

As Gagne writes, “Back then, there were no cell phones for you to text loved ones, call 911, or have your phone pinged in hopes of determining your location. There were no handheld Global Positioning Systems (GPS), no devices to allow others to track your route from afar, no personal emergency beacons (PLB).” At that point, “it was time to hunker down,” hopefully, in a place where rescuers would find you.

Gagne chronicles the four-day rescue mission in granular detail. Some readers may be exhausted by the abundance of information uncovered by Gagne’s exhaustive research. *The Lions of Winter* covers a lot of ground in 450 pages. Although this dramatic tale has been told many times by writers and on film, readers will still find the updates on Batzer and Herr surprising. I will leave that to the readers to discover.

—Steve Fagin

109° Below

A film directed by Nick Martini

Stept Studios, 2024

Running time: 13:49

ACADEMY AWARD–WINNING FILM PRODUCER SARAH STEWART HAS TURNED her gaze on New Hampshire’s Mount Washington with this documentary, which offers a glimpse into the expertise and sacrifice of the White Mountains region’s Mountain Rescue Service through the retelling of the infamous incident from January 1982 that *The Lions of Winter* (see previous review) also examines.

Only 17 at that time, Hugh Herr and 20-year-old Jeff Batzer had no trouble ascending the ice route Odell’s Gully in Huntington Ravine, but then they got lost in a snowstorm and spent three freezing days in the Great Gulf Wilderness. “At a certain point we gave up all hope,” Herr says in the film.

On the fourth day, by luck, they were discovered by a recreational snowshoer. Herr lost both his legs below the knee to frostbite, and he would have to live with the fact that a volunteer rescuer named Albert Dow had died in an avalanche while trying to find him (see *Appalachia*, Winter/Spring 1982). A memorial photo of Dow hangs today in the Appalachian Mountain Club Pinkham Notch Visitor Center.

“To me that was just the lowest point in my entire life, hearing that a fellow climber had died while searching for Jeff and I,” Herr recalls in the film.

Driven to do something with his life, Herr rededicated himself to climbing, pushing the limit of what was deemed possible on prosthetics. He then committed his intellect to reinventing the very field of prosthetics, earning a master's degree in mechanical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a PhD in biophysics from Harvard University before starting the MIT Media Lab's Biomechatronics Group.

Profiles of Herr have appeared everywhere from *Outside* to *The Economist* during the past decade. In 2011, *TIME* magazine named him the "Leader of the Bionic Age." His 2014 TED Talk has more than 15 million views. In 2022, the PBS series *Nova* dedicated a 90-minute episode to Herr's story (see *Appalachia*, "Alpina," Winter/Spring 2023). In 2024, *The New Yorker* devoted a seven-page spread to his revolutionary work in pioneering brain-controlled prostheses.

Of all mountaineering accidents and rescues on Mount Washington, Herr's story is one of the most retold because of its incredible redemptive arc. Given the ample coverage, it would have been nearly impossible for *109° Below* to break new ground. Rather, the film's power is in its stunning footage from Mount Washington and its inclusion of several MRS volunteers. It was directed by Nick Martini and produced by Lex Hinson and Sarah Stewart, who also produced the Oscar-winning short documentary *The Queen of Basketball* (Breakwater Studios, 2021).

109° Below includes the perspective of Joe Lentini, one of the dozen MRS volunteers who went out to find Herr in 1982; he still volunteers with the 55-member MRS as a team leader. Another interviewee is Alexa Siegal, who joined MRS about seven years ago. (Siegal is the fiancée of *Appalachia* committee member Michael Wejchert, who is a former president of MRS.)

We see Lentini and Siegal hiking above treeline in near-whiteout blizzard conditions and bracing against hurricane-force winds. During the film shooting, in fact, temperatures reached a windchill of -109 degrees Fahrenheit, the coldest ever recorded in North America. "We've all kind of pushed the limits at times, and that's kind of how you learn, too," Siegal says in the film.

In an online screening Lentini hosted for the Mount Washington Observatory in November 2024, Lentini admitted that for years he hated Herr, whose actions had inadvertently led to Dow's death. "And then I realized that I *was* him," Lentini said. "I just got away with it."

I can relate to that humbling realization. A decade ago, on my first winter hike to Harvard Cabin below Huntington Ravine, I got lost and fell into an icy river because I was carrying a 40-year-old map that appeared to

recommend a circuitous (and untrod) route. A year later, after leading my small party into a whiteout blizzard above the treeline, my young cousin actually said, “I want to die with Mommy.” Or there was the time my crampon fell off while I was traversing an icy slope of Mount Washington. Or when I took a 20-foot leader fall on Cannon Mountain and decked. So many times, I was lucky to get away with it.

While I personally have never had to call on MRS, I have had the chance to see those volunteers moving in the mountains, and they’re an impressive crew. Last summer, as I was finishing an exhausting climb on Cathedral Ledge in North Conway with a buddy, we shared a belay ledge with none other than Siegal, who was out for a casual climb between nursing shifts at the local hospital.

As we exchanged typical climber banter, we heard noise from across the cliff face. We looked over and spotted a cliff-top tourist hurling rocks and tree limbs over the edge, and the objects were whizzing within feet of another group of climbers midway up the cliff. Someone was about to get seriously hurt. Without pause, Siegal directed a fierce series of yells at the thrower, and he stopped. She shook her head in frustration. (At the top of the cliff, several signs say, “No throwing objects. Climbers below.”)

As I huffed and puffed up a final short pitch to the tourist overlook, Siegal was heading in the opposite direction, rappelling further down the cliff face to do laps on some much-harder climb. It was reassuring to know that she and other MRS volunteers were out there, looking out for us all.

—*Stephen Kurczy*

Losing the Garden: The Story of a Marriage, a Suicide, and a New Life of Self-Discovery

By Laura Waterman

SUNY Press, 2025, 249 pages

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WE CLIMB MOUNTAINS PARTLY BECAUSE OUR LIVES ARE COMPLICATED AND mountains, though dangerous, are not. Mountains are what they seem. Human beings, rarely.

I recognize the irony in a psychiatrist reviewing the reissuing of *Losing the Garden*, originally published in 2005 by Shoemaker & Hoard and out of print for many years. The memoir covers life with Waterman’s vigorous, visionary, witty, troubled, rageful, suffering, and suicidal husband Guy