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Books and Media

In the Land of the White Death: Writing on avalanches and other sudden demises

The only certainty for those trapped in its realm is that “white death” lies in wait for them.

—From Valerian Albanov’s journal *In the Land of the White Death*, describing a two-year odyssey in the Arctic after his ship the *Saint Anne* was trapped in pack ice. Only Albanov and one companion survived.

THE FIRST TIME I ENCOUNTERED THE TERM *BAADER MEINHOF* WAS AS THE title of Don DeLillo’s short story from 2002. In the story the title refers to the title of an art installation. The installation refers to the Baader Meinhof movement in West Germany during the 1960s, also, perhaps better, known as the Red Army Faction. The RAF carried out various bombings and kidnappings accounting for the deaths of some 40 people. The key leaders committed suicide in prison. I was mildly surprised this had never crossed my radar before. And indeed, after the DeLillo story I began seeing Baader Meinhof mentioned in articles and stories seemingly everywhere, about three times in two weeks. Coincidentally, the name for this phenomenon is the Baader Meinhof syndrome: Once you are aware of something, you begin to see it everywhere.

A recent example: I paused on a popular hiking trail to pick up a baby sock. I had never before seen a lost baby sock on the trail. Within a year and a half, I collected more than a dozen of them. Presumably, baby socks have been lost since time immemorial, but I have only been aware of this recently. Baader Meinhof.

White death is a term that seems to present itself to my consciousness with a conspicuous frequency. I suppose it’s not surprising given my interests in mountaineering and literature. It has been pointed out to me that I have a death obsession as well. After my friend Dave Bean read my first short fiction collection, *Letters from Chamonix* (Imaginary Mountain Surveyors, 2014), he remarked, “So, I guess you’re kind of obsessed with death.” My response was surprise and denial. “It’s in every story,” he said. So much for denial. As Toni Morrison observed, “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language.”

The white death foremost in my mind is Bettembourg's. Georges Bettembourg was a French alpinist who forged some of the most daring climbs of the 1970s in the Alps, Himalaya, and Andes. He was an extreme skier making first descents from high on Makalu II and other Himalayan giants. These were accomplished long before the word *extreme* became the ubiquitous adjective in mountain sport lexicon that it has become since. His memoir, *The White Death* (Reynard House), was published the year he died, 1981. He first uses the term the *White Death* (always capitalized) to describe a hypoxia-driven hallucination high on Broad Peak during his solo descent. It appears to him as beckoning woman who has materialized out of a cloud, inviting him to simply let go.

"Something that is not me shunts my eyes from her gaze and I shrink from the White Death, the beautiful, peaceful, sensuous white death . . . I somehow pull my bones up out of my grave of ice."

Death may be anthropomorphized in Bettembourg's oxygen-starved cosmology but it is not romanticized; it is simply there, an acknowledged matter-of-fact. Later in the book he'll refer to Ray Genet, famous for the first winter ascent of Denali in Alaska, found mysteriously dead high on Everest: "He had departed in the company of the White Death for a world I had only glimpses of, but a real world nonetheless."

In any case, Bettembourg *did* meet an early death but not while attempting any wildly conceived feat of alpinism. He was gathering crystals with his brother and two friends on the Aiguille Verte above his home in Chamonix when rocks—*stonefall*—came loose above the party. He said to his mates, two of whom survived, "It comes for us, gentlemen." He was 32 years old. It's the equanimity of these last words that has stayed with me, more so even than the title *The White Death*. I cannot uncouple them in my mind.

Before I found a copy of Bettembourg's book, I read McKay Jenkins's book, *The White Death: Tragedy and Heroism in an Avalanche Zone* (Random House, 2000), the story of five young climbers who were lost in an avalanche on Mount Cleveland, the highest peak in Glacier National Park. They were trying for a first winter ascent of the West Face. The search for them was one of the most extensive in North American search-and-rescue history and their bodies were not recovered until seven months after the fact.

Jenkins named his book for an avalanche called the White Death that occurred in 1910 outside of Leavenworth, Washington. The avalanche rolled a

train 150 meters down a river valley and 96 lives were lost. To this day, hikers find rusted train wreckage debris off the hiking trail.

I took a training course called Avalanche I a couple years ago. I was by far the oldest person in the three-day class. On the first morning the instructors asked everyone what their avalanche strategy is. I said I just check the daily avalanche report and if it looks questionable I stay home on the couch. Which, if you follow it, renders the “avy” course unnecessary. Instructors agreed this was the best strategy. So I guess the course is for those who go out anyway. Over the last ten years an average of 27 persons a year have died in avalanches in the United States, a surprisingly high percentage of whom were “avalanche professionals.”

Gabriel Urza’s novella, *The White Death: An Illusion* (Nouvella, 2019), describes the brief fictional life of the illusionist Benjamin Vaughn, who drowned at the age of 14 in what was for him a practice routine in which he repeatedly handcuffed himself to a grate at the bottom of a swimming pool and freed himself, except for the last time in which he was, mysteriously, unable to free himself. The White Death, within the text, is the last illusion young Vaughn, “the Great Bendini,” is working on at the time of his death. Outside the text this is the name Urza has given to a fictional magic trick. We never learn the nature of the trick as Vaughn, a meticulous keeper of journals since the age of eight, had mysteriously stopped writing a week before his death.

