

Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature 2021 - Judges' Report

The repeated Covid lockdowns of the last two years have given people more time to and space in which to write. Perhaps to write 'that book,' the autobiography that's been broiling away inside them all these years. We have certainly seen an explosion of writing and the desire to write over the last two years, which can only be a good thing. With an extended publication window qualifying books for submission to our competition, we expected a surge of entries for the Boardman Tasker Award. Indeed, over forty books were entered this year, almost twice the number entered in 2020, including quite a number of autobiographies. I want to start by thanking my fellow judges, Marni Jackson and Natalie Berry for their careful reading, diligent critique and for an enjoyable series of online discussions as we worked our way through a daunting book pile.

It is a cliché, but the truth is that with this surge we were fairly spoilt for choice. Many of the books entered were entertaining, well written, engaging, interesting in their own way and will take their place well enough on the bookcase, but the competition to capture the imagination of the judging panel with a compelling subject matter, a creative and intelligent approach to storytelling, and to hold us in thrall with a well crafted line of prose or poetry, was fierce.

So, beyond the art of the writing, an important quality that differentiated the outstanding from the good was the skill and sensitivity with which a writer handled their subject matter, its significance to climbing and mountaineering culture, and the extent to which they had produced a work that speaks with authority into the genre.

In her report to the 2020 awards, Katie Ives spoke movingly of how the events taking place across the world, and particularly in her homeland, the USA, gave us cause to reflect on the affirming power of literature, of its ability to speak into our times. The events of the year since have been no less dramatic and underline the continued imperative for us to be informed about, curious for and sympathetic to the world and to the people whom we share the planet with. To be aware of unintended biases and to be sufficiently open minded to allow these to be challenged in us without feeling threatened.

Each of the shortlisted books engage this imperative in their own way. Katie also talked about the opportunity that competitions such as the Boardman Tasker provide for us to see people who are often ignored, to hear their voices and allow their art to move us into an exploration of new territory. Again, the shortlisted books often do this and are, at their hearts, sometimes redeeming, human stories.

Before I begin to talk about the six shortlisted books in more detail, the judges were unanimous in wanting to call out a book that didn't make the shortlist for a special mention, nevertheless. *A Feeling for Rock* by Sarah-Jane Dobner is a brave piece of writing. My fellow judge Natalie Berry summed it up like this: 'Sarah-Jane rocks the boat. She tackles gender issues head-on, subverting the dominant discourse of men and mountains and instead puts sex, sensuality and emotion on the menu.' Sarah-Jane's writing has been controversial, has provoked reaction, usually from men, but it is refreshing and original and has something important to say; I expect we will hear more from her in future.

***Himalaya* by Ed Douglas** is an impressive and extensively researched exploration of the human histories of the Himalaya, and of how the mountains and their geological and imagined boundaries have shaped people and place. In the western psyche the Himalaya had become part of the story of colonial conquest. A reaction to colonial racism has sometimes been to create a romanticised stereotype of Sherpas and other native peoples in the region, but Douglas breaks these down and sets out in sometimes painful detail the history of the exchanges, exploits and exploitations that have occurred on the 'roof of the world,' some involving such Everest 'heroes' as Colonel Younghusband. Few books in the mountaineering genre cover the human history and influence of geography on community and culture and it is refreshing to read less about the climbing conquests in, and more about the history of the region and its people.

***The Moth and The Mountain* by Ed Caesar** verges on mountain mythology. We may all have heard snippets of the Maurice Wilson story in some form, but what Ed Caesar does is tell a definitive and honest version, maintaining the reader's interest through exhaustive research into all aspects of Wilson's life: his upbringing and the social milieu he inhabited, his fleeting and complicated relationships and his quirky interests. Wilson's flight in his Gypsy Moth flight is examined in detail and reveals a stoic and determined character. Caesar employs an interesting style that places the reader at the heart of an explorative journey. Maurice Wilson died high in the mountain, indeed parts of his body remain in the Rongbuk Glacier, and ultimately this story is a tragedy, but it's an exemplary piece of narrative non-fiction and Caesar displays an excellent storytelling craft.

