



Freedom Climbers

Bernadette McDonald

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Winner! 2012 American Alpine Club Literary Prize (USA)

Winner! 2011 Munday Award, Banff Mountain Festival (CANADA)

Winner! 2011 Boardman Tasker Prize, Kendal Mountain Festival (UNITED KINGDOM)

Freedom Climbers — the most honoured book of mountaineering literature published in Canada — tells the story of a group of extraordinary Polish adventurers who emerged from under the blanket of oppression following the Second World War to become the world's leading Himalayan climbers. Although they lived in a dreary, war-ravaged landscape, with seemingly no hope of creating a meaningful life, these curious, motivated and skilled mountaineers created their own free-market economy under the very noses of their Communist bosses and climbed their way to liberation. At a time when Polish citizens were locked behind the Iron Curtain, these intrepid explorers found a way to travel the world in search of extreme adventure—to Alaska, South America and Europe, but mostly to the highest and most inspiring mountains of the world. To this end, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Nepal became their second homes as they evolved into the toughest group of Himalayan climbers the world has ever known.

Freedom Climbers Details

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Author : Bernadette McDonald

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From Reader Review Freedom Climbers for online ebook

Hanna says

A great book and a must-read for the non-Polish climbing fans. Unfortunately if one read already even some of the Polish books on high mountin climbing,especially those written by the climbers themselves, this one will be slightly boring.

Alex Rogers says

A very competent and well-written account of a fascinating group of climbers. McDonald has chosen a few representative Polish climbers to illustrate and add depth to her account of Polish climbing over the last 50 years. She covers an extraordinary group of climbers at a fascinating period in history, and her in-depth profiles add depth and human interest to a very impressive list of achievements. A good read for anyone interested in Himalayan climbing.

Albert Pickwick says

Un relato excepcional de los logros y sufrimientos de los alpinistas de la edad de oro polaca. Una generación de hombre y mujeres irrepetibles y casi parecía que indestructibles, hasta que el Himalaya acabó cobrando su peaje en más de la mitad de ellos.

Izabela Jaklewicz says

Poor translation into Polish

Akshata says

A great book is one that can transport you in time, place and imagination; a 4-D movie equivalent where you can feel the sun and snow, be in the middle of the conversation, and laugh and cry with the characters. This was one such book. Brilliantly written, McDonanld traces the golden age of Polish climbing when Polish climbers stood on top of the world in more ways than one, with fewer resources than climbers from other countries. She takes us to meet a few of these legends and accompany them on their expeditions, feel their anguish through the war and the communist clutch, feel their elation in their mountain home. This book moves and inspires in more ways than one, and I'm sure to return to it when life gets tedious.

Joanna Croston says

One of the best pieces of mountain literature this year! A great accomplishment for Bernadette. Highly recommended for those wanting to learn about the golden age of Polish mountaineering and what drove these climbers to such amazing accomplishments.

James Edward Mills says

Writer and former director of the Banff Mountain Film Festival Bernadette McDonald has new book that offers a unique perspective on high altitude climbing in the Himalaya. As the author of several titles on the subject she's well regarded in the international mountaineering community. And back in 2003 she came up with an idea for this latest project at an adventure film festival in Poland.

"And as most ideas do, this one began at a party," McDonald said.

It was the after party of this festival and McDonald was in the clubhouse of the Katowice Mountain Club. She knew a number of these climbers from her years working at the festival. But in this particular situation she was sort of swamped with them, she said. There were dozens of climbers in this clubhouse and there was a lot of energy in the room.

"But it wasn't just about the festival. It was about a community of the hardest core climbers I had ever seen in my life," McDonald said. "And the stories that I heard that night, the passion and the depth of their history in the mountains absolutely astonished me. But the other thing that struck me was that it felt like it was the end of an era because a lot of the best of those climbers had already died in the mountains. It felt a bit like an Irish wake. That's the way it struck me and I thought there was a story here. Because the situation in which they grew up, the conditions, the hardships that they endured were so different than anything that I had ever experienced and more different than most people I knew had experienced. And I somehow felt that those two things were linked."

From the mid1970s through the 1980s Polish climbers dominated the Himalayan mountaineering scene. This generation of adventurers rose up from the horrific occupation by Nazi Germany during World War II only to be subjugated afterward by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. For thousands of young people at that time the mountains were their only escape and many of them ventured far away from Poland into the high of places of Central Asia where they distinguished themselves among the best alpinists in the world. In her book *Freedom Climbers* Bernadette McDonald tells their story.

