



Snowstruck: In the Grip of Avalanches

Jill Fredston

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Every year around the globe, people cross paths with avalanches—some massive, some no deeper than a pizza box—with deadly results. Avalanche expert Jill Fredston stalks these so-called freaks of nature, forecasting where and when they will strike, deliberately triggering them with explosives, teaching potential victims how to stay alive, and leading rescue efforts when tragedy strikes. In *Snowstruck*, Fredston draws on decades of personal experience to take “avalanches out of the statistical realm and into the human one” (*Skiing Magazine*): a skier making what may prove his final decision, a victim buried so tightly that he can’t move a finger, rescuers racing both time and weather, forecasters treading the line between reasonable risk and danger. Fredston brings to life the awesome forces of nature that can turn the mountains deadly—and the equally inexorable forces of human nature that lure us time and again into treacherous terrain.

Snowstruck: In the Grip of Avalanches Details

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From Reader Review Snowstruck: In the Grip of Avalanches for online ebook

Darcey says

Interesting read considering I knew zippo about avalanches before cracking this book. While she doesn't make a big deal of it, Jill Fredston is a real pioneer in the male-dominated field of avalanche study and I enjoyed reading about the progression of her career from that standpoint. It's also kind of a sweet ode to her husband, who was her first mentor in the field (which gives the "snowstruck" title another layer of meaning). Considering Fredston's technical background, I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of her prose - some of her descriptions of different types of snow read like poetry. If you're planning any off-the-beaten-path winter activities in the mountains, it's worth checking out this book first!

Ene Sepp says

Mõnes mõttes on hea, et Eesti on lapin nagu pannkook (no mõne künkaga), sest vähemalt ei pea talvel mõtlema laviinide peale ning maja ehitades ei ole vaja uurida, kust laviinid varasemalt üle on pühkinud. "Snowstruck" on raamat, mida võiks lugeda iga inimene, kes kavatseb kuskil mägedes lumises olukorras off-piste (väljaspool märgitud radasid) tegutsema minna - olgu see siis suuskadega, lauaga, mootorsaaniga või ka oma kahe jala peal.

Jill on töeline laviiniekspert ja ta suudab oma teadmisi nii kaasahaaravalt ja elavalt edasi anda, et raamat sai liigagi ruttu otsa. Muidugi, raamatus on ka palju surma. Jill ja tema abikaasa üheks tööülesandeks oli pikade aastate jooksul lisaks laviini ennustamisele ja ennetamisele (pommide viskamisega) laviiniohvrite väljakaevamine. Reeglina selle aja peale, kui nemed stseenile jõuavad ja inimene üles leitakse, siis ohver enam elus ei ole. Raamatu lõppus tuli eriti välja see, kuidas Jill ja tema abikaasa surma pideva nägemisega toime tulevad. Kuskil oli antud number, et aastate jooksul on Jilli abikaasa mägedest tõenäoliselt üle 200 inimese surnukotis ära toonud ja oma (sel ajal tulevasele) abikaasale soovitas ta karjääri alguses, et ohvrite nägusid ei tohiks vaadata.

Laviin on loodusjõud, mis ei hooli sellest, kui palju sa laviinidest tead või ei tea. Ebastabiilse lume liikumapanekuks võib piisata ka sellest, et sa pillad sinna apelsini. Sellisest väikesest asjast käima lükatud lumemass rabab aga sellise hooga, et majad liiguvad vundamentidelt ja inimesed mattuvad meetrite sügavusele lume alla, mis kohe seisma jäädes muutub kõvaks nagu kivi ning laviini ees liikuma lükatatud õhk võib puudelt oksad rebida ja aknaklaasid kildudeks lüüa.

Huvitav lugemine ja tuletab jällegi meelde, et inimene on väike nii väike, samas kui loodus... on loodus.

Mike says

This book was entirely too weird of a read. What kind of person writes a book that is largely about her spouse? Sorry. I can't get over it. The avalanche information was interesting.

