his radio, so now he is unable to contact Fischer to find out how the other climbers are progressing.

At about 2:10, Pittman and four other climbers, including Lopsang, reach the summit. Pittman falls to the ground, and Lopsang discovers that her third oxygen canister is empty. He had been cranking it as high as possible while helping her up the mountain. Lopsang gives her a spare tank he is carrying. Hall, Groom and Namba reach the top about the same time, and Hall radios Base Camp to inform them. He tells Helen Wilton at Base Camp that Hansen is shortly behind him, and that he will wait for him and then head down.

Hansen is not just behind him, however, Krakauer explains. He will not reach the summit for another two hours. Scott Fischer is still an hour and a half away.

Fischer had seemed nearly exhausted and mentally drained the previous day. In fact, Krakauer writes, Fischer has a chronic liver problem that gives him attacks with symptoms like malaria, but which he does not tell the other climbers about. Fischer was having these attacks almost daily at Base Camp, according to one of his team who was aware of them. Krakauer writes that Fischer does not ever mention if he is having the attacks while climbing on the mountain, as well. Krakauer recalls the last time he sees Fischer, bringing up the end of the line of climbers to the summit while Krakauer waits to descend the Hillary Step. Fischer seemed "extremely wasted" at that time, Krakauer remembers. (p. 203) Nobody discusses this fact, however, as Fischer continues toward the summit.

At 3:10, Beidleman decides he must leave the summit, even though he has not seen Fischer yet. He gets the climbers from his group together and begins to lead them down. Twenty minutes after starting out, they run into Fischer on his way up. Beidleman assumes he will go to the summit quickly, then turn around and help the other climbers down. Beidleman is primarily focused on Pittman, who is disoriented and weak. Her condition worsens, and she is given a steroid injection and extra oxygen until she is able to go on.

Groom and Namba arrive at The Balcony at about 5:00 p.m. Below them, Groom sees Adams climbing down the wrong side of the ridge. Adams sees them and realizes he is off course, and heads in the right direction. Groom is also surprised to find Weathers there. Groom sends Namba ahead and begins to lead Weathers down by short rope. Weathers is practically blind. On the way down, Namba runs out of oxygen and sits down in the snow. Groom tries to remove her mask, which is no merely suffocating her, but she insistently puts it back on her face. Beidleman comes up behind and realizes Groom cannot help both climbers at once. He begins to pull Namba behind him.

The group is about 200 vertical feet from Camp Four as the darkness becomes complete. They are only about 15 minutes behind Krakauer, who is just arriving at the tents. This is a turning point in the storm, however, and a turning point in the story. The wind picks up to hurricane force, and the visibility drops. Beidleman chooses a loop route that is less steep down to the plateau of the South Col where the tents are. They reach the Col safely, but their headlights are dimming and several climbers are exhausted. Beidleman knows the camp is to the west of them, but this requires them to walk into the wind. There are eleven climbers in the group: Beidleman, Groom, two Sherpas, and seven clients, including Weathers, Namba and Pittman. They follow the Sherpas, but the high wind causes them to bear off course and they double back. They begin to wander, and become disoriented. At one point, Beidleman nearly walks off the 7,000-foot drop of the eastern edge of the Col.

Beidleman realizes that wandering around is dangerous, and calls for everyone to huddle together to wait for a break in the storm. Nobody has any oxygen left. They crouch down behind a small boulder and wait in the cold.

They are only about 1,000 feet from the tents, Krakauer explains, and could be in camp in about fifteen minutes if they could only see the direction to go. While they are huddled in the storm, Krakauer is in his tent, which is barely withstanding the high winds. He is exhausted and delirious. Hutchison tries to roust him to go out and make noise and shine lights to help the lost climbers find them, but Krakauer is unable to respond. Hutchison, who is more rested, goes out into the storm for a few minutes at a time to try to alert the lost climbers.

The storm begins to let up slightly, enough for the climbers in the huddle to see some stars and the silhouette of the summit. One of the climbers, Klev Schoening, believes that he now knows the way to the tents, and the climbers who can still move begin to make their way in that direction. Left behind are the four climbers who cannot move,

Namba, Weathers, Pittman and Charlotte Fox. Tim Madsen, Fox's boyfriend, volunteers to stay with them until help comes.

After twenty minutes, Beidleman and the others make it into camp. They meet Boukreev, who has been in camp for some time already, having descended well in front of Fischer's group instead of staying with them and helping. This is another example of Boukreev's possible negligence, Krakauer suggests. Afterwards, Boukreev explains his reasoning for climbing so far ahead of the group. He says he felt that being rested at the camp in case the group needed extra oxygen brought up to them would be best for the team. Indeed, after realizing his team is delayed, Boukreev does attempt to take oxygen up the mountain in the storm. He has no radio to communicate with Fischer, however, and cannot see more than a few feet. Realizing it is useless, he returns to his tent.

When Beidleman and the others come into the camp, Boukreev begins to try to organize a rescue effort. Unaware that Boukreev is already doing so, Hutchison tries to do the same. Neither is able to roust anyone to help. Most of the climbers are too exhausted to help, and some of the Sherpas are suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning from a camp stove.

Boukreev heads out in the direction indicated by Beidleman to find the lost climbers. He finds them lying on the ice, unable to move except for Madsen, who is conscious and mobile. Boukreev believes they are dead. Madsen had tried to keep everyone moving to stay warm. They had gradually lost consciousness, however.

Boukreev can only help one climber at a time, he realizes. He gives Pittman oxygen and begins to help Fox back toward camp. Madsen remains behind, holding Pittman. Weathers is curled up on the ground. Namba he assumes is dead. Suddenly, Weathers gets up, climbs up on a rock, and stretches his arms out to the side. The wind immediately blows him over. Madsen cannot see him after this.

Boukreev returns and starts leading Pittman back to camp. Madsen, assuming that Namba is dead and that Weathers is gone, packs up and follows Boukreev and Pittman back to the tents. Beidleman, learning that Namba has died, weeps for nearly an hour.

This chapter marks the high point in the drama, but it is not the end of the disaster. This portion of the story has all the elements of an adventure tale, with lost climbers, terrible storms and heroic rescues. There will be more deaths on the mountain, however, although not nearly so spectacular.