Within the story there is much speculation among members of the magic community regarding his death, including that he had not really died at all, that “his death at the bottom of the pool *was* the *White Death* illusion.” Conspiracy theorists report sightings of the boy in Denver and San Francisco.

The novella is heavily footnoted, providing meta-textual “Author’s Notes” that we are to presume are somehow “closer” to the author than the relatively straightforward telling of Benjamin Vaughn’s story. This is a fun illusion because the title itself is footnoted, thus suggesting that the footnotes are actually primary; it is also clear that the same speaker narrates both what *appears to be* the text proper and the footnotes.

The final footnote in the novella covers almost two full pages and speculates on the Great Bendini’s death without drawing any conclusions: Was it “suicide, simply a slip-up, a matter of failed execution? Or perhaps his death was an attempt at the enigmatic White Death, something that falls in between accident and suicide.”

Any reader should find Urza’s tale beautifully told, but it resonates personally in me as its arc parallels our son’s short life with a terrible synchronicity.

Our son died mysteriously in a river, officially attributed to “accidental drowning.” There’s no reason to call it a suicide, but little reason not to. Whiteness was a factor as well: white water and snow-covered ground.

Urza observes, “Boys are capable of error and unfounded conception of invincibility.” Here too, he could accurately be describing our son. Invincibility can be a killer. Our son surely believed himself invincible, not without reason. He was strong and mostly indifferent to not only risk, but pain. Urza concludes that Vaughn’s story “hovers elusively around the mysterious character of a boy whose capacity for love and for suffering could not be contained by the small vessel of his body.” This capacity, for both love and suffering, but particularly for suffering, was also evident in our son, though his body was no small vessel, except in the way that all of ours are.

I wrote to Urza, a stranger, to express gratitude for his story and briefly explain my interest in his title. He referred me to his colleague, the writer Justin Hocking.

In his memoir *The Great Floodgates of the Wonderworld* (Graywolf, 2014), Hocking credits the poet Charles Olson with naming the obsession with *Moby-Dick* and all things Herman Melville-related the White Death. Hocking himself is obsessed with it. In one chapter he lists 29 of those known to him who are similarly obsessed, highlighting famous literary suicides—David Foster Wallace and Hart Crane among them. To be obsessed with *Moby-Dick* is to be obsessed with obsession, Ahab’s obsession with the great white whale being absolutely central to the book, though more accurately I think *Moby-Dick* is a book in which the peripheral *is* what’s central.

Who knows what Olson meant exactly? To be truly obsessed is to let everything but the obsession wither away. I have only read *Moby-Dick* three times, the last occasion decades ago. The first time I was on a long mountaineering expedition. We had supplies, including books, flown to a base camp on a glacier in Canada’s vast St. Elias Mountains, where we endured two weeks of whiteout conditions during our attempts to climb Mount Kennedy. During the time we were tent-bound I read *Moby-Dick*. I suppose the trip involved many white death scenarios in the forms of potential crevasse falls and avalanches, but we would have denied it back then. Back then we carried one little canister of sugar that we labeled with a skull and crossbones. This was our sense of white death: death by sugar consumption. When the sugar was all used up in our tea, we used the bottle to pee into without having to leave the tent.

Mark Fielding, a legendary Seattle climber in the mid-1970s, was said to be obsessed with *Moby-Dick*. Fielding also was known to solo free-climbing

testpieces, including the notorious Crack of Doom on Castle Rock in the Cascades, following a breakup with a girlfriend. Like us on Kennedy, he survived his early flirtations with danger.

Melville himself wrote a chapter, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” which critics have discussed seemingly without end to this day. We would know the whale is symbolic, even if Melville hadn’t explicitly told us so. We also know the whale is a plot device, the object of Ahab’s mad vendetta, the cause of the deaths of everyone aboard the Pequod, except for Ishmael. But, of course, it is not the white whale that is the cause, it is Ahab himself. The whale is also white because how else to distinguish it from all other whales?

“The Whiteness of the Whale” is a ruminative, digressive list enumerating the ways whiteness may symbolically reverberate. I say “may” because, in fact, one of Melville’s stylistic tics in *Moby-Dick* is the rhetorical question:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?

Why yes, we say, you’ve nailed it, Herman. But these many questions can’t all be *rhetorical* exactly because to follow where they take us excludes nothing: “And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol.” Ah, the mid-nineteenth century, when persons and concepts contained multitudes!

It’s not possible to say what Melville “really meant” whiteness to symbolize, other than everything he has illuminated, and, probably, more. In the chapter’s final paragraph he discusses “all earthly hues” as “subtle deceits” that hide “the charnel-house within.” By which he means death, or nothingness. In other words, color is illusory and whiteness is the death that we pretend does not exist.

The final words/question of the chapter are, “Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?” We do wonder, of course, and that may be the point of the book. Ahab’s mad obsession is directed at the white death itself, from which none of us, particularly one who pursues it so single-mindedly, can escape.