Listen to my interview with Bernadette on the Joy Trip Project: <http://joytrippproject.org/2011/freedom-climbers/>

Tomek says

A nice history of the "Golden Age" of Polish Himalayan climbing. Personally, I don't know of any others. I do have a few criticisms, though. First, I found it irksome that McDonald only focused on 3 climbers. There were many other greats besides Kukuczka, Kurtyka, and Rutkiewicz. Also, and perhaps most damningly, she repeatedly suggests that Poles wanted democracy and freedom, but needed the harsh rule of totalitarianism. This is an insane statement demonstrated by the relative stability of Poland's government and economy as compared to other Soviet bloc countries and, in fact, other EU nations.

Kelly says

I think there is an endless fascination inside me about what motivates people to do what they do, and mountaineering is a raw, isolated, and extreme look at how determination, suffering and the will to follow through with a decision effect who people are and why they act.

In freedom climbers, you read story after story of people getting close to the "red line." The thin line between life and death, yet they continuously go back for more. Almost as if, had they the choice, they would live their entire lives on this line. Metaphysical experiences are common above 8000ft, talks with the "third climber", and experiences with living in a world where 80% of the people entering it die.

The amazing Polish climbers give you a love for the Polish people, and the things people can do when they give there all to a task. The book almost gives you a feeling that climbing an 8000ft peak is just another walk in the park to this stunning group of people. You get a true sense of how bad the lives of Polish people were between world war 2 to modern times. The life of an professional mountaineer showed so much more promise than a regular job with in their country. Adventure and true Freedom!

This was an easy read, and should appeal to you on a historical and emotional level.

Jacek says

Zawsze trudno by?o mi poj?? moim ma?ym za?ciankowym rozumkiem wy?sze abstrakcje cz?owiecze?stwa. Wysiada?em w trakcie dyskusji nt. gó? - chodzi o rozwa?ania o potrzebie wolno?ci, o zagadnieniach odpowiedzialno?ci, o przekraczaniu ludzkich granic. Dla mnie istnia? tylko argument - pcha si? w góry - kusi los - sam sobie winien - idiota. Ta ksi?ka przyznaj?, mocno mnie skruszy?a... Nie to, ?e bym chcia? zaraz jecha? w Himalaje, ale na pewno zacz??em si? nad tymi abstrakcjami zastanawia? na nowo. Warto by?o :) Polecam nawet dla tych, którzy nie s? zainteresowani samymi górami, wystarczy zainteresowanie cz?owiekiem :P

Barbara McVeigh says

3.5 stars

Although I was compelled to keep on reading and felt emotionally invested, I am restrained from giving this book a higher rating. Firstly, I was frustrated by the lack of context from the outset. I would have changed the beginning of the book in four different ways: I would have started with a description of the Golden Age of Polish climbing; let the reader know which three characters were going to be the focus of the book (there are many names thrown about, and even though I am Polish, I was still confused); and I would have provided a glossary of mountaineering terminology. Also, I feel a map showing the locations and geographic features of the mountains would have been helpful.

Eventually, we get to know three climbers well. But I started to question the lack of nuance in McDonald's

research, when she writes that the next president after Lech Walesa was a communist. Aleksander Kwasniewski had belonged to the Party before 1989, but not in 1995. McDonald notes that Kwasniewski was democratically elected, so his victory wasn't a surprise to the Poles, as it was in the West. Unfortunately, she didn't witness the depression of the country when the people realized that by not participating in the second round of voting, they had allowed a previous Communist back into power.

That said, from the book, I did learn why people risk their lives to summit the highest points in the world. I appreciated the spiritual aspects of climbing, and the personalities that made up that generation.

If you're a climber, you may enjoy this book for a possibly forgotten era of mountaineering. If you're interested in reading about Polish culture and history, *Freedom Climbers* does provide a different angle than what is usually covered.

Alex says

"They crawled out of their snowy coffin and began laboring up through the thigh-deep snow. They had brought food and fuel for a maximum of five bivouacs. They were now on day eight. But as British man Doug Scott once said, "You'll never find enlightenment on a full stomach."

Sam says

As intriguing as high altitude mountaineering is, I just couldn't get into this like I wanted to. I wanted to give it 2.5 stars...so I chose to round up. The climbs, the mountains, and the personalities were amazing to read about. I wish the pictures at the end would have been inserted into the text for a visual of what they were dealing with.

I feel like there could have been a more clear storyline. The author often jumped from person to person and would even sometimes set up a story and then just stop. It was frustrating at times. Fascinating stuff, just not my favorite approach.

Bill Leach says

In the 1970's and 80's, partially due to the political and economic climate in Poland, climbers started looking to the Himalaya, carrying out climbs of greater difficulty than the current norm. New routes of greater challenge were done, often in the winter. The author focuses on the more prominent climbers, giving a bit of their early history then going through their excursions to the Himalaya.