South Col: 6:00 a.m., May 11, 1996 - 26,000 Feet

South Col: 6:00 a.m., May 11, 1996 - 26,000 Feet Summary and Analysis

At 6:00 a.m., Krakauer is awakened by Hutchison, who tells him that Harris is not in his tent. Krakauer is incredulous, saying that he had watched Harris walk to the edge of camp himself. He quickly dresses and goes out to look for Harris. He finds the place where he saw him slide down, and tries to follow his tracks. As he retraces the path he saw Harris take, he realizes that if he had not turned toward the tents but had continued straight, he would have reached the western edge of the plateau where the terrain drops off suddenly. He moves to the edge of the drop-off and sees a set of tracks he believes are from Harris. The previous evening, Krakauer had told Hutchison that he had seen Harris arrive at the camp. Hutchison had radioed the information to Base Camp, where it was relayed to Harris' wife that he was down safely. Krakauer now realizes his mistake, and becomes sick. Returning to the camp, Krakauer overhears a radio call from Hall to Base Camp. Hall is on the summit ridge and needs help. Hutchison tells Krakauer that Weathers and Namba are dead and that Fischer is missing.

Krakauer steps outside of the narrative for a moment to the time after the disaster, and after his initial article has appeared in Outside magazine. One person he has not been able to interview is Martin Adams, one of Fischer's clients. Adams and Krakauer had been climbing near one another on the way down, and Krakauer is especially interested to learn his version of the events. During this interview, Adams describes coming down the mountain and finding a climber sitting at the top of the ice slope above Camp Four. He asks the climber the way to the tents, and he points the way, but suggests that they should perhaps go get a rope. Adams says he only wants to get down and continues on, but slips and slides down the slope, but is all right.

Krakauer realizes that the climber he thought was Harris was actually Adams. Adams has also made a mistake in not recognizing Krakauer at the time. Krakauer realizes that his version of the events that he has been telling Harris' family is wrong. Krakauer wonders if he was really so debilitated to have made such a mistake, and if so, what has actually happened to Harris.

In this short chapter, Krakauer resolves the deception he employs in Chapter Fourteen. It is a particularly effective technique, and illustrates the uncertainty and futility in trying to explain exactly what happened to cause the disaster.

Summit: 3:40 p.m., May 10, 1996 - 29,028 Feet

Summit: 3:40 p.m., May 10, 1996 - 29,028 Feet Summary and Analysis

Fischer reaches the summit at 3:40 p.m. on May 10 to find Lopsang waiting for him. Fischer radios base camp that all his clients have reached the top, and that he is very tired. Hall is also at the summit, waiting for Hansen. Fischer complains frequently that he does not feel good, something that is unusual for him. Lopsang gives him some tea, but he only drinks a little. Worried about his friend, Lopsang insists that they begin the descent immediately. Fischer goes first. Although he still has oxygen in his tank, Fischer removes his mask and does not use it.

The others on the summit also start down except for Hall, who continues to wait for Hansen. It is now two hours past Hall's turn around time, and many will wonder afterward why he has not turned around Hansen and himself before this time. Krakauer speculates that it has to do with Hansen's failed attempt with Hall the previous year. Hall had talked Hansen into trying again, and had perhaps even convinced him to continue on the present climb despite Hansen wanting to turn around.

At around 4:00, according to the account that Lopsang gives afterwards, Hansen arrives near the summit and Hall helps him to the top. After just a few minutes, they start down again. Lopsang watches them from below until they pass a particularly difficult stretch, and then continues his own descent.

Hall and Hansen are at the top of the Hillary Step. Hansen has nearly collapses when he runs out of oxygen. Hall radios down that they need oxygen as soon as possible. Hall does not know that there are two bottles at the South Summit, which he could retrieve fairly easily and bring back to Hansen. Groom, hearing Hall's radio call from below, tries to tell Hall about the tanks at the South Summit, but Harris, still under the mistaken belief that the bottles there are all empty, interrupts and says there is no oxygen at the South Summit. Hall cannot be sure whether there is oxygen there and decides the only thing to do is to try to get Hansen down without it. Hansen cannot go on, however.

At the South Summit, Harris apparently realizes there are indeed full tanks, and tries to get Lopsang to take them up to Hall and Hansen. Lopsang replies that he must attend to Fischer, and continues down. As Lopsang descends, he sees the tired and confused Harris set off up the mountain to take the tanks to Hall and Hansen. "It was an act of heroism that would cost Harris his life," Krakauer writes. (p. 227)

Fischer at this time is on the Southeast Ridge, struggling to descend the mountain. Madsen sees him struggling, but notes that Lopsang is not far behind and assumes

Lopsang will be able to look after him. Lopsang convinces Fischer to put his oxygen mask back on. Fischer is nearly raving, saying he is too weak to go on and will jump off the mountain. Lopsang manages to secure him with a climbing rope to keep him from jumping. Meanwhile, the storm continues to worsen.

Eventually, Fischer cannot proceed. He convinces Lopsang to leave him and continue down to get Boukreev to come up and help. Lopsang makes him comfortable and works his way toward the camp in the storm. Along with Fischer is Makalu Gau, who has been left there by his Sherpas, unable to move on.

Lopsang loses his course on the way down and finds himself below the camp. He climbs back up the Lhotse Face to reach it. Later, Krakauer realizes that the tracks he assumed were Harris' leading off the cliff near the camp were actually from Lopsang, climbing back up to the camp. Lopsang notifies Boukreev that Fischer is above the camp and needs help, then collapses in his own tent.

Earlier in the day, a friend of Hall's named Guy Cotter, who is leading a trek near Base Camp, speaks to Hall by radio at the summit. Cotter is alarmed that Hall and Hansen have no oxygen and tries to convince Hall to descend without Hansen to get some gas for both of them. Hall will not leave his client, however. As conditions get worse, Cotter tries to convince Hall to come down alone, and to leave Hansen. Hall will not.

Later in the day, another radio transmission reaches Cotter. It appears that Halls radio has been turned on accidentally. Cotter hears someone yelling to "keep moving." Krakauer speculates that Hall, Hansen and perhaps Harris may have been working their way toward the South Summit at 2:46 a.m., when the radio transmission is received. Krakauer emphasizes that he can only guess. What is known is that at 4:43 a.m., Hall is alone when he radios Base Camp from the South Summit. He is alone. He says he cannot move. He claims that Harris had been with him the night before, but was no longer there. He asks for confirmation that Harris had been there, but since Krakauer had already reported that he had seen Harris reach camp, it is assumed that Hall is delusional from lack of oxygen. Hall tells them that he has oxygen, but that his regulator is iced up, and he is trying to clear it.

Jan Arnold, Hall's wife in New Zealand, is patched through to him on the radio. She later remarks that she immediately understands how serious the situation is. Hall is slurring his words and seems disconnected. At 5:31 a.m., he radios that he is still trying to get his breathing mask working. He asks about the condition of Gau and the other climbers, Harris in particular. When Hall is asked about Hansen, he simply says, "Doug is gone." (p. 231

On May 23, David Breashears and Ed Viesturs reach the summit if Everest. They do not find Hansen's body, but do find an ice ax that may have been his, near the treacherous edge of the southwest face. Krakauer speculates that Hansen may have lost his footing and slipped down this face to his death. Harris' body is not found, but his ice axe is located at the South Summit, confirming that he had been with Hall there. There is no other evidence about what has happened to Harris.

