

Fiva: An Adventure That Went Wrong

Gordon Stainforth

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‘So you had an epic then?’ The question, delivered in a flat Lancastrian accent to the Stainforth twins, must have seemed a statement of the obvious taken to absurdity. The tattered pair were two days late back at camp, they’d hardly eaten in that time, had fallen hundreds of feet, been hopelessly lost, Gordon had smashed his left knee – it looked, he says, like a Jackson Pollack abstract done on the side of a beach ball, and worse still, it was turning gangrenous and starting to smell. Yes, this is the story of an epic. A more pertinent question would have been, ‘Why aren’t you dead?’

Fiva (pronounced ‘fever’) is the name of a 6,000-foot route on Store Trollind in the Romsdal region of Norway. Stainforth’s subtitle, *An Adventure That Went Wrong*, speaks for itself; it also carries the flavour of laconic self-mockery that makes this book such a delight. The boys’ plight – they were just teenagers at the time – was dire, yet in retelling it Stainforth cannot resist drollery. His attitude to life (and death) epitomises that quip about the difference between Americans and the English: to Americans life is serious but not hopeless; to the English life is hopeless but not serious.

The Stainforths are as English as they come, two former public schoolboys from Knebworth in Hertfordshire; and, back in 1969, they were wonderfully naive: ‘We’ve climbed a couple of quite big mountains in the Alps with guides, and we’ve done dozens of rock climbs (last year) in North Wales and now we’re going to tackle the biggest rock wall in Europe – OK?’

It’s not a novel and both Stainforths are still alive and climbing so we know the book has a happy ending. However it unfolds as such a gripper that it would be churlish to go into detail over the plot.

Epics, of course, are standard fare of mountaineering narratives; what elevates *Fiva* is the manner of Gordon Stainforth’s telling of it. As with his superb photographic books – notably *The Cuillin* and *The Peak* – there is a sense of much careful forethought as to character of the final product. He didn’t just sit down and trot out an account, dramatic though it would have been. The book is written in the first person present tense, a bold move that has been skilfully carried off, and employs a smaller type size for the voice of his brother John when distant at the far end of the rope. Echoes from the cliffs and voices in Gordon’s head, spaced out with exhaustion, pain and hunger, are also cleverly conveyed.

For those of us of a similar age (the twins were born in 1949) there is also a good deal of gear nostalgia, Norwegian sweaters, Millarmitts, MOAC wedges and so on. Most glorious of all though is Stainforth’s evocation of the late 1960s through his zany use of song lines and titles. Looking over an abyss he turns a whiter shade of pale, without quote marks, which adds to the fun; Louis Armstrong, Del Shannon, the Beatles and more are drawn in. Gordon could be scripting a climbing version of *The Singing Detective*.

Fiva should, as publicists like to say, appeal to climber and non-climber alike. If there were any justice in the publishing world it would be a best seller, eclipsing *the Void*. But I can hear a doleful Gordon Stainforth adding, ‘there isn’t’. If so he’ll have to settle for the accolade of ‘a future cult classic’.

Stephen Goodwin