



# Above All Things

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**Above All Things** Tanis Rideout

**The Paris Wife** meets **Into Thin Air** in this breathtaking debut novel of obsession and divided loyalties, which brilliantly weaves together the harrowing story of George Mallory's ill-fated 1924 attempt to be the first man to conquer Mount Everest, with that of a single day in the life of his wife as she waits at home in England for news of his return.

A captivating blend of historical fact and imaginative fiction, **Above All Things** moves seamlessly back and forth between the epic story of Mallory's legendary final expedition and a heartbreaking account of a day in the life of Ruth Mallory. Through George's perspective, and that of the newest member of the climbing team, Sandy Irvine, we get an astonishing picture of the terrible risks taken by the men on the treacherous terrain of the Himalaya. But it is through Ruth's eyes that a complex portrait of a marriage emerges, one forged on the eve of the First World War, shadowed by its losses, and haunted by the ever-present possibility that George might not come home.

Drawing on years of research, this powerful and beautifully written novel is a timeless story of desire, redemption, and the lengths we are willing to go for honour, glory, and love.

## Above All Things Details

Date : Published June 19th 2012 by McClelland & Stewart (first published March 6th 2012)

ISBN : 9780771076350

Author : Tanis Rideout

Format : Hardcover 357 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Adventure, Cultural, Canada, Adult Fiction

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# From Reader Review Above All Things for online ebook

## Arah-Leah Hay says

First, if you haven't read a book about Everest, let this not be your first choice. This is my third book on the subject after reading "Into Thin Air" and becoming an Everest fanatic, and so far nothing compares to Krakauer's true account. This however is my first fictional endeavor inspired by true events. Rideout delivers a seemingly authentic narration based on George Mallory's attempt for the summit 1924. The story doesn't start and stop with just Mallory and the expedition though, it takes you into the heart and mind of Ruth; his wife, waiting and bearing the burden and competition that lie between her and the yet unconquered Mt. Everest. It is about love and sacrifice and above all, obsession. Always nearing the summit I am riveted, and this was no exception.

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## Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

In 1924, George Mallory set out on an expedition with seven other men for a third British attempt at reaching the peak of Mount Everest. Really, it was an easy decision for him, much to his wife, Ruth's, dismay: like many climbers, but perhaps more than most, George is driven to climb Everest, the tallest mountain in the world. His two previous defeats only make him more determined, though at thirty-seven, he knows this is his last chance. If he fails this time, he won't get another shot.

George hikes up through Tibet (they weren't allowed through Nepal) to Base Camp with expedition leader Colonel Teddy Norton; Dr Howard Somervell; naturalist Noel Odell; photographer John Noel; two British soldiers, Shebbeare and Hazard, to help with managing the Sherpas and supplies; and twenty-one year old Sandy Irvine, who is good at fixing things and hopes that Norton will let him be part of the last push up the mountain, despite his inexperience.

Meanwhile, back at their home in Cambridge, Ruth goes through the motions of a single day, taking care of their three young children, preparing a dinner party she doesn't want to have, and struggling with her feelings of loneliness, dejection, depression even. Ruth misses George, and sadly she knows she can't compete with the mountain. All she's left with is the endless waiting - not once, but several times. Waiting for George to return, waiting to hear word that he's been successful, or something else entirely.

As the two move through their very different lives, the past blurs with the present and memories are relived. And shadowing the story, and George himself, is the true story of his disappearance during his last attempt to climb Mt. Everest, a mystery that wasn't solved until his body was found in 1999.

I have to say right from the start, here, that this is a phenomenal book. It's one of the most atmospheric, compelling, emotionally-wrought historical fiction novels I've read in quite some time, and for a debut novel, it's very impressive. The level of research involved is one thing, but where Rideout really excelled is in her ability to bring these historical figures to life, giving them room to breathe on the page, to fill out their period costumes, to convince us modern readers of every facet of their lives, without any self-conscious second-guessing or fear of "not doing right by her characters", is I think the expression.