Krakauer returns to the vigil for Hall, still sitting high on the mountain. Hall complains about the bitter cold, but mentions that the sun is starting to rise. He asks again about Harris, and is put off. Viesturs tells him to only worry about himself. Hall finally gets his mask clear and begins to breathe oxygen after 16 hours without it. Meanwhile, the Base Camp crew continues to encourage him to try to get down the mountain. Hall says several times that he is about to begin descending. From Camp Four, Krakauer sees a climber on the mountain above and believes it is Hall. He then realizes it is only a rock that he sees. Hall is still at the South Summit.

At 9:30 a.m., two Sherpas leave Camp Four with oxygen to try to reach Hall. They face perhaps an entire day of climbing to reach him in the high winds. Three other Sherpas set off to find Fischer and Gau. They reach them to find Fischer nearly comatose and unresponsive. They are able to revive Gau to the point where he can move down on his own. Fischer is left behind. Meanwhile, the Sherpas on their way to Hall have to turn back because of the weather. Hall's chances of rescue disappear.

The Base Camp team continues to try to get Hall to move down the mountain. He angrily replies that he does not think he can handle the ropes with his frozen fingers. He asks for some Sherpas to bring him some hot tea and then he will be able to go on. He is told that the two Sherpas who have already tried to reach him had to turn back. Hall says he can last one more night, if they can reach him by the next morning. He has one more conversation with his wife in New Zealand. It is the last he will be heard of. He does not answer further attempts to reach him on the radio. When Breashears and Viesturs climb up 12 days later, they find his body half buried in the snow.

Northeast Ridge: May 10, 1996 - 28,550 Feet

Northeast Ridge: May 10, 1996 - 28,550 Feet Summary and Analysis

At about 4:00 p.m., just as Hansen and Hall arrive at the summit, climbers from an Indian expedition radio that they have also reached the top. The Indian team has ascended from the Tibetan side of the summit along the Northeast Ridge. Faced with the same storm, most of the climbers have turned back, but three have continued on to what they think is the top. In the heavy clouds, however, they are mistaken. They are actually some 500 feet below the summit on a lower peak, with the clouds preventing them from realizing their actual location.

The Indian climbers do not return to their camp that night. They are discovered the next day, near death, by some Japanese climbers who are following the same route. The Japanese do not stop to help them, and continue up the mountain, reaching the summit at the same time Hall is stopped on the South Summit, half an hour away. On their way back down, a Sherpa helps one of the Indian climbers untangle from a fixed line.

The next day, more climbers from the Indian team attempt the summit. They find the bodies of their teammates dead in the snow, and continue to the summit.

This short chapter underlines the extreme situation at the top of Everest. Finding the ill but alive Indian climbers, the Japanese climbers do not risk their own lives to stop and help them. Interviewed afterward, one of them says, "We were too tired to help. Above 8,000 meters is not a place where people can afford morality." (p. 241)

South Col: 7:30 a.m., May 11, 1996 - 26,000 Feet

South Col: 7:30 a.m., May 11, 1996 - 26,000 Feet Summary and Analysis

At Camp Four, the reality of the situation begins to strike Krakauer, and he is stunned. As he searches the South Col again for Harris, Stuart Hutchison, the only climber on Hall's team other than Krakauer who is still reasonably able to function, assembles a team to try to find the bodies of Namba and Weathers. He sets out following Boukreev's directions with some Sherpas, and they find them, partly buried in snow. Pushing the snow away from the face of the first climber, Hutchison discovers it is Namba. He is astounded to find she is still breathing, but she is very near death. Leaving her for the moment, he moves to Weathers, who is also still alive, amazingly. Weathers is mumbling. He has lost one of his gloves and has frostbite.

Deeply disturbed, Hutchison asks the Sherpas for advice. One of them, an experienced climber named Lhakpa, advises him to leave the climbers where they are. They are certain to die, even if they can be carried back to the tents. Trying to rescue them will jeopardize the others' chances of getting down alive. Hutchison returns to camp and asks the advice of Groom, Taske and Krakauer. They uncomfortably agree that they cannot afford to try to rescue Namba and Weathers. They also discuss descending to Camp Two, but Taske insists that they must not leave while Hall is still up on the mountain.

Meanwhile, Beidleman is assembling Fischer's team and urging them to continue their descent. They are reluctant, nearly exhausted from the previous day, but Beidleman has made getting them down his priority. Beidleman begins descending with the climbers while Boukreev stays to wait for Fischer. At Camp Three, Beidleman stops his team to rest. Breashears, who is at Camp Three, notes that they all appear to be in extreme shock.

Hall had been worried that his expedition might have to be scratched if one of the other teams got in trouble on the mountain and he was required to help them. Ironically, Krakauer writes, it is now three other teams who put their expeditions on hold to help Hall and Fischer's teams. David Breashears, the leader of the IMAX film team, stops his project and makes some of the team's supplies that are stashed on the mountain available to the descending climbers. These supplies include batteries for radios and oxygen. Another two leaders arrive at Camp Four to help the stranded climbers. As they are handing out oxygen canisters from the IMAX stash, someone is seen stumbling into camp. It is Weathers.

Weathers had spent the entire night exposed on the ice. His right hand and arm were frozen. As he describes it afterward, after twelve hours of not knowing where he was or

what was going on, he suddenly regains consciousness. First thinking he is dreaming, the reality dawns on him and he correctly assumes that the camp lies in the direction of the blowing wind. Nearly blind, he slowly makes his way into camp. Hutchison, who is a doctor, is called to care for him. Hutchison believes he is still near death, and does not know how they will get him down. Meanwhile Boukreev departs to find Fischer. He finds him, dead, with his jacket partly removed and his facemask off.

The wind that night is even worse than the previous night. Krakauer and Hutchison fear their tent may be torn to shreds in the high winds. Some of the seams are giving way, and the poles are bent. They get dressed and lean their bodies against the walls of the flapping tent, holding it up in the wind.

The next morning, Groom gets the remaining team members together except for Weathers, and begins to lead them down the mountain. Krakauer takes on the role of guide and intends to climb at the end of the line. He goes to Weathers' tent, expecting to find him dead. Weathers' tent is flattened and the doors are open. Krakauer finds that he is still alive, but once again has endured a night in the cold. The wind had blown his sleeping bags off, and he was unable to pull them back over him because of his frozen hands. He had been calling for help for several hours before Krakauer discovered him. Krakauer is overwhelmed with emotion. Although he does not believe it himself, he tells Weathers that everything will be fine. Krakauer contacts the doctor at Base Camp to get advice on what to do with Weathers. He is told to climb down and leave Weathers with the two fresh guides who had climbed up earlier. Krakauer sets off down the mountain as the two guides rush to help Weathers.

