

Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature 2020

Speech made by Katie Ives, Chair of Judges 2020, on November 6th 2020, recorded by Kristen Mills for the Boardman Tasker Shortlisted Authors event and Award for Mountain Literature on Saturday November 21st, at the Kendal Mountain Festival on line.

It can seem strange to be contemplating a topic such as mountain literature during a year of so much struggle and uncertainty around the world—a year marked for many of us by the heavy toll of the pandemic, and for Americans such as myself, by the fear that our democracy could be at risk.

But mountains, of course, have never been wholly detached from the rest of existence. The shrinking of glaciers testifies to the realities of global climate change. Shifts in political regimes affect the protection of alpine ecosystems. And climbers aren't separate from the rest of society either. Mere days before the US elections, the other *Alpinist* editors and I shipped the latest issue of our magazine to the printer. We knew that if Trump remained in power, one of our contributors, a young mountaineer and immigrant, might risk being deported—so we added an anxious note to the end of his autobiographical essay, explaining that the outcome of his story could change depending on the presidential vote. Today, as I record this speech, it's November 6th, 2020, and there are still so many unknowns.

What is the role of mountain literature in such an unsettled time? In his 2018 speech for the Boardman Tasker Award ceremony, Peter Gillman had already noted the increasing threats to the environment. *"I hope we can see the strength of mountaineering writing," he said, "as a countervailing force for good."*

How might that aim be possible? As Tim Cahill, the founding editor of *Outside* magazine once said, many readers acquire their values through stories. Swept along by powerful narratives,

readers may learn to care about the places where these adventures occur—and, one hopes, also about the people who live there. The structure of stories might help us find our way through the chaos of our existence, just as a map can provide points of orientation in an immense wild. *“To be without a story,”* the writer and activist Rebecca Solnit observed in one of her memoirs, *“is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice.”*

And thus, in this pandemic year of 2020, from the various distant places where each of us were quarantined, the Boardman Tasker Award judges—David Canning, Mike Kosterlitz and I—met each other, via a series of Zoom meetings. As we explored the settings of each book through our imaginations, I found moments of beauty, solace and escape, but also reminders of vulnerable mountain landscapes and communities.

There were only twenty-two submissions this year—ten fewer than last year. Some publishers may have delayed the release of books because of the pandemic. A few potential contenders just barely missed the deadline. At least one book went astray in the post. As we made our decisions, however, we kept in mind the usual guidelines of the Boardman Tasker Award, which state that the prize should be **“awarded to the author or authors of the best literary work...the central theme of which is concerned with the mountain environment. The emphasis will be on literary merit.”**

Of course, there’s an inevitably subjective quality that may influence all perceptions of literary merit, no matter how objective we strive to be. As usual with book contests, judges had diverging opinions, and decisions emerged from a series of discussions leading up to a final vote. We considered standard elements of literary craft: including the quality of the prose, the strength of the narrative arc, and the depth and complexity of the characterisation. We thought about the authors’

willingness to take creative risks: to shatter old prejudices and formulas, and to bring new approaches and ideas to the genre. As longtime mountain writer Ed Douglas once said about climbing art, the best books also reflected something elusive, yet essential: *“that spark of creativity, the shift in perspective that changes the way you—and others view the world.”*

Some submissions didn't make the short list because they didn't relate enough to the mountain environment. Other books faltered in some aspect of literary craft or didn't push far enough to break free from stereotypes or conventions. Or else, they simply didn't seem to reach quite the same level as the ultimately selected books. (Again, of course, there may be a subjective element.) Many, nonetheless, contained those “sparks of creativity” that can leave a lasting impact on their readers.

Among the fascinating books that didn't make the short list, Luke Mehall's book *The Desert* displays an admirable ambition of trying to create a “dirtbag climbing book” (as he calls it) for our current Zeitgeist, confronting the political unrest of the Trump era and portraying the fight to conserve public lands. James Crowden's *The Frozen River* evokes village life during a Himalayan winter in hauntingly numinous ways. Alan Mullin's writings, edited by Grant Farquhar, and included posthumously in *Crazy Sorrow*, discusses issues surrounding mental illness with an unflinching honesty that's often rare in climbing autobiography. And three of the novels—*Protection* by Paul Hersey, *Rockhead* by Sean Toren and *Broken Ghost* by Niall Griffiths—vividly capture those longed-for glimmers of transcendence that turn mountains into places of mystery and possibility in many climbers' minds.