We first meet George and Ruth in 1920 when they are both filled with excitement by the news of his first impending trip to Everest, and it is a superb place to start, because it gives us an intimate, first-hand glimpse at

the couple when everything must have seemed so bright and promising to them. Contrast that with the shell-shocked Ruth who moves through the day on autopilot, trying to hold it together but completely worn out by the endless waiting, aware that her sister and servants don't consider her "stoic" enough. Their three children, Clare, Berry and John - who barely remembers his father because of all the absences - are likewise very real characters, young beings with growing personalities, hot breath on their mother's neck, and youthful demands - among them a strong need for the father.

The expedition itself is rendered in clear, artful detail, from the list of supplies -

44 tins of quail in *foi gras*; 120 tins of bully beef; dozens of wrapped squares of flaky chocolate; 9 tins of tobacco; 7 tubes apiece of petroleum jelly, to be smeared on chapped faces, to deflect the sun; 63 working oxygen canisters; 26 tents of varying sizes; a crate of cutlery and tin plates; one case of Montebello champagne; 17 bottles of Macallan whisky, not less than 15 years old. Miles and miles of rope, campbeds, tents, tools, and cooking pots. [p.34]

-- to the clothes they wore, their bleeding lips, and most fascinating (and scary) of all, the effect of altitude sickness in all its diverse forms. And not just the altitude, but hypothermia, dehydration and shock as well. I felt like I was right there on the mountain with these men, which was, truth be told, a very uncomfortable and frightening place to be. To think of these climbers tackling Everest in woollen socks and tweed coats! It's amazing what they achieved, considering how ill-equipped they were. The descriptions of their hallucinations, or how they would zone out and hours later realise they'd just been sitting there, staring, were chilling and all too believable. The atmosphere, the setting, was so vivid, the effects on the men so tangible, it only emphasises - and justifies - Ruth's anxiety, her fear.

The Col had shocked him when George took him to see it the day after he arrived at [Advanced Base Camp]. He'd stood at the bottom of the long saddle that connects Everest to her neighbour Changste and looked up: thirteen hundred mostly vertical feet. All ice and snow. Above the Col, nothing was protected. Above it, the wind screamed down in a terrible way that he couldn't quite grasp. That was where they got turned back in '21. Where the avalanche had occurred in '22. George pointed: "On the lower section we'll cut steps and haul ourselves up them. But the last twenty feet" - George drew his attention to the chimney that they would follow, the route he would try to take - "might as well be rock." [p.134]

The air outside felt as though it might snap. Sharp and fragile, edged like crystal. When he inhaled, it cut into his nostrils, his lungs. The moonlight was cold on the mountain, iced blue. Sandy slogged through the snow after Somervell, the snow filtering into his misplaced boots, melting against his skin and cooling fast. His feet would freeze in his boots. The cold in his brain hurt. He pressed forward. [p.204]

Sandy's hands stroked the air near his face. It was agony. It felt as if the mountain had stripped

the flesh from his cheeks. There couldn't be any skin left. George reached across to him in the twilight, pushed Sandy's hands away from his face, and smeared petroleum jelly carefully, gently on his skin. [p.279]

As well as Ruth and George's narrative - Ruth in first person present tense over the course of a single day, George in third person past tense - we also get the perspective of George's expedition partner, Sandy Irvine. Young, hopeful, strong, with a bit of climbing experience behind him but not enough for Teddy Norton to consider letting him try for the summit, he gives us a third perspective on George, not just to flesh out Ruth's idea of George, but to flesh out the story of the attempt to climb Everest. You can't help but warm to Sandy, and coming to care for him too.

Part of the expedition is spent debating the use of oxygen in summiting. They've never used it before, and some of them consider it cheating if they use it now.

"With God's help, and not the oxygen's, we'll make it." Somervell's tone was affirming, emphatic.