The Geneva Spur: 9:45 a.m., May 12, 1996 - 25,900 Feet

The Geneva Spur: 9:45 a.m., May 12, 1996 - 25,900 Feet Summary and Analysis

Krakauer leaves the South Col on the morning of May 12 with the rest of his teammates. They had started with eleven. Now there are six. Krakauer notices that Hutchison is not wearing his goggles to protect his eyes from the intense sunlight. He calls to him to remind him, and Hutchison thanks him. He asks Krakauer to check his climbing harness, saying that he is feeling light headed and unsure of himself. Krakauer discovers that Hutchison's harness is indeed improperly fashioned. Had he tried to put any weight on it, it would have come off.

A bottleneck forms at the top of the Yellow Band, a limestone cliff. Some of Fischer's Sherpas arrive behind Krakauer, including the despondent Lopsang, who blames himself for bringing bad luck to Fischer.

Krakauer reaches Camp Two that afternoon. He no longer feels as if his life is in danger. Others are still in danger, however. Several Sherpas bring Makalu Gau into camp for medical attention from two expedition physicians. He has severe frostbite. David Breashears radios to camp that he is bring Weathers in. Krakauer is amazed that Weathers is still alive. With help from several other climbers, Weathers makes it back to camp. His frostbite is also severe.

The next day, Krakauer is asked to find a landing site for a helicopter to evacuate the injured climbers. Landing a helicopter at this high altitude is dangerous. Because of the thin air, they are difficult to fly. With Breashears' help, he marks a landing site and the helicopter lands. The pilot indicates he can only take one climber, and Gau is loaded on. Owing to his severely injured feet, he is unable to walk. Weathers can still walk, should the helicopter not be able to make a second flight. The pilot takes off and disappears down the mountainside.

While they are discussing how to get Weathers down the mountain in case the helicopter cannot return, they hear the sound of the rotors and the helicopter reappears over the ridge. Weathers is carried off to Katmandu to the hospital. Afterwards, Krakauer sits and reflects on the disaster, asking himself if it really happened, and why. He finds no answers. Taking up his pack, he sets off down into the Icefall.

Everest Base Camp: May 13, 1996 - 17,600 Feet

Everest Base Camp: May 13, 1996 - 17,600 Feet Summary and Analysis

Krakauer arrives at the bottom of the Icefall to find some of the Base Camp crew waiting for him. One of them hands him a beer. He is overcome, and sits and cries deeply, grateful to be alive and sad that so many have died. The next day, a memorial service is held for the dead climbers, and the mood is gloomy.

Groom and Fox are evacuated by helicopter to have their severe frostbite treated, and Taske, a doctor, goes with them. Krakauer and the other climbers from Hall's group walk out of Base Camp to Pheriche, where they fly back to Katmandu. There they are swamped by journalists, including several from Japan, where Namba's death has become a national story. After facing many questions, Krakauer is taken to a hotel by an American consul, where he falls asleep sobbing. Krakauer returns to the United States on May 19, carrying Hansen's gear to return to his family. He meets Hansen's children and girlfriend at the airport.

The sea-level air of Seattle, his home, now seems thick to Krakauer. He takes delight in being safe at home, but he is still haunted by the events on Everest and his possible blame in their unfolding. Krakauer is disturbed that he did not act to possibly prevent Harris from deteriorating further. He reflects that while Namba was dying in the cold, he himself was huddled in his own tent, worried only about himself. Krakauer seeks out Klev Schoening, who also lives in Seattle. Schoening explains that he has come to terms with the situation because he knows that he did all he could do. He asks Krakauer what he could possible have done for Namba in the state he was in. Krakauer reluctantly agrees that Schoening is probably right, but is unsettled that he will never be certain.

Krakauer turns to the possible causes of the disaster. Many people had thought that with so many people climbing the mountain, a disaster such as this one was over due. Nobody expects that it will strike an experienced leader like Hall, however. Even the previous year, Hall had successfully brought Hansen and another debilitated climber safely down the mountain. Krakauer proposes that perhaps this had given Hall a false sense of his own ability.

Krakauer wonders why Hall extended the turn-around time, and suspects it may have had to do with the rivalry with Fischer, paired with his failure to get any climbers to the top the previous year. Failing twice in a row while Fischer, who was guiding a high-profile climber like Pittman and who had never led an Everest team before succeeded, would be bad for his business. Finding reasons is difficult, Krakauer explain, because at

high altitude the mind does not work as it should and rational thinking goes by the wayside.

Krakauer speculates on ways to possibly reduce the risk of accident among commercial expeditions. One idea is to require each guide to lead only one climber. Another idea is to limit the use of oxygen. Not allowing climbers to climb with oxygen would force many of them to turn back before getting too high on the mountain. Krakauer believes that discussing these accidents and possible solutions is worthwhile, but that infinitely analyzing the events of the disaster will not prevent future accidents. Krakauer explains that expressed as a percentage of climbers in 1996 who died compared to previous years, the season was actually safer than usual.

In the end, Krakauer states, mountain climbing is an inherently risky endeavor. Those drawn to it are the kind of people who are attracted by the risk. There will always be accidents.

As an example, Krakauer relates the events on the mountain in the days after the disaster. On the Tibetan side of the mountain, an Austrian climber dies on May 17 of pulmonary and cerebral edema. At the same time, the IMAX team is regrouping to try their summit attempt. Led by Breashears, Viesturs and Robert Schauer, they are an experienced and strong team. They arrive on the South Col on May 22 and make the summit that night. On their way down, they meet the South African team on their way up. Breashears recalls that they look strong, but cautions them to be conservative to avoid a disaster like the one that has just occurred.

The South African team leaves for the summit from the South Col that night. Bruce Herrod, on of the climbers, falls well behind the others, who summit at about 10:00 a.m. They pass Herrod on their way down, and give him a radio and tell him where some oxygen has been stashed. Herrod reaches the summit at 5:00 p.m. He is alone. Radioing to Base Camp, he is patched through to his girlfriend in London, who is greatly worried that he is at the summit so late in the day. She notes that he sounds good and seems strong. He does not make any further radio contact, and the following morning is presumed dead.

Seattle: November 29, 1996 - 270 Feet

Seattle: November 29, 1996 - 270 Feet Summary and Analysis

Krakauer finishes the book with a short epilogue describing some of the reactions he and his fellow climbers have experienced since the event, and following up on some of the people involved. Kasischke, among others, tell Krakauer that despite the deeply affecting tragedy, they have managed to move on. Weathers has his right arm amputated below the elbow and loses the fingers and thumb of his left hand. His nose has had to be removed and rebuilt, and his face is scarred from the frostbite.