Nicola says

"At our avalanche workshops, we like to recite a parable that was masterminded by Bill Glude, with minor contributions by us and others. It begins, 'Brethren and sistren, today I want to speak on morality and the snowpack. You see, life is like the snowpack. There are many paths you can choose. You are free to metamorphose as you please.' We suggest, 'You can become a shining example of a moral, responsible snowflake...develop close bonds with your neighbors, sinter and strengthen the entire social fabric.' Or, alternatively, 'Forget about your neighbors, go all out for personal growth. Go ahead, indulge yourself, build those facets and striations, build great showy crystals, steal vapor from your neighbors. Yes, you could go all the way and become one of the depth hoars, live in sin and degradation down in the red-light district of the snowpack, down close to Hades.'"

Fredston weaves stories of man and snow. Her fascination becomes yours. Her death count yours. Her frustrations and breakthroughs. Fredston draws on her own and her husband's vast experience battling and studying avalanches in Alaska. Enjoyed reading this while aspiring to become a ski bum and making only on piste tracks. But looking across at the slopes that have gone, and hearing of others caught in avalanches, I feel more alert, both scientifically and emotionally. I would like to read a more technical book on avalanches, but as memoir and a personalized account, I recommend this book highly.

Random, interesting fact: animals do not have a sixth sense when it comes to avalanches. "Birds, squirrels, Dall sheep, mountain goats, caribou, wolves, bears, deer, elk, horses, dogs, oxen, mules, and moose have all been found dead in avalanches. (The birds, for the record, have included a chickadee, a raven, and an eagle.)"

Sarah says

My Review: As a longtime Utahan, I'm no stranger to snow. Although my skiing career ended with too little money and too much knee pain, the threat of avalanche is never far from my mind as friends and family are frequently known to play in our magnificent, snow-covered mountains.

In her book, *Snowstruck*, Jill Fredston summons her readers into a world of a fatal beauty; the avalanche. Having spent a good part of her life studying avalanches and uncovering (often deceased) recreationists, Fredston recalls her experiences in an effort to engage her audience in a respect and reverence for Nature that, for some, does not come easily. Excited and utterly energized by the dazzling lure of fresh powder or a weekend of uninterrupted play, many outdoor enthusiasts pay little attention to Mother Nature's subtle warning signs- the intensity and direction of the wind; the sound of the snow; the crystalline patterns etched into the mountainside. Too often in our relationship with Nature, the price we pay for ignorance is fatal.

As Fredston highlights in her poignant memoir, it would truly behoove us to interact respectfully and thoughtfully with the snowy mountain spirits that oversee our play, for our fundamental existence can be violently severed in a 30-second flurry of powder.

Kristen says

This was a great book club read - really interesting and informative. Also I've never wanted an AIARE refreshers as badly as I do right now.

rachel says

Nathan's mom accidentally gave this book to me one Xmas (she was supposed to give it to Jamie), and I just never got around to reading it. Anyway it's really fascinating. The author, Jill Fredston is one of the foremost avalanche experts in the world, and her husband Doug, is the other one. Jill is a very good writer: she knows how to tell a story to keep you turning the pages. Mainly it seems to be real-life stories about avalanches and rescues and deaths. Sometimes it gets pretty hard to keep reading and know yet another person is going to be dying shortly. But that's the reality of avalanches. I'm not sure I will be an avalanche expert when I finish, but it sure is making me want to learn more.

Ted says

I really enjoyed this book. I have met the author at the annual Canoecopia event in Madison where she presented on her other book, Rowing to Latitude. This one shares the science as well as the human stories surrounding avalanches. Since Jill and her husband both live and teach avalanche science in Anchorage, my future home, I took particular interest in reading about mountains and passes that I have recently become familiar with. Also, as a backcountry telemark skier I also know I am at risk of being involved in an avalanche, something I want to educate myself as much as possible to avoid such.