IN SARAH PERRY’S *THE ESSEX SERPENT* (CUSTOM HOUSE, 2018), SET IN THE nineteenth century, she refers to tuberculosis as the White Death. This is due, apparently, to the pale complexions of the victims as their lives slowly ebbed away. Curiously, the disease was somewhat popular during the early part of the century. Those suffering from it were thought to acquire heightened

sensitivity and the disease's relatively slow "progress" allowed patients to make "a good death," that is, they had time to put their earthly affairs in order. Somehow this became associated with a kind of desirable spiritual purity resulting in young upper-class women purposely paling their complexions to achieve a consumptive appearance.

In America the disease became associated with a kind of vampirism, attributed to the first in a family to die. As the other family members began to weaken and die, it was thought that they were infected by the first. Which actually is somewhat accurate, but because of a highly communicable bacteria, not vampirism. One remedy for this was to disinter the original "vampire" and burn that person's internal organs. Of this practice, Thoreau noted in his diary on September 26, 1859, "The savage in man is never quite eradicated. I had just read of a family in Vermont—who several of its members having died of consumption, just burned the lungs & heart & liver of the last deceased in order to prevent any more from having it too." Three years later Thoreau died of tuberculosis at age 44. In 1900 tuberculosis was the leading cause of death in the United States.

One of the towering literary works of the twentieth century, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (Knopf, 2005), features both tuberculosis and, obviously mountains. Neither are exactly central to the story, in my opinion. Tuberculosis is a plot device, a reason to gather all the characters together; the mountain is the physical location for this gathering, the location of the Berghof Sanitarium above Davos, Switzerland, an idyll outside of the concerns of typical daily early century European life. In fact, the hero, Hans Catsorp, first arrives at the sanitarium as a visitor and shows only very mild symptoms. At some point, he is convinced to stay; yet it's never entirely clear he has actually contracted tuberculosis. Other patients clearly have and some die. In the end Catsorp, after seven years, is discharged, only to enter World War I from which it is unlikely, though not explicitly stated, he will survive. In fact, he is closer to death when caught in a blizzard:

. . . the dazzling effect of all that whiteness, and the veiling of his field of vision, so that his sense of sight was almost put out of action. It was nothingness, white, whirling nothingness, into which he looked when he forced himself to do so. Only at intervals did ghostly-seeming forms from the world of reality loom up before him . . .

Finally, he stumbles into a mountain hut, escaping this more literal white death, and finding his way back to the Berghof.

This calls to mind our stumbling into Lakes of the Clouds Hut in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. We were on our third day of a mid-winter traverse of the White Mountains. The wind had blown us down to all fours and whiteout conditions prevailed. The clouds lifted for no more than a moment and the stone refuge revealed itself to us. We hunkered in for two nights before continuing on our way. In our youth we called this traverse a triumph, conveniently ignoring how deeply lucky we were.

Mann ends his text with an afterword, “Notes on the Making of the Magic Mountain.” (*Here dear reader, let me tell you how to read my book.* At least Melville trusts us to take up the fiery hunt on our own.) He describes Catsorp as overcoming “his inborn attraction to death and arrives at an understanding of humanity that does not, indeed, rationalistically ignore death, nor scorn the dark, mysterious side of life, but takes account of it, without letting it get control over his mind.” Mann directs us specifically to the chapter, “Snow,” where he tells us, we find that “All interest of [disease and] death, is only an expression of interest in life.”

My father’s parents both suffered from tuberculosis. They were in and out of sanitariums all their adult lives. The “san,” they called it. When my father was 19 both parents were in the san at the same time, and he left college to care for his younger sister and much younger brother. His father died about that time. When I asked my father the actual cause of death, he said his father was “just worn out.” By which I understood that no more would be said about it.

THE WHITE DEATH WAS ALSO THE NICKNAME THE RED ARMY GAVE THE FINNISH sniper Simo Häyä during the Winter War of 1939–1940 between Finland and the Soviet Union. (Note: This is the only fact concerning my subject here that I discovered through Google.) Haya wore white camouflage and kept snow in his mouth so condensation from his breath would not render him visible to the enemy. He was credited with more than 500 kills. He tallied his kills in a “book of sins,” lived his life out as village farmer, and died at the age of 96. Though he never spoke of his war experiences he was shunned by many who questioned the morality of his actions.

Death caused by this particular White Death thus most likely occurred in a split second. But then, the victim would have been a soldier, in combat. Death lurking behind every corner, every building, every tree. If you had a

moment to be surprised, how surprised could you be? Not a good death by Victorian standards, but opinions on this may vary.

In her essay “Transit of Venus,” collected in *Index Cards* (New Directions, 2020), Moyra Davey cites Hervé Guibert: “Hervé Guibert calls the clear film ‘white death.’” What the “clear film” is exactly is not clear. No real context is provided, though Guibert is referred to throughout the essays. Because Davey’s writing is collage-like, quotations like this are often simply *placed* in the text, neither commented upon nor necessarily explicitly tied into the subject matter. The reader may do with it what he or she wishes.