Krakauer is having a harder time moving on. In the six months since returning to Seattle, he has thought about the disaster almost constantly. In September, his article about the climb is published in Outside magazine and he begins to receive letters from people who have read it. Most are supportive, but some are highly critical of Krakauer and his possible role in the deaths. Krakauer includes excerpts from some of these letters.

He learns that the following season, Lopsang is killed in an avalanche on Everest between Camp Three and Camp Four, and that Boukreev is severely injured in a bus crash. Krakauer includes an excerpt from a message written by a Sherpa who has lost his parents and some of his siblings while they were working on Everest. The Sherpa blames the other Sherpas for the disaster in 1996 for helping the inexperienced westerners place themselves in such danger, and for dooming themselves in the process. Many of the other climbers are also having difficulty, Krakauer writes. Sandy Pittman is openly scorned and hounded by journalists. One climber has had his marriage nearly fail over the episode.

Krakauer speaks with Neal Beidleman some time after returning to the United States. Although Beidleman saved the lives of five climbers, he is still haunted by the death of Yasuko Namba. Beidleman describes the scene when he was trying to help Namba back to the camp. She had tried to hold on to him, but was too weak and fell to the ice. Beidleman says he just kept moving and never looked back.

Characters

Jon Krakauer

Jon Krakauer is the author of the book, and one of the eight clients of Rob Hall and his crew of mountain guides ascending to the summit if Everest in May, 1996. Krakauer is an avid climber and a journalist, and is accompanying the expedition on assignment from Outside Magazine to write about the growing business of commercial climbing. He lives in Seattle with his wife. He is 41 at the time of the climb.

Krakauer has always dreamed of climbing Everest, ever since childhood, and when the opportunity arises to join an expedition on assignment from the magazine, he jumps at the chance, despite his wife's misgivings about the danger. He is perhaps the strongest climber among Hall's clients, and is frequently out in front of the group as they climb. He is the first client to reach the summit, and the only one to do so before the scheduled 2 p.m. target.

As a journalist, Krakauer writes that his position requires him to be completely honest about what he observes, including the shortcomings of his fellow climbers. After he returns from the expedition, he surmises from interviews with some of the other surviving climbers that the presence of a journalist may have driven some of them to push themselves harder than they should have, indirectly contributing to the disaster. Krakauer wrestles with this possibility after returning home, as well as the guilt he feels that he could have done more to prevent the accidents that befell his fellow climbers.

Rob Hall

Rob Hall is the leader of Adventure Consultants, the commercial guiding service that Krakauer signs up with to scale Everest. Hall, 35 at the time of the climb, is a friendly New Zealander. He is thin and very tall.

Hall is one of the most highly respected climbers in the world, particularly at high altitudes. After organizing several expeditions with his former partner Ed Ball, Hall starts a commercial guide service after Ball dies from complications owing to oxygen deprivation on a high-altitude climb. Hall is very organized, and well liked among other climbers.

The year prior to the 1996 expedition, Hall was unsuccessful in reaching the summit, turning his climbers back to avoid climbing too late in the day. Krakauer suggests that as competition in the commercial guide business heats up, Hall is especially driven to get his clients to the top in 1996. This perhaps contributed to Hall abandoning his strict climbing plan on May 10, the day the team attempted the summit. Hall did not turn the climbers around when he said he would, instead allowing and even helping one of them climb to the summit long after the 2:00 p.m. deadline. This ultimately cost him his life, when he and another climber become stranded high on the mountain as a storm rolls in.

Hall dies high on the mountain, radioing that his hands are too frozen to use the safety ropes to descend. His body is discovered several days afterwards by another team of climbers, partly buried in the snow.

Andy Harris

Andy Harris, also called "Harold," is one of the guides employed by Rob Hall on the expedition. Krakauer befriends Harris and often climbs along with him. Harris dies high on the mountain, apparently in an attempt to take emergency oxygen to Rob Hall and Doug Hansen. Krakauer does not realize this until long after he has returned home, however, believing that he sees Harris make his way back down from the summit to Camp Four, only to fall off a sharp incline to his death.

Ang Dorje Sherpa

Ang Dorje is the lead climbing Sherpa on Hall's Adventure Consultant's team.

Yasuko Namba

One of Hall's clients on the expedition, Namba is a Japanese executive and avid climber. Krakauer is concerned about her strength early on after observing her climb. She does reach the summit of Everest, but is with a group of climbers who lose their way while returning to Camp Four in the heightening storm. Lacking the strength to make it back to the tents, Namba spends the night exposed on the ice and is left for dead.

Scott Fischer

Fischer is the guide of the Mountain Madness commercial guide service. He is an acquaintance of Krakauer's and a friend of Hall's, despite his business rivalry with Hall. In contrast to Hall's organized approach to guiding, Fischer is more relaxed. Fischer has a severe liver condition that he keeps secret from most people, which gives him episodes of malaria-like symptoms. Krakauer speculates that this condition may contribute to Fischer's eventual death on the mountain, when he stops above Camp Four to rest and is unable to continue.

Anatoli Boukreev

Boukreev is one of the guides hired by Fischer to help his clients to the top of Everest. Boukreev is an elite climber, but does not take on the role of a traditional guide, often climbing well ahead of or behind Fischer's clients, and sometimes not carrying essential gear such as rope and first aid equipment. Boukreev helps to rescue some of the

climbers huddled in the wind outside Camp Four, and makes an attempt to take oxygen to the ailing Scott Fischer, but has to turn back.

Beck Weathers

Weathers is a conservative Texan physician in his 50s. Climbing to high altitudes leaves him practically blind because of complications from previous eye surgery. Unable to continue the ascent, Weathers waits to be guided back to Camp Four and is among the group that becomes lost. Left exposed overnight, Weather is still alive when he is found, but is considered very close to death and left on the ice. He miraculously recovers, however, and manages to make his way into camp. Weathers recovers enough to make it down to Base Camp where he is evacuated and treated for frostbite.

Ian Woodall

Woodall is the sometimes belligerent leader of the South African team. Hall is concerned that Woodall's team may blunder into an accident and have to be rescued by Hall and his team.

Bruce Herrod

Herrod is of the guides on the South African team. Herrod dies on the mountain.

Doug Hansen

Hansen is a postal worker who attempted to climb Everest in 1995 with Hall. Hall has convinced him to try again, and has reduced his fee for Hansen. Hansen barely manages to reach the summit assisted directly by Hall. He runs out of oxygen shortly after beginning the descent, and Hall stops with him at the South Summit. Hansen dies on the mountain, but his body is not found.

