

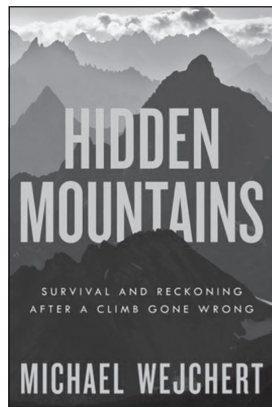
including our own human survival, are completely ignored. One of my favorite images is a round window through which she views backyard nature, like a mandala, that becomes symbolic—the circle of life, an orb like our planet.

I turned down dozens of pages with passages that moved me. Her personal bobcat observations truly resonated, as I have had several recent bobcat encounters in my own backyard, including one with a mother whose three young kittens scampered behind her. It is disturbing how many people fear wild animals and put up fences, physically and emotionally, instead of welcoming nature into their backyards. As wild areas shrink, wildlife encounters and concerns increase—whether a raptor or songbird, cottontail, coyote, opossum, fox, or deer.

Kumar vividly and eloquently describes her own encounters, sharing them in ways that encourage readers to simply pay more attention. Nature is talking to us, if only we would listen. In a search for goshawks, for example, she finds the land surrounding their nesting site has been clear-cut. And she writes of the curlew, one of dozens of animals that require grassland habitat. In her search, she learns that people shoot them “for fun.”

In her explorations and searches for birds, she discovers more about herself and her own relationship with nature, and the interconnectedness of all living things. In a detailed, compelling, but not preachy way, Kumar shares her own heightened awareness of the destructive, ongoing, and in some cases irreversible impacts of human activities.

—Margarett Jones



Hidden Mountains: Survival and Reckoning After a Climb Gone Wrong

By Michael Wejchert

Ecco, 2023, 256 pages.

ISBN: 978-0-06-308552-7. Price: \$28.99 (hardcover).

HIDDEN MOUNTAINS STARTS AS A SIMPLE STORY OF two Boston couples—John Gassel and Alissa Doherty, Emmett Lyman and Lauren Weber (a pseudonym)—falling into climbing and falling in love. Five chapters in, the book takes a surprising turn when they meet David Roberts, a famous

mountaineer and author or co-author of more than 30 books about climbing and mountaineering.

In his early 70s, Roberts pushes the younger climbers to break away from guidebooks and explore new peaks, as he had once done. At his relentless urging, in 2018 the couples embark on a climbing expedition to Alaska's "unexplored and remote" Hidden Mountains. They barely made it out alive.

Woven into that narrative is still another story: how author Michael Wejchert, also under the tutelage of Roberts (who died in 2021), intersected with those couples as he evolved from Connecticut suburbanite to international mountaineer and chair of New Hampshire's storied Mountain Rescue Service. In an exciting narrative that stretches from North Conway's International Mountain Climbing School to Alaska's aptly named Hidden Mountains, "one of the most difficult to get to ranges on the planet," Wejchert explores the mentor-mentee relationship in mountaineering while giving a clear-eyed look at the hard-nosed logistics and contentious ethics around search-and-rescue operations. (Roberts and Wejchert have each contributed to *Appalachia*, and Wejchert is on the Committee on Appalachia, this journal's editorial committee.)

"The Hidden Mountains were something unique in modern climbing, or even Alaska climbing, a holdover from that era when alpinism shared more DNA with polar exploration than CrossFit gym culture," writes Wejchert. "Instead of a well-documented mountain, here existed mile after mile of mountains that no one had stood on top of."

Getting there from Anchorage required flying in two bush planes, then sloggng six miles through thick brush with 500 pounds of gear. Along with a shotgun to ward off grizzly bears, the couples carried two DeLorme inReach satellite phones—a crucial decision. In bringing those inReaches, the climbers were subtly rebuking their mentor's black-and-white approach to cell phones and other gadgets, which Roberts had called "get-out-of-jail-free cards." Such technology allowed people to be "rescued from their own incompetence" while putting the lives of rescuers at risk, as Roberts wrote in the *New York Times* in 2012. In this journal, I've written about my own opposition to taking such technology into the backcountry ("Do Cell Phones Belong in the Mountains?" Summer/Fall 2022).

But when the couples' expedition goes awry, Roberts is forced to question whether he pushed the young climbers too hard. The expedition leaves one person quadriplegic, and worse would surely have happened if the team hadn't brought along the rescue communications technology that Roberts had condemned. The book subtly asks, When pushing protégés to seek greater challenges, how much should a mentor warn of the associated dangers? If that mentor comes from a pre-cell phone era when going into the wilderness

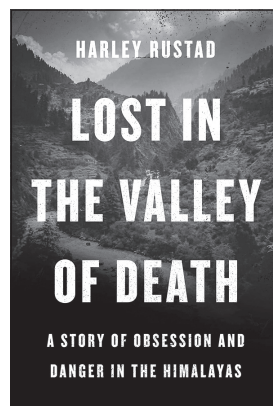
meant going off-line and being entirely self-reliant, how can followers reconcile their own use of civilization-anchoring and potentially lifesaving communications technology?

Wejchert balances his enthusiasm for the outdoors with his own sobering experience in search and rescue. He notes how, on a trip to Denali National Park, while “grappling with a dangerous, rotten ice pitch on a peak called the Eye Tooth,” his own inReach began chirping madly when his fiancé, back in New Hampshire, wanted to know where to find a spare printer ink cartridge. He mentions how, while on assignment for the magazine *Rock and Ice* to the Karakoram mountains in 2018, he discovered that one-third of professional alpine expeditions in Pakistan were calling for rescue, suggesting that many mountaineers were too quickly reaching for those “get-out-of-jail-free” cards.