"Somes, the only thing that's going to tame this thing, this..." He wanted to say *bitch*. He wanted to curse the mountain, but held his tongue. "The only thing that matters is us."

"Exactly, George. Us! We're the instrument designed for climbing. You pretend to be a skeptic, but you have faith. You believe you're destined for it, for the top. Don't pretend you don't. That's faith, George. That's a plan." Somervell turned to Sandy. "And you? Do you share his skepticism? His humanism?"

George watched Sandy as he glanced from him to Somes and back again.

"I don't know." Sandy's tone was slow and measured, or maybe it was the altitude. George leaned towards him and Sandy's voice picked up. "All that religion seems an excuse. I'll keep God to myself, I think. I want to climb Everest for the achievement of it, not because it's for or against someone's idea of God." [pp.152-3]

The climbers' motivations for tackling Everest time and again are touched upon throughout the story, especially George, who is compelled to leave his wife and young family to conquer the mountain. From the exhilaration he feels, climbing - "You know that feeling - when you're pushing yourself and pushing yourself and then you leap for that hold you think is just out of reach. You know you're going to fall. Then you don't. And for just that moment, the world sharpens. Comes into focus." [p.155] - to what the people back home expect from them, especially after the first world war; to George's personal ambition, how he feels he doesn't even have a choice but to try, and try again. Rideout tacks back and forth in time, revisiting the time George and Ruth first met, to other scenes in their past, each time making George (and Ruth) feel ever more inevitable, more tangible, until that ending, that mesmerising ending at which point George feels so alive, and then suddenly isn't.

The only problem I had with this novel, my only struggle, was that the prose was a bit... erratic? It didn't always read smoothly, the sentences didn't always link up neatly together, so that you could start reading and never find a place to stop. On the contrary, I found it surprisingly slow to read, easy to forget whose memories I was reliving - surprising that such a well-written novel could still suffer from jagged pacing.

But if the story was an unexpected slog to read (and I use the word "slog" for the sake of metaphor, not for

its negative connotations), it matched the character's slog through life (Ruth) or up a mountain (George and Sandy). And when you get to the final push to the summit, the step-by-step slow detail of it all not only builds tension but makes you *feel* each and every painful step they make, the struggle to breathe, to put one foot in front of the other. Maybe it was a tad too slow and a bit too long, but the effect can't be denied.

Between Ruth's raw emotions and sympathetic story, George's obsession with summiting, and Sandy's youthful yearning, it's a novel of depth and insight. Add to that the impressive and incredibly real atmosphere, the sensation that you're there on the mountain with them, and it's a story that claws its cold grip into you. I also learnt a lot from it - like the fact that this mountain is named after a man who never even saw it, a British surveyor based in India. I learnt about their attitudes towards the Sherpas (like children, who needed to be constantly watched and told what to do). And I learnt what it was like to try and climb Everest in the 1920s. Even with all our advanced fibres and clever tents, high-protein bars and other gadgets, nothing appeals to me less than the idea of trying to climb Everest. Experiencing it vicariously through this novel was enough for me! Not to mention how emotionally wrung-out I felt, for it is a heartbreaking story, all told (this isn't a negative - I love a book that makes me feel that way; it's the mark of great writing!).

And on a final note, I have to add that this particular edition (McClelland & Stewart, hardback, first edition) is just stunning, from the typeface on the cover to the font on the pages (Perpetua, perfect for the time period depicted); from the tinted photographs to the texture of the jacket - hard to describe, but wondrous to feel. Honestly I don't think I've seen a more perfectly put-together book in a long time. Probably the only thing I'd add is a map, because I love map, and as a visual-conceptual person, it helps me visualise in relation to other things. But it's not really necessary. And definitely read the author's note at the end, about how she started on this long journey of research and writing, her personal motivations, and some other details behind this finely crafted story. Highly, highly recommended.