Now, for books that made the shortlist. I'll follow the tradition of presenting the chosen entries in the alphabetical order of the authors' names—beginning with **Patrick Baker's book, *The Unremembered Places: Exploring Scotland's Wild Histories***. During an age when outdoor pursuits have become spectacles in mainstream media, and when so many stories tend to emphasise the highest, fastest and hardest, longtime mountain wanderer Patrick Baker takes us on a much subtler kind of journey. He seeks out lesser-known areas of "*rumor and folklore*," following vague directions and quasi-secret paths, tracing neglected contours on topographic maps, rooting out stories behind (what he calls) "*strange anomalies in the landscape*."

In the process, he makes a case for the value of "*wild histories*" as he terms them. He describes these landscape tales as "*fragments of human and natural history that had somehow become lost...peripheral places, existing at the edges of our collective memory and often hidden by dint of sheer geographical remoteness.... Wild, certainly, in that they were located in wilderness areas, but wild also in an almost anthropomorphic sense: feral, uncared for, mostly unknown.*"

With quiet and poetic prose, Baker's book evokes a different way of thinking about exploration—one that could inspire other writers' journeys as well. For there are still many small nooks of wild nature and half-visible traces of human stories that have remained forgotten or marginalised despite the illusions of geographic omniscience in our Information Age.

Next, the second book, ***Where There's a Will: Hope, Grief and Endurance in a Cycle Race Across a Continent* by Emily Chappell**. Reading each of the books on the list, I was struck by how the particular motions of travel through the mountains can affect the arc and style of a story. While *Unremembered Places* has some of the discursive, yet purposeful quality of roaming on foot, Emily Chappell's prose teems with the vivid, fleeting images encountered during her experiences with long-distance cycling.

Nonetheless, as my fellow judge Mike Kosterlitz says, Chappell also describes mountains in ways that *“any adventurer who has attempted very long and difficult hikes or climbs”* can understand. Biking up Mont Ventoux in the dark, Chappell recalls: *“I had become a creature who climbed—there was no room in me for any other impulse, no reason or logic behind it, no sense of destination or reward. My awareness was narrowed to the dark road curling up the mountainside ahead of me, the cold moonlight as it fell on the silvery scree slopes around me, and the fierce racket of wind above my head.”*

Chappell is an experienced literary journalist, as well as a talented cyclist, and as she depicts struggles with depression and grief, she consciously avoids the clichés of inspirational sports memoirs. Instead, she argues for a more complex, honest and human approach to outdoor stories. *“As my own journeys progressed,”* she writes, *“I discovered a deep skepticism towards the endings other travellers described. I found that I simply didn’t believe the emotions they recalled.... A lot of their stories followed a formula as clear as any thriller or romance novel, and after I’d read two or three, the homecoming scene rang as false as the happily-ever-after. Their writers, I told myself, were saying what they felt was expected of them—what they themselves had expected: that this was the greatest moment of their life, that they were happy, that everything had built towards this. I wondered if they were even able to admit to themselves that the template they’d spent however many thousands of miles molding themselves into was false.”*

This is an insightful passage—and a book—
that many aspiring mountain writers would do well to read.

Another unconventional approach to adventure writing appears in the third book, **Peter Goulding’s *Slatehead: The Ascent of Britain’s Slate-Climbing Scene***, which won a New Welsh Writing Award. An in-depth history of climbing in slate quarries, *Slatehead* is also a lyrical and

humorous meditation on the nature of obsession, on the persistence of wildness in a post-industrial world—and on the medium of the rock itself, at times sharp, lustrous and strangely alluring, captured in such quirky, delightful observations as the following: “*When it is wet, [slate] is a dark blue purple like a juicy sloe berry.*”

