

Magnificent failure on the slopes of K2

"Into The Clouds: The Race to Climb the World's Most Dangerous Mountain" by Tod Olson. Scholastic Focus, 2020

"Into the Clouds" chronicles an iconic mountaineering expedition: Charlie Houston's 1953 team's attempt to be the first to reach the top of the Himalayan peak K2. The team set out just after the news broke that Edmund Hilary and Tenzing Norgay had reached the summit of Mt. Everest, the only mountain taller than K2. Like other serious mountaineers, Houston's team knew that although K2 was 780 feet lower than Everest, its nearly inaccessible location, its brutal storms, and its rock and ice ridges made it even more difficult to climb. As Olson points out, worldwide celebrations of "man's conquest of the world's highest mountain" threatened to make the Houston team's attempt into a second best-effort.

In point of fact, Houston's expedition joined Hilary's in mountaineering legend.

Because it failed. Or

rather, because of the way it failed.

Olson, known to young adult nonfiction readers for his "Lost" adventure story series, opens his book with a prologue that describes the moment Houston and his team realized they couldn't achieve their goal. Three thousand feet from the summit, after seven painstaking weeks of trekking 330 miles on foot to K2's base and surviving the grueling climb that had brought them within reach of the top, the team was trapped at over 25,000 feet by one of the mountain's notorious blizzards. For six days, they huddled in their tents, enduring 100-mph winds and subzero temperatures. As the weather began to clear and the men emerged with

hopes of a final push to the summit, their youngest and strongest member, Art Gilkey, collapsed with blood clots in his leg. Houston, a doctor in "real life," knew that Gilkey had no hope of survival on K2. He also knew that since Gilkey couldn't walk, let alone climb, rescuing him meant carrying him down the terrifyingly steep terrain they had dealt with on the way up. But Houston and his team believed in what he called "the fellowship of the rope." Physically,



Tod Olson



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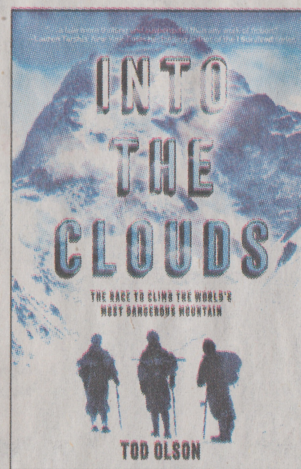
Laura Stevenson

the phrase referred to the way climbers roped themselves to each other, enabling them to save their comrades from falls, which on K2 meant plunges of thousands of feet. Metaphorically, it meant teamwork based on absolute trust. And so Houston's team decided to give up their hopes of conquest and save their comrade, ignoring the obvious dangers to themselves. Olson's readers follow their harrowing descent inch by

inch. "Into the Clouds" is a great read, even for people who have never climbed more than a hill. It is illustrated with breathtaking pictures of the fiercely inaccessible mountain, and it explains in vivid detail the problems that beset mountain climbing the Himalayas. Among these are frostbite and snow blindness; but even more serious is oxygen deprivation, which above 25,500 feet causes death if it's

endured for too long. At best, insufficient oxygen makes climbers unable to concentrate and make informed decisions. Behind Houston's expedition was the knowledge of a climber in a previous expedition who, because of poor decisions, was accidentally left stranded near the top of K2 for days without sufficient supplies. Both he and the men who set out to rescue him disappeared forever on K2's slopes. Memories of that story inspired the Houston team's fellowship of the rope, and their iconic rescue attempt has become a legend that Olson has now made available to his readers.

Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington and her most recent novels are set on Boyd Hill Road.



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