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### **Susanfr says**

My husband gave me this book, figuring I'd enjoy reading a fictional treatment of George Mallory's doomed ascent of Mt. Everest. Normally I would--I enjoy reading books about exploration and adventure.

Unfortunately, this work blended the expedition story with a melodrama regarding Mallory's relationship with his wife. I'm not a fan of romance novels even when they are well written, and the opening chapter had me flipping back to the cover to see if there wasn't a picture of Fabio there, bare chested, hair flowing, perhaps attired in crampons.

The picture wasn't there, but it should have been.

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### **Andrea Paterson says**

Somehow I have managed to live my entire life without knowing thing about George Mallory or the 1924 attempt to conquer Everest. Just in case you've managed to do the same I won't give away the ending, but I suspect I'm the only person on the planet who had the opportunity to read this book without knowing what was coming. Consequently I was surprised when the ending happened.

I have since done a bit of reading about Mallory and the early treks up the world's highest mountain and I can say that Tanis Rideout did a stunning job bringing the story and characters to life. This is a tragic book, and not just in relation to mountaineering. This book is about human passions--the drive that pushes us to go farther and to sacrifice everything for a goal. In this novel, obsession takes on human shape, loss is palpable, and you begin to sense that the story isn't really about Mallory at all, but about love and how it isn't enough, even though we believe that it should be.

I don't know what reading this book would have been like if I had already known the shape of this story. I went into this an innocent, and came out shaken. A great book that skirts precipice between fact and fiction.

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### **Kathrine Holyoak says**

Rideout's depiction of George Mallory's pioneer ascent up Everest allows readers to feel the thrill of the climb without paying the agonizing cost of the reality. I felt the chill settle in my own bones as the oxygen thinned and the timing became critical. However, whole chapters should have been cut. The adrenaline of the expedition was interrupted by the chapters which switched the scene to Mallory's melancholy and boring wife waiting in London. I began to skip those chapters entirely and lost nothing. The only place Ruth's story is relevant is at the conclusion of the novel. Even novice climbers know that less is often more for what you choose to pack on a climb.

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### **Bookkaholic Magazine says**

(See our full review over at Bookkaholic.) The story of George Mallory's fatal obsession with Mount Everest, with historical gaps filled in by the imagination. He tries not once, not twice, but three times to conquer the mountain, leaving a wife and three small children behind for months at a time. The novel mainly focuses on that crucial final attempt in 1924. It is beautifully written (at times too flowery), gripping, and suspenseful even though the ending is well-known.

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### **Lara Kleinschroth says**

Just finished racing through the final 80 pages of my advanced reading copy of this stellar book and I am still tingling with breathlessness. Can't wait for its release in June, when I can share it with and recommend it to everyone! It is described as a cross between *The Paris Wife* and *Into Thin Air*, which it is, but I would even compare it to one of my all-time faves, *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood. It takes brilliant writing technique and storytelling ability to take a story out of the history books, when we all know how it's going to end, and still shape and craft an intimate portrait with so much tension that we still hope for a different outcome. I can't tell you how excited I am by this book!

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## Joanne says

I would have expected a book about climbing Mount Everest to be a bit more exciting. It was too slow for me and the alternate chapters told from Ruth's perspective did not hold my interest.

One positive thing I can say is that while reading I became interested in Everest and did a bunch of internet research on stats and people who have climbed it, and watched a video of climbers finding bodies on the mountain. I'm sure I'm probably the only one, but I "spoiled" the ending for myself by reading what happened with the people the book was based on, as I wasn't familiar with the story beforehand.

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## Emily says

Beautifully written, a great example how even if you know the ending (I did, being sort of a mountaineering reading junky), you're still swept up in the story of these two people and an obsession.

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## Amy says

I had high hopes for this book. An explorer climbing Mount Everest and his wife's perspective as well! How interesting!!!

