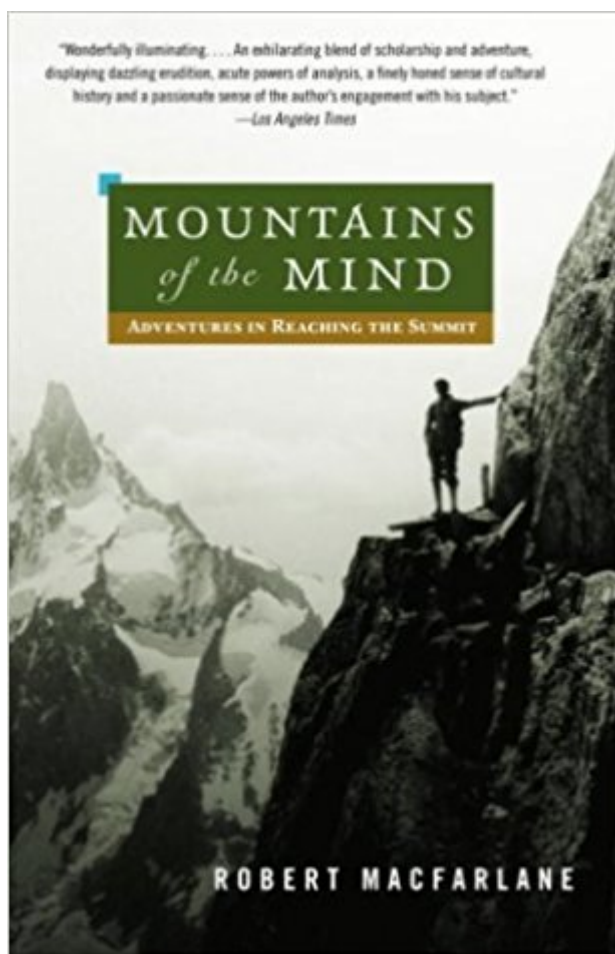


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# Mountains Of The Mind: Adventures In Reaching The Summit



## Synopsis

Combining accounts of legendary mountain ascents with vivid descriptions of his own forays into wild, high landscapes, Robert McFarlane reveals how the mystery of the world's highest places has come to grip the Western imagination and perennially draws legions of adventurers up the most perilous slopes. His story begins three centuries ago, when mountains were feared as the forbidding abodes of dragons and other mysterious beasts. In the mid-1700s the attentions of both science and poetry sparked a passion for mountains; Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Lord Byron extolled the sublime experiences to be had on high; and by 1924 the death on Mt Everest of an Englishman named George Mallory came to symbolize the heroic ideals of his day. Macfarlane also reflects on fear, risk, and the shattering beauty of ice and snow, the competition and contemplation of the climb, and the strange alternate reality of high altitude, magically enveloping us in the allure of mountains at every level.

## Book Information

Paperback: 324 pages

Publisher: Vintage; Reprint edition (July 13, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0375714065

ISBN-13: 978-0375714061

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 25 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #143,492 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #20 in Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Mountains #144 in Books > Sports & Outdoors > Mountaineering > Mountain Climbing #799 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Travelers & Explorers

## Customer Reviews

Mountains haven't always been viewed as magnificent tests of bravery or even as scenic vacation spots-only in the last few centuries have Westerners found them worthy of attention. As British writer Macfarlane (the London Review of Books; the Times Literary Supplement) points out, "until well into the 1700s, travelers who had to cross the Alpine passes often chose to be blindfolded," sparing themselves the terrors of the view. His point throughout this strangely compelling volume is that our attitudes toward mountains are very much a cultural product, a rich mix of theological, geological, artistic and social forces. With the development of geological science in the early 1800s,

mountains, once viewed as "giant souvenirs of humanity's sinfulness," came to be seen as part of the earth's historical record. Recognized as "the great stone book" of history, mountains opened a window into "deep time," a glimpse of eternity. The thrill of vertigo, the infatuation with the unknown, the Social Darwinist challenge of the survival of the fittest, the march of British imperialism, even advances in cartography-all shaped the social imagination of mountains. As Western adventurers were increasingly lured from the Swiss Alps to the Himalayas, Macfarlane closes his study with the ill-fated Mallory expeditions to Everest, so mythic they almost defy analysis. The book itself is rather like some idiosyncratic, hand-drawn map of terra incognita. But for romantic, mountain-struck readers, Macfarlane's rich thoughts may make snow clouds clear, revealing new peaks and new wonders. B&w illus. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Wonderfully illuminating. . . . An exhilarating blend of scholarship and adventure, displaying dazzling erudition, acute powers of analysis, a finely honed sense of cultural history and a passionate sense of the author's engagement with his subject." --Los Angeles Times