I would love to find this reference in Guibert’s own work, but this will be perhaps an impossible task. Even if I could find it in context, I wouldn’t expect clarification from Guibert himself as he often wrote the same way as Davey. Guibert wrote 36 books, only 16 of which have been translated into English. To date I have read only one: *Ghost Image* (University of Chicago Press, 2014). The title essay, I had hoped, would lead to elucidation of his reference to the white death. It does not, at least not in this translation (by Robert Bonanno). But a ghost image *could be* a kind of clear film. In “Ghost Image” Herbert tell the story of his 18-year-old photographer self who conducts an elaborate photo session of his mother at the age of 45, when she was “still quite beautiful, but a desperate age, when I felt she was at the threshold of old age, of sadness.” The film turns out to have been misloaded into the camera and was blank:

That blank moment (that blank death? Since one can shoot “blanks”) remained between my mother and me with the secret power of incest.

I plan to press on with my reading of Herbert, with no expectation of illumination, even if I should I stumble across a more precise reference.

That Guibert was interested in death (whiteness aside) is inarguable. His most famous, work, the novel *To My Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (Gallimard, 1990; a new edition from Penguin Random House, 2020), is about the death of his friend, the philosopher Michel Foucault, of AIDS. His next most famous work is about his own death, of AIDS, a mere four years later.

In Hocking’s “The White Death” chapter he lists, without citation, the second meaning of the *white death* as “a slang term used to describe incurable diseases such as tuberculosis or AIDS.” In fact, the cause of death for persons infected with the AIDS virus *is* tuberculosis.

I SURVIVED MY OWN NEAR WHITE DEATH. THE FIRST RESCUE PARTY TO REACH us assumed that we were dead inside our tomb-like snow cave. A number of factors had aligned to pin us down there, most significantly, my untimely heart condition and then the three feet of new snow. We had been staying at a well-provisioned mountain hut, thus traveling lightly, and were unprepared to be caught out on an Alaskan winter night. Our body temperatures were dropping, and our margins were thin. One more snowstorm and they wouldn't find us until June. The second rescue party arrived by helicopter and from that point, our ordeal was over very quickly. I was granted a reprieve from my own white death.

More than one person asked, "Was that the closest you have come to dying in the mountains?" The answer to that, which I was aware of even the first time it was asked of me, was, "Maybe, but probably not." In the mountains, we might be closer to the white death than we ever know. The avalanche that rips loose hours after our passing, the snowfields riddled with hidden crevasses unseen as we pass over, loose rock above us, seen or unseen, that may break free at any time; not to mention the human foibles: the underestimation of the difficulties, the distances, the hours of daylight, the overestimation of our own abilities. We strive to minimize risk (but not eliminate it). The danger is real and also necessary.

So, what I say, when they ask if that was the closest I've come to dying in the mountains, is that I had probably been closer on other occasions, but never even knew. Moreover, my first cardiologist upon reading my chart blurted out in his heavily German-accented English, like some mad Teutonic astrologer, "Do not worry about your heart! You will die of cancer!"

DENISE RILEY IS A PHILOSOPHER AND POET WHOSE ADULT SON PASSED AWAY unexpectedly from an undiagnosed heart condition. Her short book *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (Picador, 2019) has been called a work of "literature of consolation in the wake of grief." Pretty much the exact kind of book I have avoided since we lost our son. I am more likely to be consoled by literature than "literature of consolation." Of course, there is no consolation. Riley's theory is that time appears to "freeze" upon the unexpected loss of a loved one. This seems accurate to me. Though this is a prose essay, Riley's poetic voice sometimes takes over the narrative:

At the death of your child, you see how the edge of the living world gives onto burning whiteness. This edge is clean as a strip of guillotined celluloid film.

First came the intact negative full of blackened life in shaded patches, then abruptly, this milkiness. This candid whiteness, where a life stopped. Nothing “poetic,” not the white radiance of eternity—but sheer non-being, which is brilliantly plain.

Despite her repeated mentions of whiteness here—“burning whiteness,” “milkiness,” “candid whiteness,” “the white radiance of eternity”—I don’t think she means it in any literal way.

The more operative words here are “The edge of the living world,” and “the sheer nonbeing.” Her whiteness is here for contrast, and nothingness.

In writing about dealing with this worst of losses Riley invokes Samuel Beckett’s famous line: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”

“You are returned after your brush with another’s death,” Riley says, “a brush that seemed to have stopped you, too—and you’ve been returned differently. You return, knowing more.” Mmm, maybe.

I imagine Bettembourg stopped in his tracks on the descent from Broad Peak, alone, his breathing loud and ragged, his temples pounding, his legs wobbly, out of oxygen, energy, strength, the White Death so near, so enticing, “I can’t go on,” he thinks. And a moment later, inexplicably, “I’ll go on.” Like Beckett, perhaps, channeling a particular chord from the collective unconsciousness.

The fact of our son’s absence overwhelms our desire for answers about his death, answers that we can never know. But I imagine him in Bettembourg’s boots, high on his own private Broad Peak. I imagine his own private conversation with the White Death and somehow, just . . . letting go. “I can’t go on.” My grandfather: worn out.

Consider that here I have been in conversation with these writers and they also in conversation with one another. Bettembourg: “It comes for us, gentlemen.” To which Melville replies: “Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?”

