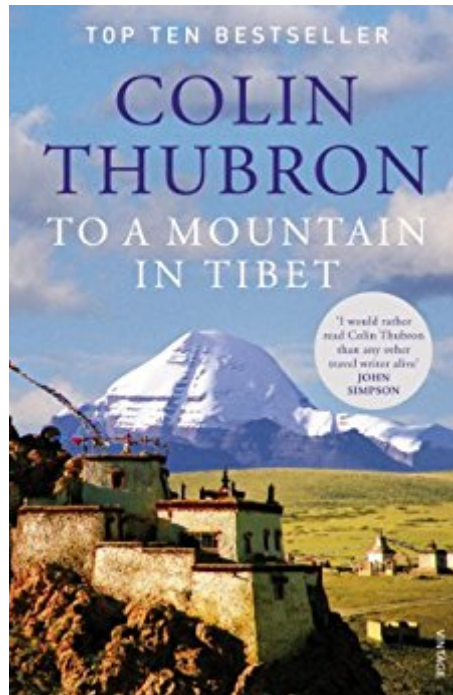




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To A Mountain In Tibet



Synopsis

TOP TEN BESTSELLER Mount Kailas is the most sacred of the world's mountains - holy to one fifth of humanity. Isolated beyond the central Himalayas, its summit has never been scaled, but for centuries the mountain has been ritually circled by Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims. Colin Thubron joins these pilgrims, after an arduous trek from Nepal, through the high passes of Tibet, to the magical lakes beneath the slopes of Kailas itself. He talks to secluded villagers and to monks in their decaying monasteries; he tells the stories of exiles and of eccentric explorers from the West. Yet he is also walking on a pilgrimage of his own. Having recently witnessed the death of the last of his family, his trek around the great mountain awakes an inner landscape of love and grief, restoring precious fragments of his own past. 'I would rather read Colin Thubron than any other travel writer alive' - John Simpson

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Customer Reviews

Though still quite active, as evidenced by this book, Colin Thubron seems to belong to an earlier generation of British travel writers, the one that included Norman Lewis, H.V. Morton, Freya Stark, and Patrick Leigh Fermor (who also is still living, age 95). They wrote with grace and erudition, and

with compassion, about exotic foreign places that were not served by any travel agencies. Take, for example, Thubron's latest book, *TO A MOUNTAIN IN TIBET*. The principal subject is a trek Thubron made to and around Mount Kailas, in western Tibet, in 2009. Accompanied by a guide and a cook, both Nepalese, he hiked from Simikot, Nepal to the Tibetan border, then took a Land Cruiser to Darchen in Tibet, from where he set out by foot on a kora, or circumnavigation, of Kailas. The trip was at altitude - from 8,000 feet to 18,600 feet - and much of it was along narrow trails perched hundreds of feet up the walls of sheer river gorges or up and over landslides of jagged scree. Thus, it met the criterion of old-fashioned travel books by being physically demanding. (And Thubron did it at age 70!) Mount Kailas is "the most sacred of the world's mountains". It is holy to Buddhists and Hindus and a host of related and precursor faiths or ways of life. It stands by itself, in splendid isolation and over 22,000 feet high, next to Lake Manasarovar (equally holy and where Mahatma Gandhi's ashes were scattered). It has never been climbed - due in part to technical difficulties but more to its remoteness and the reverence with which it is held by those who live in the area. But a circumnavigation of it is for many Hindus, Buddhists, and Tibetans what a pilgrimage to Mecca is for Moslems or to Jerusalem for Jews. Along the way to Mount Kailas, Thubron encountered plenty of exotic sights and experiences, more than enough for a classic travel book. For example: Tibetan monks watching a soccer game on television and rooting for Manchester United and becoming enraged at the referee; caravans of goats, each carrying on its back a saddlepack filled with salt from Tibet, which will be exchanged for grain on the return trip from Nepal; a monastery in a stone hut, where pilgrims crowd in and leave behind money, which a novice collects in a box labelled "Budweiser".

This is the fourth book of Colin Thubron's I've read and while they're all fascinatingly interesting and wonderfully crafted, this is probably my favorite because of how personal it feels. He retains from his earlier work the vivid pictures he paints for us of what he sees and encounters, adding to it in this case a fascinating exploration of the lore and beliefs surrounding the mountains and lakes he passes. Additionally, it's clear this trip has the added dimension of a personal pilgrimage as the author peels back a bit of the curtain to show glimpses of his family's past as he reflects on the passing of his last immediate family member. The reflections are wonderfully interwoven with both his physical journey and the legends of the territory through which he treks.

Thubron's touted as a master of the travel genre, and I agree. This tale immediately plunges you into the climb into the Himalayas, towards the Nepalese remoteness of Humla, on his way to the

sacred "spindle" of Hindus and Buddhists as the world's axis, the Kailas peak over the Tibetan border. He describes the scenes clearly, without sentiment, but with compassion as well as objectivity. The estrangement he feels, as a British hiker able to enter the realm where Tibetan exiles cannot in search of this pilgrimage site, deepens the resonance of his story. For instance, one guide's face "has the lemony blandness of a sumo wrestler's, faintly androgynous." A woman carries on her back a sick baby, "bundled like a sad, balding toy." His narrative deepens as he intertwines the story of his father, who hunted and served as a soldier in colonial India, and of his recently departed mother, for he must now figure out what to do with their love letters, dithering between destroying them and keeping them, for this is "how once-private things endure: not by intention, but because their extinction is unbearable." The combination of distance, as a rather reticent Englishman, and candor shows Thubron's commitment to convey the truth, seen and pondered, in his own journey inward as well as upward. He makes his own progress as a pilgrim, and the tale expands as the direction narrows. He tells of Sven Hedin and cuckoos, sky burial and evangelists. He follows earlier European explorers into this fastness, and it seems about as far away from the West as one may penetrate. Even here, mountaineers such as Reinhold Messner have failed to scale Kailas. Perhaps this represents the power attributed to its home as Mount Meru, the mystical palace of Brahma. It keeps an aura about itself, apart from the highest, now almost too-familiar peaks climbed further east along the fabled ranges. Thubron respects its meanings. This recalled for me Andrew Harvey's "A Journey to Ladakh" and Peter Mathiessen's "The Snow Leopard" in its combination of adventure and enlightenment, if on a more secular scale than those two seekers. Thubron efficiently sums up the Bon religion and Buddhist practices, Hindu lore and Chinese incursions, the fate of Tibet and the remnants of its monastic culture half-hidden at the tense international points on Nepal's intersection with China, just beyond Indian impact. The erosion of the slopes corresponds to the globalization that even his presence represents, at the frontier between where the ancients imagined heaven meets earth. I found this more invigorating than "Shadow of the Silk Road," which captured the excitement of the start of his last Asian trek but which also, fairly if dispiritedly, documented the lassitude that followed as he trudged westward. In this new travelogue, Thubron's interest seems restored, and for us restorative. He does not romanticize but he scrutinizes, and allows us to see what he does, recorded meticulously but conveyed freshly in vigorous prose.

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