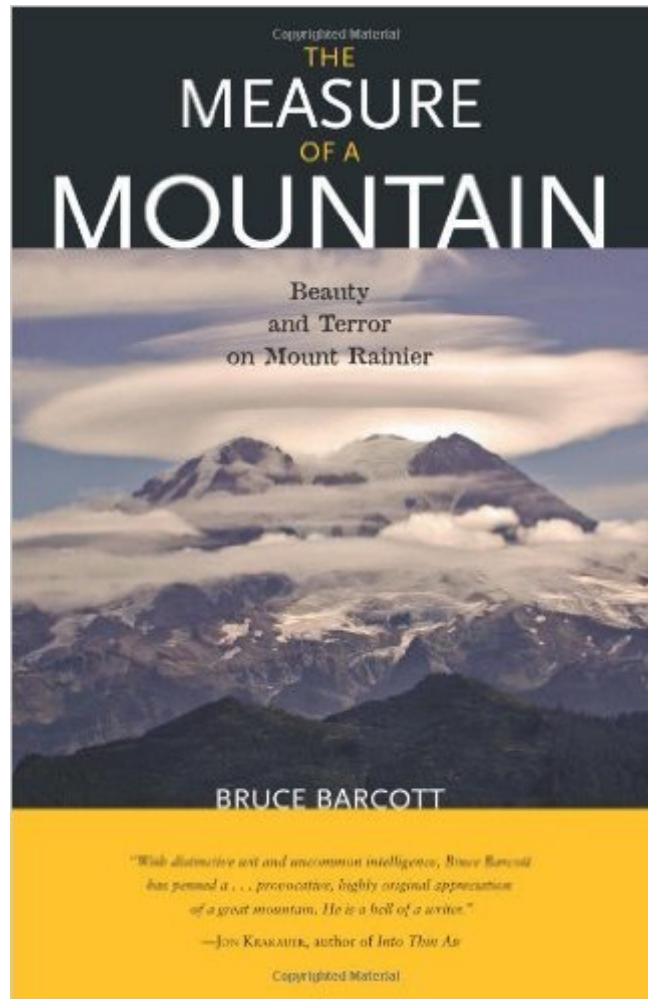


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Measure Of A Mountain: Beauty And Terror On Mount Rainier



Synopsis

In *The Measure of a Mountain*, Seattle writer Bruce Barcott sets out to know Rainier. His method is exploratory, meandering, personal. He begins by encircling it, first by car then on foot. He finds that the mountain is a complex of moss-bearded hemlocks and old-growth firs, high meadows that blossom according to a precise natural timeclock, sheets of crumbling pumice, fractured glaciers, and unsteady magma. Its snow fields bristle with bug life, and its marmots chew rocks to keep their teeth from overgrowing. Rainier rumbles with seismic twitches and jerks—some one-hundred-thirty earthquakes annually. The nightmare among geologists is the unstoppable wall of mud that will come rolling down its slopes when a hunk of mountain falls off, as it does every half century (and we're fifty years overdue). Rainier is both an obsession and a temple that attracts its own passionate acolytes: scientists, priests, rangers, and mountain guides. Rainier is also a monument to death: every year someone manages just to disappear on its flanks; imperiled climbers and their rescuers perish on glaciers; a planeload of Marines remains lodged in ice since they crashed into the mountain in 1946. Referred to by locals as simply "the mountain," it is the single largest feature of the Pacific Northwest landscape—provided it isn't hidden in clouds. Visible or not, though, its presence is undeniable.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I'm a climber, and I enjoyed the book. There were some bits that weren't terribly interesting, but much of it was. The chapter on meadow restoration was fascinating. Another chapter illuminates something I've long wondered about: why you so often see insects and spiders on the snow

thousands of feet above their apparent habitat. It'll be a while before I scoop up a handful of snow to suck on while climbing! The history is well done; the story the early history of the park were very interesting. And this is the most complete account of the Army airplane crash into the Tacoma Glacier that I've ever read. He mentioned a couple of other books that I've been grateful to learn about: "The unpublished journals of John Muir" (published now, of course) and "Mountain Fever", an account of the early ascents of Mt. Rainier, both of which I've got now, and one of which I've read. I feel I've learned something fairly profound from this book. He climbed to the summit and still doesn't appreciate the urge that drives people to do that sort of thing. He felt nothing at the summit, or at Camp Muir, except an emptiness. When I climb, it's always a deeply meaningful experience: last time I was on the summit, I called my wife on the cell phone, and was actually in tears. Each time I climb Mt. Rainier, even if it's just a hike up to Camp Muir, I feel on the descent a tremendous reluctance to leave, and keep looking back for one last look of the icefalls, the massive, serene, intricately shaped rock formations. For me, climbing Mt. Rainier is like visiting a lover, and each time I leave, to return to my life, my job, my wife, the question "but when will I get to see you again?" looms largest. So I might be expected to reject his experience, or his interpretation.

Bruce Barcott writes as if you were in the room speaking with him. His style is friendly, to the point (often blunt) descriptive and frequently flowery. He uses such descriptive phrases that I was often left rolling on the floor, tears of laughter flowing from my eyes. It's hard to categorize this book. It's not really about climbing mountains, though there is plenty of that. It's not really about geology, though there is plenty of that as well. It's not about ecology, though ecologists will certainly connect with Barcott, and it's not really about history, even though there are lots of interesting historical tidbits sprinkled throughout the book. The book is sort of a mish mash of all these subjects that Barcott ultimately ties in with the mountain that defines Washington State, and Seattle in particular: Rainier. It's hard to say what part of the book I enjoyed the most. I really enjoyed the stories about the mountain's "real" name. Even though I grew up in Federal Way, Washington I never knew about the battle waged by Tacoma in trying to rename Rainier with its original (or at least one of them) Indian name. There are other interesting historical footnotes like the military plane carrying marines home for the Christmas holidays that slammed into the mountain. And, of course, there are stories about early climbers like Muir. Barcott describes lots of his hikes around Rainier, particularly the wonderland trail, and he ends the book with an account of his climb to the summit. As it turned out, I had climbed Rainier in June of the same year Barcott climbed it (he climbed in July) and so it was interesting comparing my recollection of the trip with his. Barcott tries hard not to come across as the

typical macho, climb-or-die mountaineer.

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