



Moonstone Hero

David Sklar

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In the musing adventure novel Moonstone Hero, three strangers are forced together after a mountain climbing emergency.

In David Sklar's multiperspective novel *Moonstone Hero*, a group of international climbers makes a fateful ascent of Mount Kilimanjaro.

Andrew is a medical student and part of the mountain-climbing expedition. He is joined by Barry, a Peace Corps volunteer; Eve, Barry's girlfriend; a German trio of fitness trainers; a Danish couple; Salaam, the group's guide; and porters. When Barry develops high-altitude sickness, they're all impacted, and the trip to the summit is threatened.

As Barry's condition worsens, the team's personal histories are shared in brief: the Germans had their trip funded, and they're determined to succeed. Eve is stricken with faintheartedness when it comes to other people's sickness. And Salaam understands that Barry's illness is severe but feels pressured to meet his climbers' expectations.

In its focus on the team members' reactions, the novel sacrifices some sense of natural progression. Barry's illness is repackaged as an illustrative lesson about group dynamics and unforeseen problems; his characterization is vague beyond this role. And although Andrew and others share fleeting memories, and Salaam is forthcoming with his views of foreign tourists, their individuality is also peripheral to the emergency. When they're faced with making a critical decision about Barry, many are reluctant to get involved and are consumed by selfishness and fear. One porter, Koba, volunteers with Andrew, who's driven by his conscience as a future doctor, to help. They face the physical strain of carrying Barry toward safety and are forced into such proximity with one another that they're made vulnerable. As they move through treacherous patches and wild vistas, their resolve is tested.

Though he's made the book's hero, Andrew's observations are sometimes less sympathetic than his actions. He is attracted to Eve based on their few interactions and wrestles with pursuing that connection. In addition, he thinks that Koba's background imbues him with heroism, saying that, for the Masai people, it "was built into their genes and their blood." He is surprised that Koba speaks English, too. In such moments, Andrew is cast in an unflattering light. Still, he grows to appreciate Koba's efforts.

As the novel winds down, it comes to deviate too widely from the central emergency on the mountain. There's a drug-induced sequence and a move toward the future; a rushed romantic obsession further dilutes the main story line. Loose reflections on loyalty during crises also arise.

In the intriguing novel *Moonstone Hero*, two men help a stranger, resulting in pain but also new relationships.

KAREN RIGBY (August 11, 2022)

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