



Honouring High Places: The Mountain Life of Junko Tabei

Junko Tabei

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Japanese mountaineer Junko Tabei earned international renown for being the first woman to climb Mount Everest and to complete the Seven Summits. People were always surprised when they met her; at five feet tall and weighing just over a hundred pounds, she looked nothing like a mountaineer. Lacking the brute strength and speed of men climbers, Tabei made up for both with discipline, determination, good sense, and strength of will.

Once considered an act of worship, mountaineering was just beginning to open up as a sport in Japan when Tabei came on the scene, and she was instrumental in opening the door for women to excel at it. Her successful Everest climb took place during International Women's Year, 1975, and she wrote, "Whether I wanted it to be or not, our climb became a symbol of women's social progress," especially in Japan, where the culture had traditionally held women to a strict code of behavior.

Rather than being full of bravado, Tabei's book is a humble, factual, beautiful, searing record of what it takes to summit the planet's highest, most difficult peaks. It begins with an avalanche and the terror, disorientation, and pain of being crushed by the weight of snow, ice, and the tangle of fellow climbers buried alive on top of her. It ends with another kind of avalanche, when cancer finally conquered her indomitable will, though she managed to climb mountains in more than twenty countries even after her diagnosis.

Junko Tabei left a legacy of kindness and courage in sport and in life. "I would like to die saying it's been a good life," she often said. And at this, she also succeeded.

KRISTINE MORRIS (January/February 2018)

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