



Kiss or Kill: Confessions of a Serial Climber

Mark Twight

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2001 Banff Mountain Literature Award Winner

Mark Twight's collected works, some never before published in North America Includes dramatic black and white mountaineering photos Features brand new epilogues to all of the stories They call him Dr. Doom.

Raving and kicking against mediocrity, his anger and pain simmer close to the surface. He speaks and writes the language of the punk music that defined him. He is extreme alpinist Mark Twight, and he doesn't back down from the truth. He's a one-man literary punk band. If you have any doubt, here comes his knockout punch: the only collection of writing Twight swears he'll ever publish.

Kiss or Kill: Confessions of a Serial Climber is raw, unfiltered Twight. These author's cut are the real deal, not the homogenized fluff offered up by magazine editors who are often unwilling to offend. Twight's words make it clear that climbing is only distantly about the summit. Several of these pieces are new to U.S. readers. Twight edited all of the selections and appended each with a current author's note; confessing his inspiration, events that followed, and lessons learned (or not learned, some might say). It adds up to a frightfully lucid look into Twight's personal life as both man and hardcore alpine climber. The dissection scares me sometimes... Whether railing against the spinelessness of American siege-style mountaineering, admitting addiction to pushing the bounds of the possible, or reveling in his ability to cut away anything in life that holds him back, Twight never blinks. Along the way, there is the drama of new and epic routes, unbreakable bonds between climbing partners, and Twight's evolution as a climber and a man. He tells every story in a unique, in-your-face style.

Kiss or Kill is not an easy read. It may scare some readers-but that's the point. "I want this book to help you recognize your own anger, which will help you understand mine," says Twight. "Somewhere out there somebody understands these words and knows they matter. They were written in blood, learned by heart."

Kiss or Kill: Confessions of a Serial Climber Details

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From Reader Review *Kiss or Kill: Confessions of a Serial Climber* for online ebook

Mihai says

I had long heard the praises sang to this collection of magazine articles and opinion pieces from one of the premier American climbers of the 1980s and 1990s, and one of the strongest exponents of the alpine style. *Kiss or Kill* didn't blow me away in terms of content, though Twight is an excellent writer, riding a fine ability to convey his thinking and his honesty into engaging and at times hilarious prose.

But ultimately, the book is unable to become more than just the sum of its parts; there's nothing "bringing it together", so to speak it. The earlier essays are not much more than the rantings of an angry young man, who tries to harness his inner drive by taking on increasingly extreme challenges that he survives either by luck or by will. Unfortunately, a life constantly on the edge is not sustainable, a conclusion he arrives at as he is getting older and the number of friends or fellow climbers that perish in the mountains increases.

It is somewhat ironic to reconcile the idealist climber from 20 years ago with the today's owner of Gym Jones, a high-end fitness business that caters mainly to Hollywood film-making industry. The firm commitment to the purity of the alpine style as emphasized over and over again in *Kiss or Kill* is not as appealing when one realizes that top mountaineering requires acceptance of commercial sponsorship, at least in getting around the world.

Twight's contribution to climbing is undeniable, and was finally recognized in 2016 when he was awarded the ____ by the American Alpine Club. The writings in this book provide a fascinating insight into how Twight became a climbing legend, being willing to take incredible risks, while also benefiting from an incredible dose of luck.

Eric says

I've found Mark Twight's essays on the Gym Jones site inspirational and thought provoking. I am only interested in alpine climbing inasmuch as the lessons learned about life from that discipline can be abstracted and applied to my own life. In that sense, Mark's book was helpful. I learned what self-assessment and self-honesty really means. Mark's a great writer and I recommend this book to anyone with a passing interest in the intersection between sport and self-knowledge.

Philippe says

I read this book back-to-back with Steve House's 'Beyond the Mountain' which was a very worthwhile experience. Twight and House share a similar agenda. Both are evangelists for a clean, 'alpine-style' way of climbing very technical routes on the world's highest peaks. In practice it comes down to climbing solo or in very small teams, relying on speed as an essential safety factor, carrying minimal resources and avoiding litter on the mountain. Confronted with the extraordinary complexity and risk that inevitably comes with these pursuits, this demands an almost superhuman level of commitment.