Neal Beidleman

Beidleman is one of the guides on Fischer's Mountain Madness team. He is among the climbers who get lost while descending to Camp Four. Arranging them in a huddle, Beidleman manages to get those who could still walk back to the camp during a slight break in the storm.

Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa

Lopsang is the lead climbing Sherpa on the Mountain Madness team. Devoted to the team leader Scott Fischer, Lopsang stays with him while he is debilitated above Camp Four. Fischer convinces him to move on.

Objects/Places

Mt. Everestappears in non-fiction

At 29,028 feet, Mt. Everest is the highest mountain on the face of the Earth. Ever since it was identified as the highest peak in the world in the 19th Century, people have imagined climbing it. It is not until 1953 that anyone is successful, however, when it is scaled by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. At the time that Krakauer writes his book, climbing Everest has become an increasingly commercial affair, a phenomenon that he sets out to document as a magazine article.

Phakdingappears in non-fiction

Phakding is a small Nepalese village where the climbers spend their first night together.

Lobujeappears in non-fiction

Lobuje is the last village where the group stays before moving on the Base Camp. Lobuje is overcrowded with climbers and extremely filthy as a result.

Everest Base Campappears in non-fiction

Base Camp is the main headquarters for the various expeditions ascending the summit. Hall's and Fischer's companies maintain staff at Base Camp, including doctors and Sherpas to help their clients. Radio communications on the mountain are coordinated through Base Camp, where radio transmissions can also be patched through to satellite phones.

Camp Oneappears in non-fiction

Camp One is the first camp on the route to the summit, located at about 19,000 feet. The group camps here briefly to acclimatize to the thin air.

Camp Twoappears in non-fiction

Camp Two is the second camp on the route to Everest, where the group camps for a time to acclimatize, and from which they ascend the Lhotse Face to Camp Three

Lhotse Faceappears in non-fiction

Lhotse Face is the long slope of ice between Camp Two and Camp Three which the climbers must ascend slowly and deliberately using crampons.

Camp Threeappears in non-fiction

Located at 24,000 feet on a narrow ledge of ice, Camp Three is another stop on the acclimatization program of Hall's.

Southeast Ridgeappears in non-fiction

The Southeast Ridge is the ridge that runs at about 27,600 feet from above Camp Four to the Summit Ridge.

South Colappears in non-fiction

South Col is the icy plateau where Camp Four is located, and where the lost climbers spend hours huddled in the freezing winds.

The Geneva Spurappears in non-fiction

The Geneva Spur is a spur of rock below Camp Four along the descent to Camp Three.

Northeast Ridgeappears in non-fiction

The Northeast Ridge is part of the route to the summit from the Tibetan side of the mountain.

South Summitappears in non-fiction

South Summit is the peak of rock along the Summit Ridge at the end of the Southeast Ridge. Rob Hall's body is found at the South Summit, and it is the last place Andy Harris is seen.

Hillary Stepappears in non-fiction

A 40-foot high rock face on the Summit Ridge, Hillary Step is named after Edmund Hillary. The Step is the location of the jam of climbers that delay Krakauer's descent from the summit. Doug Hansen is last seen just above the Hillary Step.

The Balconyappears in non-fiction

The Balcony is an open area at the end of the Southeast Ridge. Scott Fischer's body is located just below the Balcony.

Cramponsappears in non-fiction

Crampons are spiked, metallic attachments that fit over climbing boots, allowing climbers to kick into icy surfaces and ascend.

Ice Axeappears in non-fiction

An Ice Axe is a small, light axe used to chip out steps from the ice or to clear a space for a tent. Ice axes can also be used to stop the slide of a climber.

Sherpaappears in non-fiction

Generally speaking, a Sherpa is one of the Sherpa people native to the region of Nepal around the base of Everest. The word is used specifically to refer to the hired guides who accompany most Everest expeditions. Sherpas climb ahead of the groups, preparing the route and setting up camps and hauling equipment.

Themes

Conditional Morality

In a short chapter inserted almost as an aside, Krakauer tells of three Indian climbers on the mountain at the same time as he, who succumb to exhaustion and oxygen deprivation while climbing Everest from the Tibetan side. The climbers are found the day after they fail to return to camp by some Japanese climbers, disoriented and debilitated, but still alive. The Japanese climbers do not stop to help them, but simply walk past on their own ascent. Asked afterward about their failure to help the climbers, on replies, "We were too tired to help. Above 8,000 meters is not a place where people can afford morality." (p. 241)

Krakauer presents this episode, which is not directly related to the situation faced by himself and his fellow climbers, in a straightforward manner, without judgment. He does not include any information from the other side of the story, however, such as the reaction of the Indian climbers' expedition members or their families. It is represented that it is understood in the extreme conditions atop Everest, it is every man for himself. Someone who would never dream of simply walking past an injured person on a city sidewalk might well do so at 27,000 feet.

This skewed morality, created by the situation, runs throughout Krakauer's text. The episode involving the Japanese climbers is presented immediately before the chapter where Krakauer and the remaining members of the team make the decision to leave two of their fellow climbers to die. The climbers are alive, but not by much, they think. Rescuing them and taking them down the mountain will put more lives in danger, they reason, so it is better to leave them where they lie. It turns out that in the case of one of the climbers, who miraculously is able to get up and find his way back to the camp, their decision is misguided. The climber, although badly injured and largely blind, manages to make his way down under his own power.

In contrast to this episode is the decision of Rob Hall, the expedition leader, to stay with an exhausted client high on the mountain rather than leave him behind to save himself. Hall, guiding Doug Hansen down the mountain, stops with him when Hansen runs out of oxygen and is unable to continue. This act ultimately costs him his life, as Hansen dies and Hall himself becomes stranded by the storm. Krakauer implies that had Hall followed the code of morality that rules the mountain, he might have lived, as well as Andy Harris, who apparently died trying to bring aid to Hall and Hansen.

Futility

Climber George Mallory famously answered, when asked why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest, "Because it is there." Krakauer's reasons for wanting to climb the mountain are no less vague. He has been a climber for his entire adult life and is drawn to it forcefully,

and climbing Everest has been a lifelong dream of his. The other climbers on the mountain at the same time as Krakauer have their own personal reasons for climbing. Some are attracted by the challenge, and some are being paid to help others realize their own personal goals.

However, underlying Krakauer's entire narrative is the implied understanding that nobody is actually required to climb Everest. There is no larger good that is served by ascending to the summit. Indeed, Krakauer explains, the environmental impact that the climbers have, although partly mitigated in recent years through cleanup efforts, is negative. Trash is left on the mountain, and conditions in some of the camps along the way are unsanitary.