I highly recommend this to those who like to read about outdoor recreation and tragedy. It is fascinating psychology that surrounds the decision making we make outdoors while participating in sports that involve risk.

Liralen says

Fredston is an avalanche expert, a hard-won distinction that comes of years of experience and countless bodies dug out of snow. I don't have a particular interest in avalanches, but I *do* have an interest in nature...and, after Rowing to Latitude, I do have an interest in Fredston's writing. This is a woman who describes Dyea, a gold-rush town, as *a brawl of a town that mushroomed and died within two years* (75)—how could I *not* love a writer with that facility for description?

Fredston's story is twofold: partly it is her own story of working with avalanches—of learning to predict risk, and of different disasters she's been called out to manage—and partly it is a story of avalanches themselves. When Doug Fesler, Fredston's husband, started working with avalanches, some years before she did, they were little understood, so he set out to fill that gap—and Fredston brings their knowledge to light for the lay reader. Of her own learning curve, she writes: *Most of my life, I'd learned by absorbing the written or spoken word. Now it was as though I had been pushed inside the tiger cage at a zoo, clutching a briefcase full of tiger statistics. The briefcase wasn't nearly big enough to hide behind, and my theories about the way the*

tiger should behave were only going to take me so far. (61)

And of learning to read snow: Doug made it clear that if I was to have any chance of bringing avalanches into focus, I needed to learn to read the history of a single winter's weather in a snowpit wall... After each storm, I laid colored strings on top of the snow between two trees. Every few days I dug pits and observed changes between the layers. That winter I watched eight inches of fluffy powder compact to four inches of ever-smaller, stronger, more rounded grains under cloudy warm conditions and witnessed clear windless weather produce surface hoar, fragile feathers of frost that are capable of wreaking havoc months after they have been buried by subsequent storms. During long cold, dry spells, when many might believe the snowpack dormant, I monitored the growth of large grains with the flashy facets of diamonds, keenly aware that this classically weak layer causes more than its fair share of mayhem and heartbreak. (49)

Her tales take a turn for the slightly surreal when she starts talking about setting off avalanches for movies (who would've thought?). *Given that Doug and I have spent careers debunking misperceptions about avalanches, when we received a phone call on October in the early 1990s asking if we could spend a day in March making avalanches for a feature film, it was not without a sense of irony that we said yes. Thus was launched a sideline business of creating "designer" avalanches (193).* She and Fesler, after all, have experience not just in rescuing people from avalanches and figuring out which places are likely to be dangerous when, but also in setting off 'controlled' avalanches to mitigate risk later on, and they're perfectly capable of figuring out likely spots for those 'designer' avalanches.

Despite Fredston's frustration with people who ignore obvious risk signs—sometimes through willful ignorance—hers is a compassionate voice, and she's not afraid to laugh at herself or Fesler:

During a similar blizzard...I drove into a snowbank... As we stood shouting to be heard, I told Doug that I'd try again, but that I had never had such trouble. It wasn't a matter of seeing poorly; I couldn't see at all. He looked through the tiny opening left by my cinched hood and with admirable restraint said, "Jill, wipe your glasses." (232-233)

We were still in the hospital when the article ran and hadn't had a chance to read it when the reporter called, apoplectic with apology. An editor had tampered with his prose. The passage he was concerned about read: "There is absolutely no reason in the world why you can't ski the steepest chute or gully: it is just a matter of good judgment and timing," says Fesler, who is recovering from a near-fatal fall down a steep chute." Though laughing was agonizingly painful, Doug couldn't stop. Rarely has a newspaper article ever gotten it so right. (189)

Ultimately, Fredston comes to the conclusion that her job is not about saving people after the fact—she writes of going eighteen years without digging somebody out alive*—or about preventing avalanches themselves, but about passing on knowledge so that people will make better, and better-informed, decisions: not build houses directly in known avalanche paths; recognise and respond to warning signals when skiing/snowmobiling/etc.; wear avalanche beacons in case one is caught in an avalanche; act quickly when somebody else is caught. Her other crucial role involves keeping *rescuers* safe (305–306) and not compounding tragedy.