Twight's collection of pieces - written over more than a decade - is very different from House's rather monolithic narrative. Whilst the latter radiates an almost priestly solemnity, Twight serves up a caustic, high-octane mix of personal reminiscences and reflections on the 1990s mountaineering scene. Twight's sophisticated, staccato prose, his black humor and his propensity to provoke the reader with in-your-face exhortations contribute to an immersive reading experience. House's 'Beyond the Mountain' was tougher fare to chew on. However, from the relentlessness of the latter book eventually emerges a visceral awareness of the physical and emotional exigencies of high-altitude, alpine-style climbing. One cannot be but in awe. Twight's more fractured, wide-angled and philosophical lens creates another (less diegetic) perspective. The climbing reports are broad-brush and cinematographic. The book is littered with penetrating one-liners of someone who, with hindsight, reflects on the value of personal experiences. The effect is reinforced by the 'author's notes' that conclude every chapter and in which Twight reminisces on the particular circumstances in which he wrote the original pieces. 'Kiss or Kill' appeals to the conceptual thinker in me. House plumbs more subterranean registers. Both books echo very effectively off each other. One cannot remain indifferent to their dry-eyed and stoical plea for a life lived fully, radically, stumblingly, acceptingly.

Laura Michelle says

You can't call yourself a mountaineer unless you've read Mr. Twight. This collection of articles/essays is a great read for the iconoclastic climber or the punk-loving thrill seeker (and any of us in between).

Karine says

A peek into the mind of the oh-so-superior Mark Twight... or is he?

Daniel Weaver says

Filled with Skinny Puppy quotes. Good stuff.

Alex Rogers says

Interesting, entertaining, and at times very absorbing, this is a decent read for climbers - I wouldn't recommend it outside those interested in climbing or extreme sports. Twight eventually annoyed me with his extreme attitude towards risk / fulfilling ones potential etc and his evident enjoyment in taking extreme positions to gain a reaction. He is undoubtedly brave and a very serious climber, and so has earned insights into himself that few people do. But he extrapolates from that into extreme positions that few people will agree with, and fewer survive.

Tara deCamp says

Mark Twight is an intense, serious climber inspired by punk and here to provoke people. I agree with almost

everything he says and find him quite inspiring, but his ego is pretty massive and occasionally gets irritating. If punk attitude and talk of posers annoys you, then you may not like this book. He tells it like it is and isn't afraid to ruffle some feathers—in fact, that's often his intention.

A passage I thoroughly enjoyed on the high risk in alpinism and serious climbing:

"Death plays a huge role in why men climb, in the way they climb and why some of them eventually quit climbing in the high mountains. Alpinism often means high risk and the loss of life. Your friends are up there in the clouds, in storms, swept away by avalanches, or cowering under a volley of stones. Perhaps they'll freeze to death at the bottom of a crevasse or sit down to rest and never get up again... Alpinism is the story of men and the risks men take, the ones they are equal to, the ones they barely get away with, and those risks that kill them. It is about the obsession. The danger and the glory, the addiction of going harder, higher, longer. Sometimes we get away with it, when others do not. Death in the mountains can be as ugly as a falling stone surprising an innocent hiker on the trail. It can also be as beautiful as seven men struggling through a storm day after day, giving everything they have to life and living it. But one by one, from cold, from exhaustion, from having fought so hard, they die. Until three remain.

I say this is beautiful because the greatest human act is the act of *survival*.

I think this passage is especially relevant given the recent media attention of free soloing. But I think it's also a thoughtful perspective on what makes life fulfilling.

On a related note, Twight rants a bit in this book (I forgot to highlight where) about how, with advancements in technology, mountaineering, climbing, and alpinism aren't nearly as risky or dangerous as they once were, and accomplishing the same routes as climbers once did before that technology was available isn't as worthy because those who repeat them do so without commitment. Totally agree - it's not the same. He ends this rant with a snarky comment: **"I can take Sport Climbing—I participate. Sport Alpinism, though? Yeah, Verm, it's neither."**

An example of his general attitude I found entertaining:

"I laugh hard at French climbers and their media because too much talk and not enough action in France. They spend too much time posing and not enough time training. The common availability of high-quality terrain causes complacency. It makes them wait for perfect conditions, when all the conveniences coincide before attempting a new route, which makes their remaining plums ripe for plucking. It just takes a bit more motivation than the locals possess."

