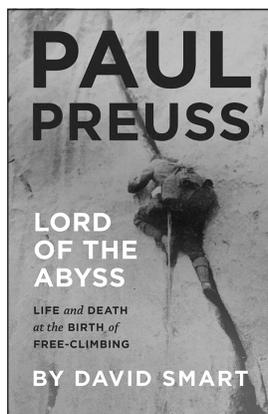


with nature.” Yes, seeking equilibrium instead of competition, and sometimes in the harshest conditions. The landscape for one landscape painter was so cold that her paint froze before it could hit the canvas.

Many of these waymakings occur in places the rest of us won’t manage to climb, hike, swim in, camp by, tarry near, or gaze at. Sometimes the names alone are exercise: Ambleside and Troutbeck, Dollywaggon Pike and Hermannsdalstinden, Clogwyn y Garnedd and Higgarr Tor. Twisting your tongue around the syllables might be adventure enough.

It speaks to the integrity of the editors—and of their collaborative spirit—that royalties from the book will be split between a rape crisis charity and the John Muir Trust. There is no personal profiteering, and though it’s always nice to see your name in print, the writers, cartoonists, photographers, and painters here seem to have nothing to prove in their travels to anyone but themselves. In the ego-driven times of today, nature for the sheer love of it is a gentle relief. “I’m happiest walking upstream,” muses one solitary brook-wader who prefers countercurrent direction. She means it literally, of course, but if nature offers a metaphor, we must take it and run.

—Elissa Ely



**Paul Preuss: Lord of the Abyss**

*By David Smart*

*Rocky Mountain Books, 2019, 248 pages.*

*ISBN: 978-1-77160-323-2. Price: \$32 (hardcover).*

**Emilio Comici: Angel of the Dolomites**

*By David Smart*

*Rocky Mountain Books,*

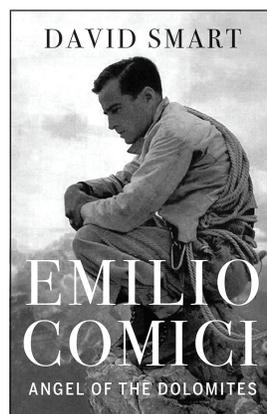
*2020, 248 pages.*

*ISBN: 978-1-77160-456-7.*

*Price: \$32 (hardcover).*

THE ANGEL. THE DEVIL. AND THE LORD. THESE three characters ring out from David Smart’s new duo of rock-climbing biographies set in the early twentieth century.

The “angel of the Dolomites” was Emilio Comici, an Italian known for his graceful climbing



and compassion toward other alpinists. The “devil of the Dolomites” was Tito Piaz, who looked somewhat demonic with his “craggy face and piercing eyes” and was said to have made a Faustian bargain that enabled his hard and dangerous climbing. The “lord of the abyss” was Paul Preuss of Austria, who climbed unroped and “dominated the rock like no other, with ideals, chivalry, and speed.”

These vertical pioneers overlapped in the mountains of eastern Europe in the early 1900s, pushing alpinism to previously unimaginable heights and forcing the climbing community to rethink the spirit and ethics of their burgeoning sport in ways that are still echoing. In these meticulously researched books, Smart—the founding editor of *Gripped* magazine—weaves mountaineering history and European politics to give overdue recognition to the angel, the devil, and the lord.

These three climbers were among the first to ask: What is the right way to climb? Who decides? What is cheating, and is it ever okay to cheat? Smart asks the reader to consider: Where do free-spirited ideals meet the hard realities of politics and war? Who and what determines the legacy of a climber’s life?

The elder of the three was Piaz, born in 1879 near the Dolomite Mountains. He first made a name for himself at age 20 with a solo ascent of the 600-foot-tall Winkler Tower (5.7\*), one of the Vajolet Towers. His most daring climb was in 1910, when he soloed the first ascent of the Piaz Crack (5.7), part of a 600-foot-long route up Punta Emma in the Dolomites.

Then along came Preuss, born in 1886, who said Piaz was climbing wrong. Real climbing was done without the pitons and ropes that Piaz had relied upon for aid and protection. In 1911, Preuss completed the first solo, ropeless ascent of the 2,000-foot-tall West Face of the Totenkirchl (5.8), considered the hardest rock climb in the Alps at the time. Days later, he soloed the 1,000-foot-tall East Face of the Campanile Basso (5.8) *and down-climbed the same way*. (The route was not repeated by anyone with or without ropes for more than a decade.)

After climbing the Campanile Basso, Preuss took refuge at the Vajolet hut, where Piaz was the longtime caretaker. As the men traded stories over bottles of wine, Piaz told an increasingly rowdy crowd that Preuss had seized the mantle of top climber. When Preuss demurred, Piaz took out a pair of pistols and challenged him to a gunfight unless he accepted the compliment. In that standoff, Piaz was announcing that climbing had a new champion, albeit one who was proving difficult to follow.

