

Boardman Tasker Award judgment, delivered by Peter Gillman at Kendal on 16 November 2018

This has been a record year for entries for the Boardman Tasker Award. I have used that opening sentence before, when I was the chair of judges in 1997. There is a saying among writers that you should never waste a good intro, so I have used it again this year – this is known in the writing trade as recycling. So, in 1997 there were 25 entries. This year there were 38, and that represents an advance on last year's record of 35. There is another new record, namely that the entries came from eight different countries – something which has especially pleased the Boardman Tasker trustees.

That yet another new record has been set says something very positive about the state of mountain writing and publishing. It is heartening that interest in mountains and mountaineering, in the outdoors and the wild, is so high. That is even more important since we need to be vigilant in protecting the environment and asserting its values at a time when they are under intensifying danger, not least in the potentially disastrous policy reversals emanating from US. I hope we can see the strength of mountaineering writing as a countervailing force for good in the face of these threats.

So, who are your judges? We are an unusual trio perhaps in that none of us are front-line climbers or mountaineers. We are all however experienced in the mountains. Catherine Moorehead has led six expeditions to unexplored regions of Central Asia and completed the Munros in 1996. Roger Hubank is a novelist who has climbed extensively in Britain, as well as in the Alps. I was a rock-climber, mostly in Snowdonia, in the 1960s, but reckon that my best times have been as a winter hill-walker in Scotland, bringing me wonderful days of experiencing the Scottish winter in all its beauty and fury. I completed the Munros the year after Catherine.

Our qualifying attributes are therefore as writers. We have all written mountaineering books, have entered for the Boardman Tasker award, two of us have even won it, and so have now seen the awards from both sides. So we reckon that we understand the travails that writers go through as they exercise their craft. This made us especially sympathetic to many of the entries, particularly as we wrestled over some of our shortlist decisions, feeling for those we eventually did not select. I have to add however that at times we were dismayed at the poor quality of some of the writing. There's a lovely moment in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* when, after Caesar's funeral, the rampaging mob happens upon a suspected conspirator named Cinna and threatens to kill him. He protests he is not Cinna the conspirator but Cinna the poet. So, the mob cries: "Tear him for his bad verses!" – and they do just that. However tempted we might have been, our resort when confronting the equivalent of bad verses was to place the offending volume in the reject pile.

Let us refresh our memories of the judgment criteria, namely that the award is for the best literary work concerned with the mountain environment. A lot depends on what you take literary to mean. If you Google the word, you find a range of definitions, allowing you to select whichever you prefer. In some recent years I feel it can be deduced that the judges preferred entries tending to the poetic. Our own interpretation was more central to the definition, as we found that we agreed on writing with the following virtues. Strong, clear and precise. Sentences and paragraphs with a narrative flow. Good selected detail. And a strong sense of story – all qualities that should apply to fiction and non-fiction equally. We were drawn to inventive language too, provided that it fitted the other

criteria, and was not narcissistic or distracting. We did not settle on this definition at the start. But as we narrowed down the entries we found that it applied to the books we liked most. We also bore in mind that these were exactly the qualities that distinguish the writing of Joe Tasker and Pete Boardman, whose legacy we are celebrating here today.

There is also a rider which states that the rules are “deliberately not too precise, to encourage a wide range of books”. There’s another that gives the judges the “freedom to follow their own instincts....as well as to use common sense.” We did find that we were indeed judging with a mix of instincts and common sense – but also making technical appraisals of what we were reading. You should bear mind that all three of us are or have been teachers, tutors or trainers in English literature and language, and at times our discussions went beyond the technical into the arcane (more of that to come). However, our “instincts”, as per the criteria, proved equally important. What I have learned to do is to trust my instinctive response to any work of art – music and painting as well as writing – and then to find the language to identify or describe my response.