—David Stevenson

DAVID STEVENSON directed the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Alaska Anchorage from 2008 to 2022 and is the book review editor of the *American Alpine Journal*.

**The Naturalist's Companion:
A Field Guide to Observing and Understanding Wildlife**

By Dave Hall

Mountaineers Books, 2022, 208 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-68051-576-3. Price: \$19.95 (paperback)

MOST HUMANS AREN'T BORN WITH INSTINCTS FOR WATCHING AND UNDERSTANDING wildlife. They must learn how to get close without harming them. Wildlife observer Dave Hall teaches the attitudes and skills that will help people begin to imagine the world as animals do.

Hall describes how to be “invisible” to an animal, how not to interrupt it during such vulnerable times as feeding and raising young. He offers safety suggestions and tells people what gear to take and wear. He urges people to use their senses and to study the patterns of movement in everything from birds to reptiles to mammals.

One chapter teaches tracking, or looking at footprints, odors, markings, shelter, hair, scat, bones, and more. “Tracking is a process that forces you to look beyond the surface and ask questions,” Hall writes.

He devotes a chapter to attracting animals, using calls and other tricks to make them move closer. These tactics can be practiced ethically, he says, if done at times when they won't stress or harm them. He also writes that hunting is ethical when practiced with respect: A hunter should plan to kill just for necessary food and following all laws and regulations.

Hall lives in upstate New York. He started a program for young people with Cornell Cooperative Extension called Primitive Pursuits. He has been practicing and teaching thoughtful approaches to watching wildlife for three decades.

This book is full of practical tips, stories from the field, and photographs. It is an excellent resource for a wide range of people interested in animals—from those who have already watched creatures to those who have not yet tried.

—Christine Woodside

This Wild Land

By Andrew Vietze

Appalachian Mountain Club, 2021, 288 pages.

ISBN: 1-62842-132-0. Price: \$18.95 (paperback)

ANDREW VIETZE MOVED ONLY ABOUT 100 MILES AS THE CROW FLIES WHEN HE left his office job in coastal Maine to begin work as a ranger in Baxter State Park. In many ways, however, the new setting was light years away.

Vietze had long been unhappy with his job as managing editor of *Down East: The Magazine of Maine*, even though he had “a private corner office in a beautiful, old Victorian cottage just a short walk from Penobscot Bay.”

In this memoir Vietze recalls, “I had everything an aspiring writer should want: a high-profile position at a beloved institution; an audience that numbered in the hundreds of thousands; a group of talented colleagues whom I admired. I got to interview the most interesting people in the state, stay at the finest inns, and eat at the best restaurants. But I was miserable. I felt confined in a box.”

Vietze’s book does more than chronicle “two decades of adventure as a park ranger in the shadow of Katahdin.” While it does describe harrowing mountain rescues in harsh conditions, along with the rigors of traipsing through remote, rugged terrain, it also incorporates abundant information about the park’s history, geology, and penchant for attracting colorful characters who wind up, like Vietze, working as rangers.

Vietze is an award-winning, bestselling author of more than a dozen books, and *This Wild Land* showcases his keen eye, attention to detail, and appreciation for Baxter’s majestic natural attributes that have attracted such notable visitors as Henry David Thoreau and Teddy Roosevelt.

Vietze’s wilderness cabin, which he helped build, may have been less sumptuous than his magazine office, but it provided ample rewards:

My camp is a log cabin in a 3-acre field. A narrow strip of conifers screens it from Dacey Pond Road on one side and wide Nesowadnehunk Stream on the other. On the far side of the field, perhaps 100 yards away, the Appalachian Trail emerges from the woods . . .

Big and Little Niagara, a series of granite twists and chutes and cascades about a mile away, shush constantly if you listen closely. At night, stars stare down so intently it’s astonishing.

Working as a park ranger, however, was not all beautiful views, and Vietze was far from a happy camper. *This Wild Land* sometimes bogs down with his gripes about less-rewarding aspects of the job: lugging picnic tables, cutting firewood, cleaning toilets, and dealing with undesirable people. “We’ve had people drive stolen cars into the park, bring firearms into their cabins, kick in outhouse walls, carve up cabins, launch motorboats on Daicey Pond, fly prohibited drones, smash the thwarts of canoes to unlock them and use them illegally, and pack twenty people into a cabin that fits six,” he writes. Dwelling on these unpleasant acts is perhaps unavoidable. After all, Vietze was not vacationing in Baxter; he was working in a demanding job.

He also paints a sobering picture of how the park has evolved because of climate change: “I’ve hunkered through ever more violent storms, each one trying to fell more trees than the last. It seems every year for the past several we’ve witnessed dramatic weather events. . . . We’ve been thrashed by successive October nor’easters, leaving piles of downed trees almost as tall as the young trees left standing. And now drought. There is no normal anymore.”

Vietze may have abandoned his magazine office, but readers should be grateful that he hasn’t forsaken writing. This warts-and-all account could serve either purpose: Inspire some to pursue new career paths, or lead others to think long and hard before following in his footsteps.