Left behind also are the bodies of the climbers who lack the strength or the luck to make it up the mountain and back. It is this high possibility of death, Krakauer seems to suggest, that makes the climbing of Everest a futile endeavor. What drive, he seems to be asking, is so important that one would risk one's life? The paradox, which Krakauer elaborates, is that one must be driven to climb Everest, but if one is too driven, it leads to death.

Krakauer sets out to fulfill his childhood dream of climbing to the highest point on Earth. He opens his narrative at the top of Everest, at the completion of his goal. Yet he is not exuberant as he thought he might be. He is exhausted to the point that he barely even cares. Recounting the ascent later in the book, it is almost as if he stumbles upon the top by accident, merely climbing automatically until he has no place higher to step.

It is on the way down that the disaster that kills several of his fellow climbers strikes, and the ultimate senselessness of mountain climbing is hinted at. By dismissing his childhood dream within the first few paragraphs of the book, Krakauer moves the emphasis of the narrative from reaching the top to the question of why anyone should want to, given the extreme potential cost. His sense of accomplishment has been taken from him by the doubts he later feels about his own role in the deaths of the other climbers. The emotional and physical costs of climbing Everest far outweigh the benefits of achieving the summit, making the entire endeavor a futile one for Krakauer.

Krakauer's culpability

As Krakauer lies exhausted in his tent after scaling the summit of Everest, just twenty minutes away several other climbers are dying in the open elements unknown to him. One of the few people who knows about the huddled climbers, Stuart Hutchison, is rapidly trying to assemble a rescue team from among the climbers and Sherpas who are available. He does not try to roust Krakauer, however, assuming he is too exhausted. This bothers Krakauer, who imagines afterwards that he might have been able to help Namba and Weathers had Hutchison woken him.

This is not the only thing that Krakauer feels guilty about after returning to safety. Looking back, he realizes that he saw Andy Harris acting irrationally and should perhaps

have insisted that he get some oxygen. He remembers the time he spent waiting for his fellow climbers when his instinct was to go ahead and set up ropes for them so they might ascend more quickly.

These questions haunt Krakauer after he returns to his home in Seattle, and he finds no real answers. He has, however, planted information throughout the book that suggests that perhaps he can be partly excused for some of his actions. In the case of helping Weathers and Namba, Hutchison reminds Krakauer that he was exhausted from his descent and would not have been any help even if he could have been wakened. Krakauer explains that Rob Hall was so insistent that his word was law on summit day that Krakauer decided to wait for the others as Hall had told him to do instead of follow his instinct and go ahead to help set up the ropes. In the matter of Andy Harris, Krakauer does not offer any mitigating circumstances beyond describing his own confusion from lack of oxygen, which may have kept him from recognizing the same condition in Harris.

However, another incident Krakauer implies he must take full responsibility for, the mistaken identification of Harris above Camp Four. It is only Krakauer who thought he saw Harris there. Based on his belief, Harris' family is told that he fell from the South Col. Krakauer takes responsibility for this mistake, but in wondering how it is possible he could have made it. He wonders how he can be sure of anything that he remembers happening, further complicating the question of his role or personal responsibility.

Style

Perspective

Jon Krakauer is a journalist by trade, and his initial reason for going on the Everest expedition is to write an article about the experience of climbing as part of a commercial expedition. The perspective is in the first person, but with a journalistic viewpoint. Krakauer often seems removed from the subject, describing events as objectively as possible, as one would expect in a journalistic article. For example, he is sometimes critical of his fellow climbers, even though elsewhere he describes them as friends.

While Krakauer tries to maintain a journalistic perspective throughout the book, the ordeal that he must pass through along with the rest of the climbers on the mountain is so serious that the wall between a journalist and his subject is torn down. Krakauer cannot simply treat the subject as an outside observer because he becomes an integral part of the story, affecting its outcome.

Krakauer tries to keep these two elements balanced in his writing, but they are difficult to blend. A passage relating an emotional or dramatic event might be followed immediately by an anonymous citation, as in a news article. This sometimes interrupts the flow of the narrative. Krakauer also seems to enter into his journalist mode while treating the most difficult subjects, without injecting his own opinion or any subjective judgment. An example is his description of the case of the Japanese climbers who simply walk past three other climbers who are injured but alive, leaving them to die. Krakauer neither condemns them nor excuses them. He simply presents the bare facts, along with a quotation from one of the Japanese climbers. He treats the decision to leave two of the climbers on his own team behind in a similar way. He mentions who is there and what is done, but does not elaborate much on his own feelings on the matter, even though he is one of the people who makes the decision.

Krakauer's mixed approach to the subject also creates difficulty for the reader in keeping track of all the people in the story. At times, Krakauer refers to them by their last name, as one would do in a magazine article, but at other times, he calls them by their first names or nicknames. For example, Andy Harris, one of the guides of Krakauer's group, is sometimes referred to as "Andy," sometimes "Harris," and other times by his nickname, "Harold." The effect is to create a more personal perspective. It seems that when he is relating his own thoughts about someone, or describing them in relation to himself, Krakauer is more likely to use his fellow climbers' first names. When simply relating facts, last names are more common. The mixing of the two, however, sometimes leaves the reader backtracking in the narrative to confirm which people are involved in the present passage.

As the climbers descend to Base Camp without two of their three leaders, Krakauer volunteers to act as a guide and follow behind to help the others. At this point, he is no longer really simply a journalist along on the expedition as a client, but is also one of the

subjects of the story. He begins to assess his own role in the events on the mountain, and how he might have contributed them. Twice he breaks down in tears after coming off the mountain. As an epilogue, Krakauer steps outside the story and describe the effects writing about it have had on his own life and the lives of his fellow climbers.

Tone

The tone of "Into Thin Air" is primarily objective and straightforward. Events are presented in a journalistic style, with times and dates cited and quotations provided by the main subjects, as in a magazine article, which is what the book is based on, largely. This matter-of-fact tone sometimes contrasts sharply with the dramatic and emotional events that Krakauer is describing.

For example, the physical and mental exhaustion the climbers feel as they exert themselves and suffer from oxygen deprivation is described in terms of its primary physiological effects and supported with background data from other sources. This informs the reader, but does not seem to deliver the impact that the subject deserves.

Krakauer treats the emotional subjects in his narrative in a similar way. Life and death situations are described in terms of their basic facts and times. Krakauer describes his own outward reactions, but does not spend much time describing the inner turmoil he must have been feeling. A subdued tone hangs over the entire narrative, which is perhaps suitable to the somber subject matter.