But I was so wrong!! Here's a list of what I didn't like:

1. The book is supposed to be from the perspective of the wife, Ruth, and George the explorer. Although I'm ok with others in the story she pops in explorer, Sandy's, perspective. Why? It doesn't fit. It feels out of place. He's like a third wheel!
2. Ruth is such a booooooring character. All she thinks about is her husband. I understand it was 1924 but I do not believe women were this empty. I just didn't care about her. Her perspective doesn't add to the story.
3. I don't understand why Ruth's written over a day and George over wks or months. This was confusing and annoying. What was the point in this?
4. Why would people climbing a dangerous mountain suddenly get a little snapshot of a dinner they went to. Umm no. I just don't believe it.
5. I found the story very poor in transitioning from scene to scene.
6. George is a jerk. I do think a writer can create a "readable dislikeable" character but not here.

Overall the story had poorly developed characters. The story felt like it was trying too hard to be good; like most Hollywood movies. I just couldn't connect to the story at all. It was very very very sloooooow. I wanted to be interested in exploring and climbing but didn't. I didn't finish it.

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## Jake says

You don't need to be a mountain climber to get hooked on the subject, especially when it comes to Mount Everest. Three years ago I read Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* and was hooked. Since then I have read seven more books on Everest, followed online coverage each season, and watched a handful of films. However,



*Above All Things* is the first dedicated piece of Everest fiction I have read. Though I was intrigued by author Tanis Rideout's NPR interview plugging the book, it left me suspicious. Her qualifications, historical knowledge and mountaineering experience, seemed limited.

Nevertheless, I snatched up my public library's copy and gave it a chance. After all, I find the legend of ill-fated George Mallory as engrossing as any fan of Everest literature does. The chance to experience his story as historical fiction, and the story of his wife Ruth, was irresistible. From page one, I was encouraged by Ms. Rideout's narrative style. The delivery is delightfully straightforward and focused.

The novel's major drawback, initially at least, is the choice to limit Ruth Mallory's plotline to a single day. While it affords readers great insight into the plight of loved ones waiting for news, it means much of the story is excruciatingly stationary. Rideout compensates for this with increasing effectiveness as the novel progresses and the characters develop. In particular, she includes a pivotal supporting character named Will. His turbulent bond with George, revealed in flashback, and the exquisite affection he exhibits for Ruth in the present, provide tension and flow to scenes that would otherwise be nothing but relentless waiting.

After a slow start, I read the latter two-thirds of *Above All Things* in a single day. This is comparable to my experience with other Everest books. Even readers get summit fever. As Rideout and her characters press into situations undocumented by history, she keeps the novel on task by exploring post-war national angst, as well as the competing pulls of familial commitments and personal quests. By her own admission, Rideout takes some significant liberties with the facts but does so for the sake of effective storytelling. Her depiction of the final summit bid is mesmerizing. At any time, this book is on the verge of plummeting into schmaltzy romance. Yet, through good writing, empathetic characters, and with the help of an irresistible legend, Rideout offers up a novel well worth reading.

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### **Vikki VanSickle says**

I met the author of this book at an event last year and was thrilled to see it out in stores, and with such a beautiful cover treatment. I loved the dual-narrative of the book, which alternated between an ill-fated climbing expedition by George Mallory and his team and a day in the life of his wife, Ruth, who is waiting for his return with their three children.

I was worried I wouldn't enjoy the George sections because Mountain climbing and traditional adventure stories do not interest me in any way. However, the trip is just as much about the conflict and group dynamics among the men who are climbing together as it is about the incredibly harsh and unwelcoming Mount Everest. The psychological drama is fascinating, particularly as they get closer to the summit and exhaustion, starvation, and the high altitudes start to play games with the men's sanity.

I adored Ruth and her quiet struggle and Rideout's portrayal of the children and how they each miss their father and act out at their mother felt heart-breakingly accurate.