—Steve Fagin

Tangled Roots: The Appalachian Trail and American Environmental Politics

By Sarah Mittlefehldt

University of Washington Press, 2014, 280 pages.

ISBN: 978-0-295-99430-7. Price: \$24.95 (softcover).

Editor’s note: Although this book was first published in 2014, it came on our radar recently, and we feel it deserves attention even now.

ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL, SURROUNDED BY TALL TREES AND DENSE FOREST, it’s easy to think we’re traversing an ancient footpath through old woods. I’ve thought, “Thank goodness we preserved this sliver of nature before it was chopped down, mowed over, paved, and developed.”

That way of thinking about the AT is almost completely wrong, as I learned from Sarah Mittlefehldt’s *Tangled Roots: The Appalachian Trail and*

American Environmental Politics (University of Washington Press, 2014), a research-heavy dive into the environmental ideals, political compromises, setbacks, and breakthroughs that established and protected the footpath from Georgia to Maine (currently 2,194 miles long).

The AT is not ancient; some sections were blazed only in the past few decades. It was not preserved from old woods but rather carved through private farms and logging tracts, including properties that have been purposefully cleared of their human history so as to create a more “natural” experience for hikers. Only 1 percent of today’s trail has not been relocated or rebuilt.

That hidden history of the AT is an essential part of understanding how the trail was tediously cobbled together through a mix of community negotiations and strong-arm government tactics in what Mittlefehldt argues is a distinctly “American” version of environmental politics that blends federalism and grassroots organizing. Unlike Philip D’Anieri’s more recent *The Appalachian Trail: A Biography* (Mariner Books, 2021), which focused on such eccentric characters as Grandma Gatewood and Bill Bryson who built up the mythology around the AT, Mittlefehldt’s book is more of a study in trail-building realpolitik.

“Over the course of nearly a century, the AT project has combined the horizontal, dendritic roots of grassroots social action with the strong central taproot of federal authority,” writes Mittlefehldt, a professor of environmental history and policy at Northern Michigan University. “These two sources of political power evolved in dynamic interaction with one another, tipping at times toward one side or the other, but never fully separate.”

Known formally as the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, it was proposed in 1921 by Connecticut native Benton Mackaye, a U.S. Forest Service worker who was in the first Harvard class to graduate with a forestry degree. In a 1921 issue of the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, Mackaye noted how a trail following “the skyline along the top of the main divides and ridges of the Appalachians would overlook a mighty part of the nation’s activities” and might help address the unemployment, class antagonisms, and mental health problems that all appeared on the rise in a society “infected by a kind of spiritual malaise that came from being disconnected from nature.” (Mackaye’s wife had died by suicide that year.)

The essay led to a 1925 gathering in Washington, D.C., of the inaugural Appalachian Trail Conference, which would evolve into a nonprofit organization known today as the Appalachian Trail Conservancy responsible for managing the footpath. A loose-knit group of advocates began investigating potential trail locations, to varying levels of local support.

Moonshiners in Georgia tangled with trailblazers stumbling upon backwoods distilleries. An angry mob in Virginia, in what would become Shenandoah National Park, threw stones at trail volunteers and stole their shelter construction materials. Such resentment bubbled up over the decades. In the 1980s, thru-hikers in Tennessee encountered fishhooks dangling from a fishing line at eye level, presumably strung there by landowners unhappy about being pressured to sell their land. In the same area, arsonists torched an AT shelter and a posse of locals smashed a USFS vehicle with rocks and clubs.

The AT needed government support. In the 1930s, the Maine lawyer and trail enthusiast Myron Avery—who chaired the Appalachian Trail Conference from 1931 to his death in 1952—recruited the Civilian Conservation Corps to help blaze the trail, and in 1937 a CCC team marked the last remaining link of the AT between Spaulding and Sugarloaf Mountains in Maine. The following year, the Appalachian Trail Conference’s annual meeting was attended for the first time by the National Park Service, underscoring the government’s growing role following Congress’s 1936 passage of legislation to promote cooperative agreements between states in planning recreational areas.

By the late 1960s, however, the AT remained a largely ad-hoc string of public and private trails. Many sections had no more than a handshake agreement to allow hikers to pass. The Appalachian Trail Conference still needed to acquire 630,500 acres to create a publicly protected, 2,000-mile-long corridor 200 feet wide. (Later, trail advocates realized that the AT needed more than just a “skinny right of way” between housing developments, so in a 1978 federal bill, the corridor was widened to 1,000 feet.)

In 1968, Congress passed the National Trails System Act, with the AT and Pacific Crest Trail named the country’s first national scenic trails, thus inducting the AT into the national park system while deferring management and land acquisition to the ATC. Whereas volunteers had previously followed whatever “path of least resistance” could be negotiated with landowners and townships, according to Mittlefehldt, the AT now had federal money and the federal power of eminent domain to pursue the most scenic path, which is how spots like McAfee Knob in Virginia became part of the trail.