And...possibly the best thing about this book? Towards the end, Fredston notes that avalanche rescue is something that one can do for only a finite period of time before bodies start to give out and the emotional impact becomes too much, and that she and Fesler were moving in other directions. Why is this good, you say? (You're right—that doesn't sound good.) It's good because it means that perhaps, at some point in the (near, please!) future, she'll write a book about her/their continued adventures.

*Sounds like immediate response is the most critical; if somebody is buried, then by the time emergency responders can get to the scene, a very narrow window of time has likely closed.

Gareth Jones says

Fredston's book is an excellent read for anyone involved in emergency and crisis management (also off-piste or mountain folks). It is interesting and opens up the world of snow. Its value to a BCM or emergency planner is clear when it talks of a really useful approach to making people think about hazards. In this case avalanche traffic lights, red - stop hazardous situation, yellow: caution, green light :ok. The interesting part is their experience of defining the parameters, in this case weather, terrain and snowpack. She also talks of familiar things to any BCM or contingency planner: the shortness of corporate memory and a sentence that resonates. "wishful thinking, hubris, habits, peer pressure, complacency, inattention & intuition on the way people dispatch uncertainty and make decisions. Interesting facts 1 Time of survival (after 35 mins most dead), 2. powder blast (90 to 120mph!) 3. I never thought of the mass of snow going up the other side of the valley (200 feet up a hill in one case) 4. Most slab avalanches over 35 degrees - slopes over 25 degrees possible. She reflects the anger and unreasonableness of those left behind after disasters. Definitely a recommended read for anyone involved in emergency management and natural hazards (and obligatory for off-piste skiers or mountain nuts)

Sara Russell says

One of my favorites. It's well written and perfect for someone like me who would rather read about snow than be in it. The plaintive sincerity of life-and-death issues discussed is riveting.

Shonna Froebel says

I received this for Christmas in 2007 but hadn't yet got around to reading it. With the multitude of avalanches in the news this year, I thought it was timely.

Jill Fredston and her husband Doug Fesler codirect the Alaska Mountain Safety Center. They have made their careers on avalanche education and avalanche rescue. Using real world stories, Fredston makes the power of avalanches come alive. I was especially taken by her discussions around those who have been killed and injured by avalanches. Most were experienced backcountry users, some of whom had taken classes on avoiding such situations. The danger is due to human nature. Part of it is around familiarity breeds, if not contempt, at least decreased vigilance. Because the victims were familiar with the terrain and enjoying the experience they disregarded warning signs. The other bit of human nature is peer pressure. If the others in your group say things are fine, you tend to go along. Fredston also talks about how the increased power of snowmobiles is now bringing less experienced users into dangerous situations. Throughout, she acknowledges that we all make mistakes and it is something we must constantly guard against. Her attitude is realistic and offers fascinating information. I thoroughly enjoyed it as well as learning a lot.

Bryce says

Excellent stories told from the perspective of one of today's foremost snow science experts. Jill Fredston has lived a life many who've come to Alaska can only dream of.

Minus the non-required, lovy-dovy fluff, I would have given this book a 4 and would recommend it to more of my guy friends. But alas, this less desirable material can be waded through with only a minimum amount of sneering and face scrunching.

Still a fantastic read if you are interested in stories of life and death and how to avoid the latter while perusing adventure in avalanche terrain.

Erin says

Super interesting. Super scary.

Deborah Britton says

Fascinating! I learned so much about avalanches! What a heartbreakingly business recovering bodies from the slides. So many dead. I can definitely see how that work would start to get to you after a while. Thanks to Jill and Doug for all the work they have done and although it may appear that most people do not listen to what they have learned you can be sure that some do and their lives are saved.