The risk in these routes eventually caught up to most of the leading Polish climbers. Only a few lived into their later years.

K.N. says

This book was hard for me to rate. The topic is fascinating. The people that are the focus of this book are/were truly awe-inspiring. However, it was extremely difficult for me to acclimatize (see what I did there) to MacDonald's writing style. For a good chunk of the beginning of the book, I was having a hard time keeping people and facts straight. There's an avalanche (yes, I went there) of information that necessitates note-taking and charts, and as a casual reader, I neither had the time nor the energy for that.

This book falls somewhere around a 3.5/5 for me, but points are due and rounded up for making me *feel!* A lip quivered!

I will hate mountains for the rest of my life! They're murderers!

In all seriousness, parts of this book (notably the second half) were amazing and had me unable to put the book down. The Polish climbers were truly incredible and in a league of their own. The details of their climbs had me saying this more often than not:

I will not be climbing at any point in the near future...or ever. I'll pass.

I'll end my review with a quote by Wanda Rutkiewicz that I feel is ever-appropriate:

“We should not presume to judge those who seek out danger on the world’s highest places or demand to be told the meaning of what they do. Simply, when they pay the ultimate price for their passion, we should remember them...”

A says

The experience for someone who lived through this era, who left Poland during this time and has lived through this history, it is like re-living it from another, completely different perspective. It hits home in a way that I don't imagine anyone else reading the book will experience. Yet, the feelings that I identify with that make it authentic to me, I trust are what make it an authentic representation of the alpine experiences.

Paul Walker IV says

nice book and need to be updated

micusiowo says

Ciekawe (g?ównie dlatego, ?e obcym okiem) spojrzenie na z?ote czasy polskiego himalaizmu. Bez zad?cia, stawiania spi?owych pomników i niepotrzebnej martyrologii. Chocia? z drugiej strony - w?a?nie przez to -

Je autorka jest Kanadyjk? czasem trudno brnie si? przez "oczywiste oczywisto?ci" historyczno-polityczne o w?asnym kraju, to jedyny drobny minus tej pozycji.

Tina says

Izvrsten vpogled v zlato dobo poljskega alpinizma. Neverjetno pogumni, vztrajni in mo?ni so se Poljaki odlo?ili, da bodo postali najboljši himalajci. In so. Za ogromno ceno. Knjiga se mi je zdela izvrstno napisana, s pripovedniškim slogom, ki kljub neizogibnemu ponavljanju (odprava, vzpon, spust, pot domov, odprava ...) nikoli ne postane dolgo?asen, ?eprav zato žrtvuje nekaj jasnosti in linearnosti pripovedovanja. Zgodba se osredoto?i na tri alpiniste, vendar prepozna tudi dosežke drugih. Stvari, ki so jih po?eli, so bile neverjetne, kljubovali so vsemu, za kar sem mislila da je nemogo?e. Ve? zaporednih zimskih bivakiranj prakti?no brez opreme in hrane na višini okoli 8000 m? Ni problema.

Mihai says

The Golden Age of Polish climbing (roughly 1971-1992) was a time of incredible and groundbreaking achievements, some of which have never been replicated. Unfortunately, this momentous chapter in the history of mountaineering has mostly faded from memory, owing to the tremendous loss of life among the elite climbers, as well as to the lack of effort in preserving the memories and presenting them to the whole world. Luckily, author Bernadette McDonald assembled a fascinating overview that resurrects the forgotten past, proving without a doubt why Poland (and those who rose from there) firmly belong in the top echelon of mountain climbing. The book does an excellent job explaining the social, political and economic contexts which ultimately determined how and why these climbers achieved what they did. Poles became the undisputed masters of the 'art of suffering' - which allowed them to go higher and push harder than anyone thought humanly possible. In particular, Jerzy Kukuczka rose above all to dominate Himalayan high-altitude climbing for almost a decade; if he had lived as long as Reinhold Messner did, he would undoubtedly rank as the greatest mountaineer of all time. I had heard of Kukuczka before, but knew nothing about how he managed to do things that defied (and still do) any attempts at understanding or replication. This book shed a lot of light on Kukuczka, as well as his compatriots, including Wanda Rutkiewicz, a woman far ahead of her time, who were not superhumans. They were simply the brightest stars put forth by a people hungry for global respect and redemption after immemorial times of suffering, injustice and disillusion. Like supernovas, Polish climbers exploded onto the international scene in a dazzling manner, then cruelly faded as success was paid in the heaviest price - lives left on the biggest mountains. However, their legacy will live on forever.