McAfee Knob was not along the original AT, which for its first four decades traversed the nearby Jefferson National Forest. Today, McAfee Knob is considered one of the most scenic spots on the fourteen-state footpath, and it only became a reality because of “a combination of grassroots support and the expanded power of eminent domain” from the 1968 Trails Act and a 1978 amendment expanding federal authority over trail creation, according

to Mittlefehldt. (The late Bob Proudman, the former Appalachian Mountain Club trail worker who built the Garfield Ridge Campsite in the White Mountains and went on to direct trail projects on the AT, played a key leadership role in acquiring McAfee Knob.)

In these ways, the creation of the AT can be interpreted as both federalist *and* confederalist, liberal *and* conservative; liberal in its focus on the environment and public good, conservative in its decentralized development and deference to landholder rights; federalist in its usage of eminent domain and government money, while antifederalist in its reliance on grassroots organizers, community-based groups, and volunteerism. (AMC, for example, maintains nearly 350 miles of the AT in five states.)

I learned a lot from *Tangled Roots*, and yet I wanted more from this book. Mittlefehldt conducted field research while thru-hiking the AT in 2007 on her honeymoon, which she briefly mentions. She and her husband hiked and hitchhiked into libraries and archives during the trek. I was left asking, How did librarians respond to Mittlefehldt showing up covered in mud, her grimy hands touching their archival documents? How did Mittlefehldt safeguard her research when back on the waterlogged trail?

Mittlefehldt strongly endorses the AT approach to environmental politics. I can't help but wish there was a better way. A century after Mackaye first proposed the world's longest hiker-only footpath, seven miles of the AT remain privately owned (and thus unprotected), and the trail corridor still doesn't routinely reach the targeted 1,000-foot width.

—*Stephen Kurczyk*

Imaginary Peaks

By Katie Ives

Mountaineers Books, 2021, 304 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-68051-541-1. Price: \$26.95 (hardcover).

ON AN EXPEDITION TO PERU IN 2021, A FRIEND AND I CLIMBED A NEW ROUTE of ice, snow, and rock on a 5,765-meter peak called Jangyaraja. Afterward, when I began looking into prior ascents of the mountain, things got weird. There were various spellings of its name. On Google Maps the mountain was labeled as Jatuncunca. Another trip report from the 1970s described three separate summits—though my partner and I only saw one obvious high point. By the end of my research, I wasn't even sure what mountain we had climbed.

My experience navigating a spider's web of conflicting information about a single point on the map, unsure what might be true, is the kind of territory Katie Ives, the longtime editor-in-chief of *Alpinist* magazine, deals with in her new book *Imaginary Peaks*. She takes an expansive view of the topic of "imaginary cartographies," considering ideas such as how misplaced islands, ranges, and peaks became enshrined on maps over the centuries by human error; the hunt for fully invented secret lands, from Eden to Shangri-La; how geographic names change over the centuries; and even how once-real places are no more because of climate change.

"By exploring how fantasies have shaped and misshaped human visions of geography, we might see the world more honestly as it was, as it is, and as it could become," writes Ives. And this is the throughline that underpins her wide-ranging meditations—the very real ideas and effects, both positive and nefarious, that fictitious geographies have on people and on the planet.

The conjured mountain at the heart of *Imaginary Peaks* was the result of a prank, dreamed up by the late writer and conservationist Harvey Manning. The Riesenstein Hoax, as the prank became known, is a deep cut in climbing history, unknown to most modern climbers: In 1962, Manning teamed up with Austin Post and Ed LaChapelle to compose and submit an article to the preeminent climbing publication of the day, *Summit* magazine, about an Austrian expedition to a heretofore unexplored pocket of mountains in British Columbia. Accompanying the piece was a photograph taken by Post of imposing granite walls with several climbing routes inked in—some finished, others stopping mid-face. The highest peak was named the Riesenstein, according to the Austrians—er, Manning—and it was still unclimbed. Manning ended the piece with a challenge: "Who will be the first to climb it?"

The rub? The mountain wasn't in British Columbia. And it wasn't called the Riesenstein. And no Austrian expedition had ever taken place. But the picture was real—it was of the Kichatnas, a small range in Alaska that no climbers had ever visited. Manning and company had simply *moved* the mountains on the map and invented a backstory.

On its surface, the Riesenstein Hoax seems inconsequential lighthearted fun. But as Ives digs into the tale, she shows it to be much more.

On the one hand, writes Ives, as the hoax's masterminds realized, "if modern maps and guidebooks detract from their users' imaginations, you can always shift the peaks around, mix in a few errors and fables, and then see what happens to the people you fool." The results can be wonderful: Getting lost or wandering the hills without every bit of information at our disposal in

this contemporary world can lead one to see old lands through fresh eyes, to find adventure and brilliance in the smallest of things.

More important, as Manning did with the Riesenstein Hoax and several previous ruses, imaginary peaks and cartographies can lay bare “the absurdity and inappropriateness of climbing mountains for personal glory in the first place,” writes Ives.

Directly related to this—and the most powerful theme throughout *Imaginary Peaks*—is Ives’s focus on *terra misincognita*, a reframing of how we look at “untrodde” lands. The clever phrase emphasizes “the failures of explorers to acknowledge the realities of the traces, paths, and homes of local residents,” she explains. In every historical episode she touches upon—from the early forays into the American West by colonial settlers to Frederick Cook’s faked first ascent of Denali in 1906—Ives addresses the human cost and cultural erasure of indigenous groups.