So, we are almost at the shortlist. But before I start, I would like to mention several other entries that we liked but did not make the final cut. The first is the extraordinary volume *The Climbers* by Jim Herrington. It is an outstanding collection of photographs of some of the most celebrated figures in mountaineering, names such as Fred Beckey, Ricardo Cassin, Kurt Diemberger, Reinhold Messner and Royal Robbins. It has rightly received critical acclaim, but we were unable to include it because it is principally a book of illustrations rather than a literary work (however defined). The BT trustees are aware that this year and in the past some very fine illustrated books have been excluded, but so far are clear that they wish to maintain the current criteria for the award.

We also considered *The Last Wilderness* by Neil Ansell, an enticing account of repeated visits to the Rough Bounds of Lochaber, the wilderness area of north-west Scotland that all three of the judges themselves know and love. Neil is a bird-lover and his description of sustaining his interest while contending with hearing loss resonated with the two of us who have the same problem. The book certainly met our definition of literary but, as we debated our final shortlist, felt that it did not quite meet the award criteria, since it is concerned principally with foreshore rather than mountain.

A third we wish to mention is Allen Steck’s *A Climber’s Life*. This had the qualities for us of being an honest and straightforward account of an accomplished climber’s life, devoid of ego and self-regard, with illuminating glimpses of figures such as Willy Unsoeld. It was in the running for some time, but was supplanted by some late entries that we eventually preferred.

I have two more commendations. The first is to the publisher who has three entries in the final seven, namely Vertebrate. That is impressive enough in itself – but we were delighted to see how it sets the highest standards in copy-editing and proof reading and does so in a climate where these attributes are so often neglected. We were astonished and appalled at the errors we found in some of the books. There was one which committed the most notorious spelling mistake in British mountaineering in its very first sentence: namely spelling Bonington with a double N at the start – i.e. Bonnington. It committed the mistake at least six times – but also managed to spell the name correctly another six times. There were numerous other spelling mistakes as well. In welcome contrast, Vertebrate is clearly determined to ensure that its books are a credit to their authors and themselves. It so happens that its managing director, Jon Barton, is here today, so I think he deserves to take a bow.

I would also like to offer a tribute to the unsung heroes of the BT awards, who unfailingly keep the show on the road behind the scenes, not least in ensuring that all 38 entries reached the judges, and handling a succession of queries from the aforesaid judges. They planned this occasion too, coordinating the writers, the interviews, the judges, reserving the seats, sweeping the floor, cleaning the loos – no, not the last two, I made those up. I can see Steve and Janet Dean and would like their enormous hard work and enthusiasm to be acknowledged too.

Now finally to the shortlist, which I will describe in alphabetical order of the authors. The first is *Tides* by Nick Bullock. This is Nick's second book. His first, *Echoes*, was shortlisted for the BT award in 2013. As he related there, he worked as a prison officer for 15 years before pursuing a life as full-time climber and writer. He climbs at the sharpest end, setting up breath-taking new routes in Scotland and the Alps, and taking part in more than 20 expeditions to the greater ranges. He thus offers us a scary window on the world of the extreme climber, its risks and its rewards. He takes risks in his writing too, as radical at times as his climbing. He weaves his climbing narrative with an affecting account of his family relationships but otherwise this is an unflinching account of an obsession that may also be an addiction – and one that compels him to contend with the conflicts this produces. We did feel that occasionally his writing was straining for effect and that not all his radical tricks paid off. They came together best in his chapters about his ascents of the Slovak Direct route on Denali and the North Face of Mt Alberta, which are perfectly described and paced, sustaining tension to the point where the reader subsides with relief when Nick and his partner succeed and survive.

Next is *The Eight Mountains* by Paolo Cognetti, an Italian writer and documentary maker for whom this is his first novel. It proved immensely successful in Italy and spent a year in the bestseller list there, and it has won several literary prizes. The book tells of a lonely city boy who spends his summers in the Dolomites where he forms a relationship with a young cowherd and discovers with him the high lakes and peaks of the Dolomites. The author is sensitive and perceptive as he explores the nature of a friendship forged and savoured in the wild across three decades. We enjoyed his evocation of the mountain environment and the pull it exerts – the rhythms of hill-walking, the glimpses of distant climbers, the moods of the lake, the gurgle of water unseen beneath scree. Translators sometimes feel that they are left out of the reckoning, so we would add praise for the work of Simon Carnell and Erica Segre, a working and family partnership who live with their two children in a village in the Fens.