Drawn in by Goulding’s evident passion for his subject matter, we learn to appreciate the intricate landscapes and unique characters of a somewhat esoteric climbing culture. In many ways, the story reflects the power of the imagination to re-wild the world. “*Twisting my body to reach a thin sharp edge, pulling my body weight through half a pad of my fingertips,*” Goulding recalls something almost atavistic. “*I liked the fear,*” he writes, “*not the anxiety of unpaid bills, but deep old fear of death.*” And there are startling moments of re-enchantment throughout his stories, when a sudden radiance, an intensification of perspective, transforms the commonplace into the sublime, suggesting a hope of beauty amid desolation that reverberates far beyond the routes themselves. At the end of one day of climbing, Goulding writes, “*Now the breeze has dropped, and in the precise sharp light, everything starts to look blue, except the hillside catching the last rays of light, which are soft pink.*”

With the fourth book, ***The Uncrowned King of Mont Blanc: The Life of T. Graham Brown, Physiologist and Mountaineer, Peter Foster*** applies a similar level of attention to detail while he explores the career of a Scottish climber and *Alpine Journal* editor whose contributions to history have long deserved a closer look. Partly inspired by a cartographic error and a recurring dream, and completed during the 1920s and 1930s, Brown’s routes on the Brenva Face on Mont Blanc continued to pose a challenge for strong alpinists over the decades ahead. Beyond the Alps, Brown took part in expeditions that made the first ascent of Mt. Foraker (also known as Sultana) and Nanda Devi; and his advocacy for a lighter and less militaristic style on big mountains recalls the philosophy of legendary explorers Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman.

Most of all, Peter Foster succeeds in bringing the complex personality behind all these adventures to life. My fellow judge David Canning explains it thus: Foster *“entertainingly and skillfully captures the character of the anti-hero: flawed, eccentric and brilliant.”* At a time when so much of what passes for profiles of climbers in mainstream media showcases relatively flat depictions of action-figure-like heroes—Foster’s multifaceted portrayal of Brown stands out as one model of what a nuanced and rigorous approach to biography should be.

And finally, there’s ***Two Trees Make a Forest: On Memory, Migration and Taiwan***, the fifth book on our shortlist. The author **Jessica J. Lee** describes a journey to Taiwan to hike in the mountains—and to try to retrace some of the pathways of her grandparents’ former existence on the island after they fled from China and before they immigrated to Canada. Throughout the book, there’s a recurring idea of feeling haunted by other people’s memories in a place, which she describes as *“a longing to remember things I had not known.”*

Lee’s prose evokes vivid images of ghostlike absences and presences in the mountains, hinting at emotions that lie just beyond the reach of language. As she nears one summit, Lee recalls, *“Fog turns the world to white and every inhalation I take has the cut of ice.... I long for a view, to see the island from a height, but it does not come.... Instead, I have come to know the whiteness of a rain-soaked canopy. I know the water that washes this place, spreading from the north, the sunlit fog that gathers at the heights of clouds, the trees that huddle green together.... I spend a few moments in that delicate cold, against the mantle of the island sky. Seeing only light, I make my way back down the mountain.”* Similar themes of ineffable experiences appear in a meeting with a long-lost relative: *“The instincts I had—to order, to make sense of the past—fell flat. I knew only that there were words she could not speak, explanations that dwelt only in the darkness between feeling and form. There exist losses impossible to distil into mere stories.”*

Lee's book is one that expands the topography of adventure, pushing at the very limits of storytelling. Her journey takes place through overlapping landscapes of summits, mountain legends, political conflict, exile, natural disasters, memories, imagination, immigration and longing—like multiple interwoven paths in a forest and like the numerous possible futures for mountain literature itself.

Back in 1987, during an international festival for mountaineering literature, the climbing writer Dave Cook had pointed out the need to make room for more varied voices, including those of women and people of color. He'd also urged adventure writers to seek sources of inspiration beyond the narrow formulas of escapist tales, to acknowledge the "interconnections" between experiences in the mountains and the rest of life, and to reassert "some of the values of humanity and fellowship against the imperial colonisation of the hills."

Today, despite all the challenges of pursuing writing in our era, emerging authors from many diverse backgrounds are increasingly producing narratives that help mountain writing grow in creative and original shapes—beyond what even Cook might have imagined possible. Among such books, *Two Trees Make a Forest* represents a work of both great literary merit and bold vision. Lee's story, David Canning explains, is "*Beautifully written, and it successfully progresses the genre of exploration writing into new territory.*" And for this reason, I'm happy to say that

**the author of *Two Trees Make a Forest*, Jessica J. Lee,
will receive the Boardman Tasker Award for 2020.**