***To Live* by Elisabeth Revol:** is an utterly compelling account of survival, survivors guilt and the need to tell a story as an act of healing. Summiting Nanga Parbat in winter is a truly awesome achievement on its own, even without the survival story that follows. Revol writes with great compassion and she succeeds in laying out perfectly the familiar paradox of climbing and exploration. That when she returned from an expedition to Annapurna, alone after desperately searching for Martin Minarik, her Czech climbing companion, in a snowstorm for hours on end, she says she stopped everything. That she didn't want to talk about mountains any more, but realised that a life without mountains, without high altitude, is as unimaginable for her

as life without her husband. We also see a shift in the way mountain narratives have traditionally been presented: they can fall into either using macho warrior analogies or describing feats of human endurance. Instead Revol says, 'I go up there to live life fully, my life.' In that simple, universal statement lies the perfect tragedy at the heart of her story.

***Emilio Comici, Angel of the Dolomites* by David Smart:** is an impressive biography of one of Italy's foremost climbers. Comici is credited with developing new climbing styles and techniques, putting up some of the first big-wall climbs, despite being shunned by some Italian climbing clubs in his time. This is an important chapter in the history of climbing, it deals sensitively and sympathetically with the contradictions in the character of Comici; rehabilitating in a way without revisionism, and it delves into the detail of the complex international politics of the time, the roots of Italian fascism and how this affected Italian climbing. It is a history, that, as ever, is never as simple as we might first wish it to appear and we need to appreciate the historical context in which Comici and his contemporaries lived. The patriotic nationalism, at first an idealistic movement to achieve liberation from oppressive empires, might resonate with our current social and political contexts, but it soon took on the ugly face of extremism, and then of anti-semitism. It remains a warning from history and Smart reminds us how sport is often appropriated for political ends, how individuals are never the heroes that folk memory would wish them to be and that, as with British climbing and its imperial and colonial ambitions, climbing has skeletons in its closet.

***Never Leave the Dog Behind* by Helen Mort:** Explores the deep bond that exists between people, their dogs, and the mountains with delightful prose and poetry. It raises an interesting anthropological question: why do people who love mountains and climbing tend to love dogs, and adventuring with dogs too? Helen steers clear of answering this directly but skillfully allows the reader to make up their own mind through telling stories about her experiences of fell-running in the Lake District with her whippet Bell, encountering St. Bernard rescue dogs in France, or talking to Chris Bonington about his life with dogs. Her thesis is this: "When we bring a dog into a mountain environment we begin to sense and experience it in a new way". There is charm and precision in Mort's writing and refreshingly good poetry, as well as a philosophical cast of mind that is aware of itself and does not overpower.

***Signs of Life* by Stephen Fabes:** is a cycling odyssey. These have become a regular feature of the Boardman Tasker Award and Fabes' account of his two wheeled explorations in some remote and often dangerous regions of the world are engaging, heartwarming, and often very funny. It has something of the great British spirit of the serious *amateur* about it at times, but Fabes never falls for writing a simple travelogue. The people he meets along the way are always central to the experience and his records of these meetings are insightful, culturally sympathetic, mature, warm and poignant.

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As I said earlier, the shortlisted books satisfy in their own way a curiosity and a sympathy for the world and the people in it. They are redeeming, human stories that challenge us to see people who are often ignored, hear their voices and the writers' art moves us into the exploration of new territory.

But it is David Smart's biography of Comici that shines with an excellent and polished narrative, and superb historical research. It adds potently to the genre and to the history of mountaineering literature through bringing back to our collective memory one of climbing's pioneers. It is time to acknowledge Comici for his contribution, and in doing so recover a piece of our international climbing heritage.

It is for these reasons that I have great pleasure in awarding
The 2021 Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature
to **David Smart for *Emilio Comici, Angel of the Dolomites*.**