We do have a caveat which was likely to loom large in any evaluation for a mountain writing award. It concerns both the techniques and language of climbing, which at times struck us as implausible or anachronistic – whether this was an issue in the original, or in the translation, we were unable to tell. There were also some discontinuities in the narrative which left us wondering if they were radical jump-cuts or a failure of editorial oversight. Those issues apart, we were moved and affected by the narrative, although we disagreed among ourselves as to whether the ending of the story was all too predictable or a genuine surprise.

Next up is *Kinder Scout, the People's Mountain*, by Ed Douglas and John Beatty. This is a triumphant outcome of a partnership between two of our very best mountain writers and photographers. Ed can be relied upon to produce a diligent and fluent account of whatever subject he turns to. His writing for a climbing readership is always detailed and knowing, and when he turns to a general

audience he is clear without being patronising, and expert at conveying the nuances of climbing and mountaineering accurately and with feeling. I know – because he told me – that he regarded writing *Kinder Scout* as a labour of love. I am hoping that he did not mean it was an act of charity. Fellow-writers will know that it takes intense labour to produce writing that appears as effortless as his. The love, we felt, was self-evident.

We also know that photographs of the range and quality of John's are not chanced upon but are the result of equal amounts of labour – patience, dedication, pre-dawn starts, post-nightfall finishes, waiting for the perfect combination of light, weather and landscape. And Ed has travelled across the world in the pursuit of mountain and outdoor stories, but somehow he has reserved his very best for a landscape close to home, portraying it in a full gamut of its social, political and cultural meaning – bringing new perspectives to something both familiar and yet containing secrets still to be discovered.

Now to *Limits of the Known* by David Roberts. The author can fairly be described as a veteran of mountain and outdoor writing – his first book, *The Mountain of my Fear*, was published in 1968. I remember reading it at the time and being very impressed – although if he is a veteran what does that make me, since I am even older than he is? The book is considered to have brought the narrative techniques of fiction to mountaineering writing in a way that Truman Capote and Norman Mailer did in their subject matters – crime and politics – a decade or so earlier.

As David continued to write about mountains and mountaineering writing, he also broadened out to cover subjects such as the historical treatment of Native Americans. His latest book, written from the perspective of his mid-70s, has both a retrospective and an elegiac feel. He considers the motivations of mountaineers such as Shipton and Tilman, commemorating their individuality and idiosyncrasies in a way which underscores his own approach to the major ascents he accomplished in a lifetime of climbing and exploring. This continues through his quest for traces of mountain-dwelling people in Utah and Mali. He shares with Ed Douglas the ability to make mountaineering accessible to the lay reader without ever distorting its values. We found his writing clear and compelling, with a rich vocabulary and arresting figurative language. It is literary in the best sense of the world, at least as we defined it – elegant and lucid, rather than flowery and quasi-poetic.

Because some of the chapters venture outside mountaineering to polar exploration and cave-diving, we did have to consider whether it met the award criterion of a central theme concerned with the mountain environment. However, mountains and mountaineering form a Leitmotiv, a running thread, that unifies the discussion. David has the perspective of a veteran – that word again! – mountaineering writer and practitioner, providing a lens through which he views other forms of adventure and exploration. There is another element to the book to deepen that perspective, namely that David guides us through a personal journey as he learns he has cancer and then receives medical treatment of a particularly painful and draining kind. He contemplates his mortality in an unflinching way, without being melodramatic or self-indulgent. The final scene is immensely poignant, while leaving his survival in the balance – to be determined after the book closes.