If there is a strike against the book, it is that it is so jam-packed full of references and allusions and quotes that any reader who hopes to take it all in will need to give it a second read. But the book earns the close attention it demands, and it occupies a liminal space between two ideas that reveal Ives at her best: celebrating the possibilities that imaginary cartographies offer us to see the world anew, and how they pull back the veil on what has been unjustly hidden from view.

—Michael Levy

Don’t Sing to Me of Electric Fences

Poems by Dave Seter

Cherry Grove Collections, 2021, 117 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-62549-383-5. Price: \$20 (paperback).

POETRY OFTEN CHALLENGES A READER BECAUSE IT SKIPS THE LINEARITY OF prose and asks the reader to take leaps and follow. This in turn asks a question about compatibility of mind and direction—yours and the poet’s. No small ask, I think.

Still, the promise offered is not unlike that of new terrain, or terrain new to you—what is around the bend, or the next line-break? And can you, from an angle you’ve not experienced before, name that peak, or spur? Or hear it renamed?

Such was my experience as I read David Seter’s new volume. Seter is a westward-tending poet, where the fences truly are electric, and where the

song, “Don’t Fence Me In,” still floats in the air. This book of poems, like their poet, migrates from east to west, and, in this movement lies his and their freedom.

Seter’s poems are not fenced in. He and they go out, and then out again . . . to woods, fields, trees, and more trees. And wherever the poems go, they take you along. Once you are out there, Seter’s poems like to question you: “Do you think we’d know joy if it attacked us?/ Who else watches this stand-off? Mountain lion? Bald eagle?/ . . . what else could this be but heliolatry?” You are part of this too, the questions say. They are both prod and invitation.

I accepted these invitations and was happy to go to the worlds Seter visited. And I enjoyed meeting also the characters who lived there. A favorite poem, “Golden Delicious,” cast back to the poet’s youth and noted, “What a pair we made, bookish boy and punk rock girl . . .” Such pairings often lie at the heart of poetry.

I also accepted the volume’s final command—“Go to the Blue Oak,” which an afternote points out is derived from Basho’s “to know the pine you must go to the pine.” Just so, and since we have no blue oaks in Maine, I went to a neighborhood white oak to see its lichen tats and run my fingers over its furrowed bark.

—Sandy Stott

Dammed if You Don’t

By Chris Kalman

Self-published, 2021, 170 pages.

ISBN: 978-0-578-84097-0. Price: \$24.99 (hardcover).

IN 2010, WHEN CHRIS KALMAN FIRST VISITED COCHAMÓ, A CHILEAN VALLEY of granite walls that has earned the reputation as the Yosemite of South America, it was a quiet little place. There was a single campground. Only the most motivated trekkers and climbers visited. Today, there are five campgrounds in Cochamó, and thousands descend on the valley each austral summer (November to March).

Dammed If You Don’t is fiction—it won the Mountain Fiction and Poetry award at the 2021 Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival—but is informed by the evolution Kalman has witnessed in Cochamó. The limited-edition book is a meditation on what might happen to such a place in a worst-case development scenario. It asks in no uncertain terms: Can you love a place to death?

The novella follows John Mercer, an American dirtbag climber who in 2011, with his friend Gary, “discovers” Lahuenco—the stand-in for Cochamó. Several years after climbers establish the first routes up the valley’s walls, Lahuenco is seeing more and more traffic. Mercer’s concerns are not just over-use by climbers and trekkers; a hydroelectric company may dam the Lahuenco river, thereby turning the valley into a South American Hetch Hetchy* and wiping out a rare, endangered salamander endemic to the area. The story follows Mercer as he navigates these competing threats to the place he loves.

Kalman uses a heavier hand with some themes than others—Mercer’s internal dialogues about “necessary evils,” “greater goods,” and the “democratization of wilderness” can feel overwrought—but he never forces dogma on us. The animating question, how to protect the purest places but also reap their benefits, remains just that. For those who have read Edward Abbey’s classic *Desert Solitaire* (first published by McGraw Hill in 1968), the question won’t be new, but Kalman’s delicate handling of the subject, his willingness to consider the issue’s complexity, will be.

Craig Muderlak’s black-and-white illustrations interspersed throughout the novella help bring Lahuenco to life. By the end of *Dammed If You Don’t*, with its brilliant and unexpected turn, readers will be itching to make a pilgrimage to Cochamó for themselves but also wondering if that would make them part of a bigger problem.

Kalman does argue—rightly so—that in the quest to protect natural places, we should look to indigenous models of conservation. At one point, Mercer reflects on how the Mapuche, the indigenous inhabitants of Lahuenco, “had managed to live here for thousands of years without disturbing or destroying the place at all. The model for true conservation was there. It was simply that modern man couldn’t seem to relegate his desires to his common sense.”

—Michael Levy

*Hetch Hetchy is a reservoir in the northwestern corner of Yosemite National Park. It serves the city of San Francisco. The work to build a railroad and dam in the valley took place between 1915 and 1923. A movement to dismantle the dam has gained traction this century.

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