And yet, Wejchert also cites ample examples—including the Hidden Mountains expedition—of when a simple communication device expedited rescue missions and saved lives. The debate should not be around whether to bring such technology into the mountains, he says, but rather about how to pay for the rising costs of expensive rescue missions.

“Like it or not, someone’s going to try and get you if you’re injured or stranded in the mountains,” writes Wejchert, who is also a contributor to *Alpinist*, the *American Alpine Journal*, and the *New York Times*, and who co-authored the updated edition of *Yankee Rock and Ice* (Stackpole Books, 2018) that Guy and Laura Waterman first published in 1993. “The era of total, mandatory seclusion is long gone. Gone, too, is any ethical argument about communication. Instead, it’s time to talk about how to better improve a rescue system that will, if trends continue, be strained to a breaking point.”

—Stephen Kurczy



**Lost in the Valley of Death: A Story of
Obsession and Danger in the Himalayas**

By Harley Rustad

Harper, 2022, 304 pages.

ISBN: 978-0-06-296596-7. Price: \$29.99 (hardcover).

IN 2016, AN AMERICAN DISAPPEARED WHILE HIKING in the Himalayan foothills of northern India. This in itself was unremarkable. Police had tallied the names of at least two-dozen foreigners who

had gone missing in the Parvati Valley during two decades, contributing to the region's moniker as the Valley of Death.

But this American, Justin Alexander Shetler, was a minor travel star who had tens of thousands of followers across Instagram, Facebook, and his blog called Adventures of Justin. One website had dubbed him “World’s Coolest World Traveler,” and another had named him one of “13 Inspiring Travelers to Watch in 2016.” Even Jonathan Goldsmith, the actor who appeared in “The Most Interesting Man in the World” commercials for Dos Equis beer, had once told Shetler, “I think you might *actually* be the most interesting man in the world.”

So when the 35-year-old vanished, it set off a yearslong investigation that rose to the level of the U.S. Embassy and India's external affairs ministry—and sparked the interest of Canadian journalist Harley Rustad, whose meticulously researched retracing of Shetler's steps serves as both a colorful travelogue and a cautionary tale.

Shetler was the one traveler who should have been able to get himself out of any scrape. A lifelong outdoors enthusiast, he had dropped out of high school to study survival skills and ecology at the Wilderness Awareness School in Duvall, Washington, and then at Tom Brown Jr.'s Tracker School in New Jersey. “People around him often likened him to Tarzan for his independence, Rambo for his fearlessness, or He-Man for his strength,” Rustad writes. Shetler also connected deeply with Hermann Hesse's 1922 novel *Siddhartha* about the life of a wandering ascetic during the time of the Buddha, and he came to believe “that ‘pushing the edge’ of ability and comfort would spark greater understanding of the world.”

Given those interests, “vagabonding” was a natural path. In 2013, at 32, Shetler quit a high-paying job with a tech startup in Miami so he could travel full time. Soon he was posting online about motorcycling across the United States, living with a Mentawai tribe in Indonesia, trekking into Nepal's remote Mustang Valley, and bicycling Bolivia's dangerous Yungas Road.

“Armed with an iPhone, an eye for photography, an alluring story, and a will to explore, he played the social media game well,” Rustad writes.

But those who personally knew Shetler questioned if his life was as satisfying as he portrayed online. One said it seemed Shetler was “desperately trying to fabricate a grand narrative for his life.”

The temptation to embellish his online persona likely pushed Shetler to take greater risks. In 2016, bedecked with a new tattoo of an eagle across his

chest, Shetler embarked on a solo trek to live for three weeks in a cave near the holy site of Kheerganga.

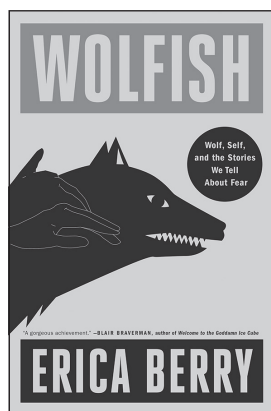
There Shetler met a self-proclaimed holy man who invited him on a weeks-long pilgrimage to Mantalai Lake, the source of the Parvati River. Shetler went, despite the explicit warning from Lonely Planet's *India* guidebook that backpackers in the Parvati Valley "avoid walking alone, and be cautious about befriending sadhus (holy people) or others wandering in the woods." This is where Shetler disappeared.

Through hundreds of interviews and two reporting trips to the Parvati Valley, Rustad wrestles with what might have become of Shetler. Did he slip and fall into the raging gorge? Was he robbed and murdered? Was he another victim of the rumored serial killer who has lurked in those forested hills for decades? Was his disappearance somehow linked to the drug trade in a valley known for some of the world's best hashish? Did Shetler overdose on another local drug, datura seeds, which can cause weeks-long delirium and psychosis?

Or, as some of Shetler's online followers believed, did he purposefully disappear in an effort to shed his ego and embrace a new level of spirituality and oneness with nature? Rustad gives arguments to each theory, turning *Lost in the Valley of Death* into a kind of choose-your-own-adventure Rorschach test.

"Maybe in a year's time he'll come back down," one friend tells Rustad. "Why not leave that little window open?"

—Stephen Kurczy



Wolfish: Wolf, Self, and the Stories We Tell About Fear

By Erica Berry

Flatiron Books, 2023. 432 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-250-82162-1 Price: \$29.99 (hardcover).

"THE WOLF IS A PIECE OF CULTURAL TAXIDERMISTRY . . . howling first and foremost in our heads." So writes Erica Berry in this eloquent book.

By the mid-twentieth century, wolves had been exterminated in America. To be clear, actual death by wolf attack is vanishingly rare, and yet this blunt-snouted, coarse-haired carnivore has remained an icon for threat and fear. To be even clearer, this leaves confusion about who should fear whom.