• "Fascinating stuff. . . a clever premise. . . . Goes back three centuries, showing how a few brainy opinion makers created the outdoor image." • "The New York Times Book Review" A convincing book of historical evidence alongside his own oxygen-deprived experiences in an attempt to answer the age old question, 'Why climb the mountain?' "--San Francisco Chronicle • "Early mountaineers were lost for words to describe the splendor of the mountains, but Robert Macfarlane is not; in particular, he has a gift for arresting similes." • "The Times Literary Supplement" • "Of all the books published to mark the 50th anniversary of climbing Mount Everest Robert Macfarlane's Mountains of the Mind stands out as by far one of the most intelligent and interesting. . . in a style that shows he can be as poetic as he is plucky." • "The Economist" • "At once a fascinating work of history and a beautifully written meditation on how memory, imagination, and the landscape of mountains are joined together in our minds and under our feet." • "Forbes" • "A compelling meditation. . . Macfarlane is. . . the perfect mountain guide through blue crevasse fields, ice walls, prayer flags, Sherpas and Shangri Las. He's been up there, and come back down through the foothills to offer us his thoughtful and gracious elegy, telling us eloquently the secret of it all, which is that no one can ever truly conquer a mountain." • "Benedict Allen, author of The Faber Book of Exploration" • "Macfarlane, a mountain lover and climber, has a visceral appreciation of mountains. . . . He is an engaging writer, his commentary, always crisp and relevant, leavened by personal experience beautifully related." • "The Observer (UK)" • "Macfarlane writes with tremendous

maturity, elegance and control. . . . A powerful debut, a remarkable blend of passion and scholarship. • • "Evening Standard (UK) • "Part history, part personal observation, this is a fascinating study of our (sometimes fatal) obsession with height. A brilliant book, beautifully written. • • "Fergus Fleming, author of *Ninety Degrees North: The Quest for the North Pole* • "A new kind of exploration writing, perhaps even the birth of a new genre, which doesn't just defy classification • "it demands a whole new category of its own. • • "The Telegraph (UK) • "There are many books on climbing and climbers, and this is one of the best and most unusual I have read. • • "The Times (UK) • "An imaginative, original essay in cultural history • "a book that evokes as well as investigates the fear and wonder of high places. • • "William Fiennes, author of *The Snow Geese* • "A crisp historical study of the sensations and emotions people have brought to (and taken from) mountains. . . . Macfarlane intelligently probes the push/pull of the peaks. . . . Sharp and enticing. • • "Kirkus Reviews

I liked the book for all the reasons the first reviewer did not."Unfortunately, MacFarlane doesn't make major points or build an argument around these themes,leaving unanswered the great question of mountaineering (and of this book): why?"This is plain nonsense. Again and again the author tells us - or hints strongly - that what draws people to the mountains is the unknown and the extra-ordinary and the sublime. People are drawn to mountains who long to get away from the 'why and wherefore' of everyday banality. This is a yearning that has never tugged on this reviewer, clearly.Mountain adventure books, are, for the most part, adrenaline hits (after which you throw away the needle).This book is unique as far as I am concerned, and its pleasures can be drawn out deeply and pondered on at leisure in repeated readings.Yes, it is an uneven experience, and, as such, is consistent with the subject matter of the book. There is serendipity and pot-boiling and fascinating discovery, meandering and an occasional breathtaking views.You get a rich cross-section of MacFarlane's writing styles, from historical to biographical, but the mixed diet and pace I found a reason for satisfaction from an author obviously hopelessly in love with (as well as fascinated and horrified by) mountains and mountain culture. An author as articulate and entertaining you don't find every day.Having dragged myself up peaks for most of my four decades on this planet, I often found myself smiling at how RM richly articulated the mystique and cultural imperative of mountain-going which I was somehow unconscious of until now.A lovely book for luxuriating in the lore and the lure of mountains.

Bought for my husband he loves it.

From the opening recollection to the last sentence, Macfarlane's history of how mountains have been imagined left me aching to read more. The final words took me by surprise; I fully expected to turn the page for at least a few more spellbinding paragraphs. While the author's own experiences with altitude, ice, and snow are interspersed throughout, this is not at all a flimsy excuse to offer up a personal memoir or a coming-of-age story. Rather, his own stories effectively illustrate his larger points. The final problem of the plot, Mallory's fatal ascent toward the summit of Everest, lingers throughout as the essential riddle, and yet Macfarlane skillfully avoids letting that tragedy overwhelm the rest of the book. Every historical nuance, every detail of landscape, every observation of human endeavor is crafted through the comprehension of one who is sensitive to his own place in the historical development he chronicles. It is difficult not to recall Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* as far as the depth of understanding and the quality of the writing.

This is a book about mountaineering for historians. I happen to be a hiker who is also an historian, so I like this book. If you are looking for adventure writing like Joe Simpson or Ed Veisturs, this is not the book for you. But if you would like to learn how westerners went from fearing mountains to (at least some of us) loving them, then this book does a good job tracing that transformation.

One of the most beautiful books I've ever read - almost poetic in its descriptions of mountains and their lure. Yet, is full of fascinating information about mountain climbing and the history of early mountaineers. This is a must read for anyone that loves the outdoors and "The Wild Places".

After returning from my first high altitude climb up Kilimanjaro, I read this book cover to cover and was absorbed, appreciative and in awe of its subtle and beautiful meditation on why mountains allure us higher and higher. Thank you so much Robert for this beautiful masterpiece.

Great mix of current, historical and ancient. Authors experience in high places very well presented. History of the mountain also well documented. Also the inclusion of the geologic history was a great addition when compared to many other books on high places.

McFarlane helps us here uncover parts of the mystery within. The history of alpinism and the early fascination the mountains inspired is a very interesting and novel view of what the mountains can represent to us. The mountains elicit all sorts of inexplicable passions and this book helps us sort

some of them out without killing the passion.

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