Honestly, I've thought a little along these lines before in regards to backpacking, hiking, and climbing. If you really love it and are psyched to get after it and be outside, you won't care about the weather or the sacrifices. You'll go because it's there. And then you enjoy it far more without the crowds of people who only can stand it with the perfect conditions. In regards to climbing, sometimes I think about how I live in Virginia/DC (where there are next to zero outdoor opportunities nearby, and if there are, they are kind of garbage) and others live in mountain towns surrounded by opportunities. Often it seems like they don't take advantage of it, while I will take a day trip driving five hours each way with little sleep just to get on some quality rock.

Lastly, I just think it's funny and cute that he lists a "Soundtrack for Personal Reinvention" with a list of punk

songs to get rid of complacency, inconsistency, and incompetency in your life. This dude is so over the top in a really fun way.

Gabriel Lando says

I spent days squeezing my mind in order to reach a conclusion regarding this book. Interestingly, one aspect of it doesn't really depend on the book itself, but on the author - actually, it doesn't depend on the author himself, but on what he (and people like him) represent.

Mark Twight is a serious climber: hardened by the cold, defined by the ice, troubled by the choice. Each and every person that hits a certain plateau in climbing has to choose between keep doing it (and risk everything) or stop, give way, see the mission as accomplished. Weirdly, the few that do hit the life-or-death plateau often choose to keep climbing until they die instead of backing off. Twight mentions several times that more than 40 of his friends are already dead, and that he's tired of finding out how much a person means to him by what he feels after he or she dies. To the non-climber, this might sound absurd. I can't imagine being in the skin of someone who doesn't understand the drive towards the mountain, the need to pursue the summit, the beauty that's born out of both success and failure. I'm part of those who see no harm in choosing to risk life in order to reach the unimaginable state of bliss, fear, anxiety and relief that climbing provides. It's not only worth it, it's also a need, a must, an addiction. It might be a disease, since it often leads to death.

Reading Twight is definitely amusing. Being able to relate to many situations he describes, the following stories touched me deeply: "Glitter and Despair", "I Hurt, Therefore I Am", "Heaven Never Laughed", "A Lifetime Before Death", "The Reference Point: Interview with Jean-Christophe Lafaille" and "No Time to Cry". Some of those stories, like "No Time to Cry", are an integral part of a climber's life: we simply can't run away from them. It's a curse that comes with the choice of being in the mountains.

My problems with the book, summarized in Twights' own words, are "we all pass judgement when we feel threatened. I suppose this is human nature and might never change". Well, Twight might feel threatened all the time, then. As a individualistic activity, climbing opens the door to extreme egocentrism: the sport is rotting from the inside. Twight is at least honest enough to admit he suffers deeply from this, but most of the time he's ranting about other climbers' actions instead of his own. Even though I agree with 99% of his ranting, I could not believe his level of self-proclamation in some passages, such as "the torch of alpine climbing has been passed to me" or "as a leading role model, I had to give the best example". I simply cringed, having to sometimes interrupt the reading due to the high levels of sheer disgust his words caused in me. I don't dispute any of his ascents, nor undervalue Twight as a climber, but I think being humble is not only more sophisticated, but also even more admirable when you're such a top-notch climber. Humbleness only adds value, and if people find out the route you opened up in the Himalayas is a grade 9 by trying it they'll be even more surprised than if they found out by reading a stupid article where you undervalue their ascents and overvalue yours. Twight goes from blaming good ice conditions to better equipment by people that are climbing harder than him, and at the same time complains about how the ego war is strong within the climbing community. Well, guess what? This book contributes to inflate a culture of egocentric, narcissistic people that have a strong pull in the direction of advertising their success by downgrading everything else.

In resume: if the book was constituted by the stories I mentioned, I'd have given it a 5 star rating. Some of the stories I didn't mention were -5 stars, that is, some of the worst pieces of text I've ever read. Twight thinks people dislike his stories because they might be too honest for them, but I insist that's not the case... I disliked most of his stories mainly because I felt like his ego was wiping its ass with my eyes.

Abdullah Mourad says

No book about the mountains has terrified me this much of alpinism as much as this book did. A great look into the mind of what it takes to be the best at a dangerous sport.

Sam Ritchie says

Mark is an intense dude, a punk who wants to wake you up and force you to examine your motivations and kill activities that you're not willing to pursue with full force. It's a tough ideal to match.

This book spoke to me as someone making the first steps toward bigger adventures in the mountains, and out of training against a stopwatch on limited tracks. I'm in awe of the big mountains, but I don't really know what it takes to "succeed" there, or even have a framework for what that means.