More than an adventure story or piece of historical fiction this felt like a love story in the grandest tradition: romantic, sensual, imperfect, and ultimately thwarted. Already Rideout feels like a seasoned and accomplished writer, an artist so at ease with language that this could have been her fifth or tenth novel. Look out for this during award season!

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## **Kathryn says**

Three word review: Romantic, disjointed, slow.

While I liked reading *Above All Things*, I don't think it's a stand-out book or one that I will really think much about again. The characters of George and Ruth really held the book together. The narrative felt flaky but the well-developed characters really drove it along and made me want to keep reading. You can really feel the connection between George and Ruth and understand how in love they are. Their children too, have very sweet personalities and George's climbing team were also very well-written, each with their own distinct nature.

I liked that the chapters alternated between George and Ruth, thus keeping a balance between them. They had separate voices which suited their characters, helped by George talking in third person and Ruth in first. However, I didn't like how *Rideout* played with time throughout the book. George went through weeks – maybe months – but Ruth only through one day. This didn't seem very natural and bugged me, increasingly so as it neared the climax and time felt so uneven.

I also disliked the points in George's chapters when the narrative switched to George's climbing partner Sandy. The book, to me, was about love and the intertwined lives of George and Ruth. Sandy felt like an unnecessary third-wheel whose life I didn't really care about and who seemed to be getting in the way of the supposed hero.

Perhaps my hopes were too high for this book. Reading the synopsis, I felt excited. The 1920s: in my mind a glamorous decade (maybe because I just watched *Gatsby*). The setting, too, on Everest sounded exciting and adventurous. However, when I read it I couldn't connect with the story; with George's expedition. Interspersed every few pages were flashbacks and memories. While these did build complex characters, it also broke the flow of the story, and detracted from the excitement and building tension. I didn't want random paragraphs of information about their last ten years. I wanted adventure.

As a result of the disjointed narrative, I didn't feel as though I was on Everest with George, or in Cambridge with Ruth. I think the book would've been enriched by *Rideout* explaining more about how Everest looked and what it was like to be there, so that I could better imagine what George and his team were going through. The detail and factual knowledge were there, just not necessarily in the right places.

*Above All Things* was readable and enjoyable at the time but didn't come without its annoyances. I was so desperate to enjoy it, but I couldn't. It's worth a read if you're interested in 1920s culture and history (it seemed pretty factually accurate) but it was nothing amazing. I'm going to give it 54%. Thinking back over it, all my mind says is "it was okay". Nothing special or exciting.

This review was originally posted on my blog: <http://anabundanceofkathryn.blogspot...>

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## **Carolyn Taylor-Watts says**

This is a powerful book - indeed, harrowing is the word, yet it is also tender. Thought-provoking, it raises philosophical questions about risk and great sacrifice, about what is worth cost, time, pain, suffering - even death, especially death. Many are the reasons given, including those used to justify cost, and the potential loss

of lives. When George Mallory is asked why he would leave his wife and three children for extended periods of time and the possibility that he may never return, all so he can climb a mountain - well, Mt Everest - he says, "Because it's there."

This story is exquisitely well written and echoes long after one puts it down.

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## **Lori Anaple says**

I went into this book not knowing that it was based upon a true story. I think that added to my enjoyment of it. It has always interested me, this fascination with Everest, and to combine that with the first expeditions, I was hooked.

Juxtaposed in the story are the tales of George who feels the need to conquer the mountain, and his wife. How does one be married to a man that loves not only her but an object? We read their love story positioned with such grace within each of the protagonists. We see Ruth, so stoic and brave on the outside, but yet on the inside she is a mess.

I mean, really, if it is another woman you are competing with things would be different, right? But what if that competition comes from a quest that you don't understand?

I found myself alternating between hope that he would make the climb and conquer his beast and hoping that he would realize what is important is sitting at home waiting for him. The author did a great job of imposing learned information (from recovering George's body) and researching effects of altitude. The hallucination sequences fit into everything I have read. Although we will never know the outcome, the pages of this book are realistic.

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