Now to our fifth book, *The Flying Mountain* by Christoph Ransmayr, an Austrian writer. This was first published (in German) in 2006 and so the version we considered is an English translation. This is our second work of fiction, and a remarkable one at that. It is written entirely in verse – described by the publisher as blank verse, although the technical experts among your judges consider it is more

properly free verse, because the metrication is not regular. It tells how two brothers from south-west Ireland embark on an expedition to eastern Tibet in search of a mountain that may represent the last blank spot on the map. Since the author is Austrian, this is a particularly bold act of the imagination. The shared journey prompts an examination of the brothers' relationships, its tensions and rivalry that again is played out against a wild mountain environment. We found the verse mostly powerful and compelling, a suitable vehicle for conveying the emotions unleashed as the journey neared its goal.

Christoph set himself a tough task in relating the story from a single point of view, that of one of the brothers, requiring him to do a lot of telling rather than showing, setting a limitation that we felt he did not always overcome. We mention once again the translator, Simon Pare, whose achievement was all the more remarkable, given that it required him to translate German free verse into English free verse, and he did so in a way which preserved and perhaps even enhanced the spirit and idiom of the original. As with the Cognetti, it has won important critical acclaim and was long-listed for the Man-Booker prize. However, as with the Cognetti, we have reservations about the mountain and mountaineering descriptions which sometimes struck us as inauthentic and which as judges for a mountain writing prize we could not overlook.

Next comes *The Ogre* by Doug Scott. We have already termed this book long awaited and most of you will appreciate what that means. It is now 41 years since the extraordinary drama in the Karakoram, when Doug broke both his legs in a fall while descending with Chris Bonington (one n) after making the first ascent of the Ogre. Thus began an epic rescue through a raging storm which was made even harder when Chris fractured his ribs in a second fall. It was largely through the extraordinary efforts of the remaining climbers, Clive Rowland and Mo Anthoine, that they eventually reached safety. Although Chris has given a partial account of these events, it has never been told in full before, and Doug has now done so, giving Clive and Mo and the credit they have long deserved. In this he was assisted by having access to memoirs drafted by Clive and the diary of Nick Estcourt, another member of the expedition.

The story is almost unbearably tense and painful, with genuine heart-in-mouth moments, as it carries you through. The writing is clear and honest, so true to the character of one of our most distinguished yet approachable mountaineers that you can almost hear him speak the words. It also left you wanting more, but it did occur to us that Doug could perhaps have used more narrative tricks to extend the tension. The account of the ascent and rescue is complemented with a very expert and readable account of the history of the Ogre, of previous visits by explorers and mountaineers. Here we have to declare an interest, as one of our judges, Catherine Moorehead, helped with research and information for the history section, and so she recused herself when we considered this book. It was however without difficulty that Roger and I selected it for the shortlist.

Our final choice is *Honouring High Places – the Mountain Life of Junko Tabei* by Helen Rolfe. I must say that this is a book which surprised us all. It was promoted as the biography of the first woman to climb Everest (this was in 1975) and we opened it without any great expectations. We were won over by the insights it offered into Junko Tabei's life and achievements, the culture of Japan, and the expeditions she took part in – these described, at times, with refreshing honesty. She went on to become the first woman to climb the highest summits of the seven continents, achieving this in 1992, when she was 53. The book was based on her own memoirs, expertly adapted by Helen Rolfe,

a Canadian writer, and translated by another duo, Yumiko Hiraki and Rieko Holtved. This is another book we liked for its honest, economical writing, with a strong narrative flow. And this is another subject who had to contend with being diagnosed with cancer, related with acceptance and forbearance, despite her regrets that there was so much more she had hoped to do. She died in 2016 at the age of 77, and this book is a superb testimony and celebration of her life.

So there we have it. Seven strong candidates from which there can be only one winner. Perhaps you could detect from the subtexts of our judgments those which we saw as the strongest contenders. After eliminating four, there were three we placed in our group for the final judgment. One in particular we regretted being unable to select, not least because the author has made a consistent and outstanding contribution to outdoor writing, and this book might have won in another year. However, in the end we were clear and unanimous in our choice, for all the qualities we have set out. The Boardman Tasker award for 2018 – and we are sorry that the author is not here in person to accept the prize – goes to the author of *Limits of the Known*, David Roberts.