"Kiss or Kill" is a collection of essays describing Twight's growth as an alpinist; significant climbs, the friends he's lost and the relationships he's shattered to continue to climb hard. In a number of the essays he hints that he knows he's a little bit of a caricature, and goes a little overboard to "wake up" the reader. Still, the honesty in the book, and the uncomfortable feeling of reading someone not afraid to tell you you're wasting your fucking time, was welcome.

Check it out if you're interested in what drives someone to go into the mountains and suffer. Then read Steve House's "Beyond the Mountain". I enjoyed seeing Steve and other characters he mentions through Mark's eyes, and vice versa. Definitely goes on the adventure list... though maybe not as comfort reading on some gnarly first alpine adventure.

Tarik Adnan says

Unbelievable climbs in true alpine style!

Goat says

Evolution of man/punk/lover/friend/extreme mountaineer. The Henry Rollins of climbing? Many men will recognise shadows of themselves in these pages - you don't have to be a climber; as an armchair mountaineer (far safer), I related to Twight's forthright tales of obsession, his loathing of the consumerist herd mentality that degrades the climbing world like any other, the anger that fuels him to drive himself onward (to the very margins of death in some harrowing sequences). Yet he avoids the descent into full machismo largely by being aware of and confronting his own "dumb male" excesses. "Yes," he says as he ages and his writing and self-awareness develop, "I was an asshole. But I know it, it's me, and I won't hide from it."

Many will be turned off by Twight's brash, unflinching style in the early selections, but the book rewards perseverance and I was totally enthralled by the mid-point. Part of it is a feeling of shared influences and

drives - he quotes freely from punk lyrics and he is quite open about the addictive nature of his escapades. At one point he counts over 40 friends and climbing acquaintances killed in their pursuit of their obsession. Twight is not shy, either, about admitting when he screwed up badly. But you can also enjoy the honing of his skills as a writer - it's punk alright, but literate and evocative, and what comes through most vividly is his love of mountains and the purity of his own style (like the music that inspired him: fast, light and high). Every tale or interview is followed by a 2000 post-script to put them into historical and personal perspective.

It's enough to do one thing and do it to the best of your ability, Twight says near the end of the volume. This collection will, he states, be his last - which is a shame, because you finish almost liking the guy, filled with a tremendous respect and awe for his commitment, and in my case satisfied that there are at least two things he does well at.

Jen says

Rather than gorgeous vistas or morality tales, this book gets at the insanity that motivates some climbers - that drive that just won't shut up. This book made me feel more sane than most :)

Mac says

Kiss or Kill is a collection of Mark Twight's writings previously published as brief articles in specialty mountain climbing magazines, and as such, the book is not an obvious choice for me. The extent of my mountain climbing experience was a one-day hike as a youngster in summer camp and a five-star rating for *Into Thin Air*.

What's more, *Kiss or Kill* is an odd book. It's just a collection of snapshots, not an organized memoir or an explanation of extreme mountain climbing. Some of the language is technical and often incomprehensible to the climbing outsider, and repetition is frequent. Many of the references are to punk bands and punk rock lyrics, another area I'm unacquainted with. And there are a fair number of confusing moments. Often I had no idea where, what, or when Twight was talking about; for example, in explaining his romantic relationships, Twight often refers to "she" without antecedent and virtually no context or scene setting.

However, despite the obvious mismatch between *Kiss or Kill* and my reading knowledge, I enjoyed the book because of its energy and a life laid bare. Twight reveals his doubts and fears, his strengths and weaknesses, his confidence and insecurity, as well as his hopes and ambitions. His writing is raw, unfiltered, candid. He lavishes praise on some climbers and savages others, including himself. And he provides insights into the need for friendship vs going it alone, maniacal focus vs having a wider range of interests, and living life to the fullest by repeatedly facing death vs a safer, more ordinary existence. It all adds up to a life lived on the edge and a life extensively analyzed, and it makes interesting reading.

My preference would be for a book that's clearer and more orderly, a book less repetitive and less wearing due to Twight's continual rants. But my preference for a calmer, safer, more stable approach is just what Twight rails against, and in this case being exposed to his condemnation provides my own set of learnings and insights. I will not be going mountaineering, but I will be thinking about how I live my life in fresh, new ways.