Decades before Royal Robbins chopped dozens of bolts on El Capitan in Yosemite and a full century before the climber Hayden Kennedy removed 125 bolts from a route up Cerro Torre in Patagonia, Preuss was the first elite climber to rage against artificial means of ascent. He not only eschewed pitons, he frowned on ropes and rappelling. “If you cannot climb down,” Preuss said, “you should not climb up.” There was a romantic purity to his ethics. To him, “mountains were to be accepted just as they were,” Smart writes. “To use pitons and ropes was to sin against the truth.”

In a counterintuitive way, Preuss was trying to increase mountain safety by forcing climbers to be self-reliant. Back then, hemp ropes were unlikely to hold big falls. The leader carried a hammer and dozens of pitons that were tediously pounded into cracks. Before the advent of the carabiner in 1921, the only way to secure into a piton was by untying the rope, threading it through the piton ring, and re-tying. It was all so dangerous and insecure that it was almost safer to climb solo—which was Preuss’s point. Without ropes or pitons, he argued, climbers would proceed with more caution. (It’s not such a crazy idea. Research has shown that wearing a bicycle helmet, for example, leads cyclists to take more risks.)

Even among climbers who disagreed with Preuss about the use of pitons and ropes (which was most), there was an appreciation for how he drew “a distinction between their use and abuse,” according to Smart. If everyone couldn’t agree on the right way to climb, Preuss did convince his peers that there was a wrong way.

Then along came Comici, who had to contend with the legacies of the devil and the lord as he proved himself in the 1930s. The youngest of the three men, Comici found himself wading into questions of ethics: Did he place too many bolts? Did he rely on rope tricks to ascend?

As a way of vanquishing critics and self-doubts, Comici took up the solo path forged by Piazz and Preuss. In 1937, Comici soloed the Fehrmann Dihedral (5.7) on the 1,000-foot-tall pillar of Campanile Basso. When he signed the summit log, he saw the name of the only other person to solo the route: Preuss, in 1911. Comici then outdid Preuss by completing the hardest solo ever, on the 1,800-foot-tall north face of Cima Grande (today rated 5.10+). The feat would be unrepeated for 24 years.

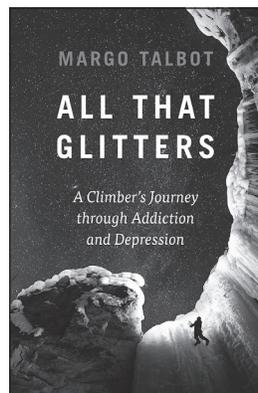
There is much to enjoy in these two books, which both received accolades at the Banff Mountain Book Competition. They tackle sticky issues such as how Preuss dealt with anti-Semitism and how Comici idolized the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. Smart offers surprising discoveries,

such as how Preuss climbed with the children of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud.

One complaint I have is that Smart did not include the grades of these century-old climbs according to the Yosemite Decimal System, so I was constantly checking Mountain Project and SummitPost to get a better appreciation for the bold climbing that was done with rudimentary equipment and “basketball shoes.” It also would have been helpful to have more context into how these figures fit into the greater historical arc of climbing. Passing mentions of Alex Honnald seemed to have been hastily added, and there was no mention of New England’s Henry Barber and Canada’s Peter Croft, two of the greatest solo free-climbers and logical extensions of Preuss and Comici.

Given how neatly these two books fit together, I wondered why I wasn’t reading one big book that pulled together the lives of these pioneers. I only hope that Smart will deliver more. Preuss, the lord of the abyss, died in 1913 while soloing. Comici, the angel, died in 1940 when his rope frayed. Only the devil lived to old age.

—Stephen Kurczy



**All That Glitters: A Climber’s Journey through Addiction and Depression**

*By Margo Talbot*

*Rocky Mountain Books, 2020, 186 pages.*

*ISBN: 978-1-77160-433-8. Price: \$25 (paperback).*

MARGO TALBOT’S SEARING MEMOIR IS A SIREN call to untold numbers of people: Heed the hidden maladies that lurk beneath the surface. People aren’t always what they project to the world, just as the glittering ice that Talbot dedicates her life to climbing can be different than it appears. Strike that apparently solid uniform ice with an ax, and cracks spread every which way, to the core.

Talbot emerged a climber after decades of depressive episodes and destructive behavior. “I had come to understand that depression was an internal struggle on an invisible battlefield,” Talbot writes late in her memoir. “While my physically injured peers were being taken out to luncheons and showered with books and gifts to keep them busy in their convalescence I hunkered down for another solo journey into the depths of my own psychic hell.”