



Snow Rising

Matt Baldwin

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Moral choices often seem obvious in the abstract, but they may not compel those whose psychological structure permits them to sacrifice the well-being of others when it conflicts with their own. When Jason Snow signs up for a guided climb of Oregon's Mount Hood, he is intolerant, intimidating, arrogant—and unhappy. He longs for a return to “the simple things” that once anchored his marriage, but only dimly senses the moral avalanche that threatens everything he cherishes most.

As Jason prepares to climb the unpredictable mountain, his memory stretches back to his first disastrously wrong choice, an act of betrayal and dishonesty that has compounded itself for years. Jason's tour guide, Clara, notices his despair, and her belief that “new knowledge enhances an ever-increasing sense of our own ignorance” gives Jason the courage to journey deep within as his group winds steadily towards the mountain's summit.

Jason realizes that he was once “an honorable man but dishonored himself in small choices, each of which, he knew now, had ripped a piece out of him and, quite literally, crippled him from the inside out.” Clara's questions push him to delve into his mind's deepest recesses, and he begins to understand that rationalizations can only silence guilt temporarily.

Jason's odyssey becomes more dramatic when falling ice almost pulls the group into a crevasse, and Clara's life suddenly hangs—literally—by a single rope. As Jason faces the terrifying challenge of trusting others who in turn depend on him, he internalizes all the danger and joyousness of mutuality in human relations in a way that could never simply be learned.

Jason's fortuitous encounter with Clara may seem a bit contrived, but readers who choose to read beyond the superficial will be drawn in by her teachings. The story of Clara's personal struggles serves as a well-nuanced reminder that teacher and learners truly form a community; to teach, one must first learn. Furthermore, although readers may initially resent Jason's undeniable privileges as a highly-paid architect, his two-dimensionality makes him a perfect *tabula rasa*, a blank slate onto which readers can overwrite their own particularities. Getting off the mountain alive now depends on the strength of Clara's teachings, as does Jason's discovery that regretting his misdeeds does not guarantee that he will be able to repair the damage they have done.

Author Matt Baldwin is an Oregon native whose intimacy with Mount Hood lends realism to Jason's journey. He concludes the book with a list of actions designed to bring people into fresh interaction with the world by giving to others and appreciating the blessings in their lives.

ELIZABETH BREAU (November 8, 2010)

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