There is also a resigned tone to Krakauer's prose. The events he describes are already well known, and his article has already appeared in Outside Magazine with substantially the same information. At times, the narrative reads like a story that the teller has already run through several times already, and which he knows everyone already knows the ending to. Indeed, Krakauer begins his book near the end, just as he is about to descend from the summit and sees the storm clouds forming below. With the ending already known, it is only left to fill in the details.

The resigned, subdued tone is perhaps meant to underline the futility of the entire expedition. There is no objective reason to climb Everest. The famous answer to the question of why climbers climb mountains is, "Because it is there." With no real reason to climb except an essential drive, the deaths of Krakauer's companions seem needless and futile. Given the subject matter, Krakauer's quiet tone is appropriate.

Structure

Into Thin Air is divided into 21 chapters and an epilogue, in roughly chronological order. Each chapter is entitled with the place where it opens, the date, and the altitude. This style of entitling the chapters creates a small joke when Krakauer includes the information for places that are not on the mountain, such as the Epilogue, where he includes the altitude for his home in Seattle. While this is an amusing consistency, it also underlines the fact that Krakauer has returned to a level of safety in his life after his

ordeal on the mountain. He begins each chapter with a quotation from other writers about Everest.

Krakauer writes in a journalistic style, inserting supporting information and quotations in the body of the text. He moves fluidly from episode to episode, often with just an incidental connection between subjects, which can create a meandering style to the narrative.

Since Krakauer has published much of the information in his book previously in a magazine article, and the disaster he describes receives wide media attention when it happens, he structures his book by opening his narrative in the middle of the story, after he has scaled Everest. However, it's just before the deadly storm arrives that will kill several of his companions on the mountain.

Beginning at this pivotal point in the narrative shifts the focus from the ascent of the mountain to the descent, which is where the tragedy strikes. The natural source of tension in a story about mountain climbing is whether the narrator will make it to the top or not. Krakauer begins at the summit of the mountain, so there is no question whether he is successful or not, allowing him the freedom to focus on other details of the expedition.

Because Krakauer is the one telling the story, there is also no question that he survives the disaster. The story is a frame narrative, where the author steps outside the story at the beginning and the end to introduce and complete it. This structure is common in true adventure stories such as this one, as well as in adventure fiction.

Quotes

"Four hundred vertical feet above, where the summit was still washed in bright sunlight under an immaculate cobalt sky, my compadres dallied to memorialize their arrival at the apex of the planet, unfurling flags and snapping photos, using up precious ticks of the clock. None of them imagined that a horrible ordeal was drawing nigh. Nobody suspected that by the end of that long day, every minute would matter." Chapter One, p. 9

"In climbing, having confidence in your partners is no small concern. One climber's actions can affect the welfare of the entire team. The consequences of a poorly tied knot, a stumble, a dislodged rock, or some other careless deed are as likely to be felt by the perpetrator's colleagues as the perpetrator." Chapter Three, pp. 37-38

"In the morning, Andy was weak, dehydrated, and shivering violently. Helen suggested he remain in Lobuje until he regained some strength, but Andy refused to consider it. 'There's no way in bloody hell I'm spending another night in this shit hole,' he announced, grimacing, with his head between his knees. 'I'm going on to Base Camp today with the rest of you. Even if I have to bloody crawl.'" Chapter Five, p. 58

"Ascending Everest is a long, tedious process, more like a mammoth construction project than climbing as I'd previously known it. Counting our Sherpa staff, there were twenty-six people on Hall's team, and keeping everyone fed, sheltered and in good health at 17,600 feet, a hundred miles by foot from the nearest road head, was no mean feat." Chapter Six, p. 73

"The wind kicked up huge swirling waves of powder snow that washed down the mountain like breaking surf, plastering my clothing with frost. A carapace of ice formed over my goggles, making it difficult to see. I began to lose feeling in my feet. My fingers turned to wood. It seemed increasingly unsafe to keep going up in these conditions." Chapter Nine, p. 125

"Chen's death cast a pall over the mountain as rumors of the accident spread from tent to tent, but thirty-three climbers would be departing for the summit in a few short hours, and the gloom was quickly banished by nervous anticipation of what lay ahead. Most of us were simply wrapped too tightly in the grip of summit fever to engage in thoughtful reflection about the death of someone in our midst." Chapter Eleven, p. 156

"Plodding slowly up the last few steps to the summit, I had the sensation of being underwater, of life moving at quarter speed. and then I found myself atop a slender

wedge of ice, adorned with a discarded oxygen cylinder and a battered aluminum survey pole, with nowhere higher to climb." Chapter Thirteen, p. 180

"I was more exhausted than I'd ever been in my life. But I was safe. Andy was safe. The others would be coming into camp soon. We'd fucking done it. We'd climbed Everest. It had been a little sketchy there for a while, but in the end everything had turned out great. It would be many hours before I learned that everything had not in fact turned out great - that nineteen men and women were stranded up on the mountain by the storm, caught in a desperate struggle for their lives." Chapter Fourteen, p. 195

"Throughout April and early May, Rob Hall had expressed his concern that one or more of the less competent teams might blunder into a bad jam, compelling our group to rescue them, thereby ruining our summit bid. Now, ironically, it was Hall's expedition that was in grave trouble, and other teams were in the position of having to come to our aid." Chapter Nineteen, p. 250

"How could things have gone so haywire? How could Andy and Rob and Scott and Doug and Yasuko really be dead? But try as I might, no answers were forthcoming. The magnitude of this calamity was so far beyond anything I'd ever imagined that my brain simply shorted out and went dark." Chapter Twenty, p. 264

"On May 19, I flew back to the States, carrying two duffels of Doug Hansen's belongings to return to the people who loved him. At the Seattle airport I was met by his children, Angie and Jamie; his girlfriend, Karen Marie; and other friends and family members. I felt stupid and utterly impotent when confronted by their tears." Chapter Twenty-one, p. 270

"For Neal Beidleman's part, he helped save the lives of five clients by guiding them down the mountain, yet he remains haunted by a death he was unable to prevent, of a client who wasn't on his team and thus wasn't even officially his responsibility." Epilogue, p. 288

Topics for Discussion

How does Krakauer resolve his role as a journalist as well as a participant in the events he is covering?

Does Krakauer bear any blame for the disastrous events on the mountain? Does anyone? If so, who?

How does Krakauer characterize the roles of the Sherpas in his narrative?

Is mountain climbing a worthwhile endeavor?

Krakauer sometimes uses separate chapters to describe simultaneous events, moving forward and backward on the timeline of the story. Is this an effective way to tell this story? Why or why not?

As a journalist, Krakauer explains that he feels he is required to tell the story as he observed it, even if it means hurting people who are involved. Is this a responsible approach? Is Krakauer fair to his subjects?

How does Krakauer portray himself in his narrative?

How does Krakauer's opinion of his fellow climbers change over the course of the expedition?