

THE BODECIA BOOK CLUB REVIEW

A Change in Altitude by Anita Shreve

It's the mid-Seventies and American newlyweds Patrick (a doctor) and Margaret (a photographer) are expats temporarily based in Nairobi, where Patrick is studying tropical diseases. Unable to find a home of their own, they end up lodging with British ex-pats, Diana and Arthur, and their two children. Over dinner and brandies it's decided that the two couples, along with a Dutch husband and wife, Saartje and Willem van Buskirk, should climb Mount Kenya

Margaret's sense of being an outsider intensifies as she finds herself attacked by red ants, burnt by the sun and left breathless by the lack of oxygen. It's Arthur, rather than her increasingly remote husband, Patrick, who recognises her plight - his flirtatious attentions provoking the story's central drama. Shreve thrives on depicting the conflict within relationships, and while it isn't perfectly executed, it's clear that this is where she really excels.

Halfway across the glacier – the ascent is described in nightmarish detail. Shreve has us on the edge of our seats as the six climbers inch their way through mud, ice and scree to the final summit. When one of the party slips to their death, the blame-game begins. Who is to blame? It is a tragedy that will, metaphorically, put Margaret and Patrick's marriage on ice.

That is Part One. Part Two explores the fallout from the accident, as Margaret's marriage comes under strain as a result. The Patrick and Margaret who come down the mountain are not the same couple who went up it, and it's Margaret's struggle to accept this and redefine her marriage that make up the meat of the book. While they try to recover from what happened on the mountain, Margaret begins to branch out and explore her own independence, and as a result begins to see the “real” Africa, often hidden from Western eyes. It's fair to say that the second part lacks some of the tension of the first, even though there is plenty going on – possibly too much – and at the end there are a few loose ends still needing to be gathered up.

But maybe that is the point: life does tend to leave loose ends.

Additionally, if you're looking for an introductory book on Africa, this is a great place to start.

We gave A Change in Altitude **3½ / 10**

The book we are now reading is **Your Next** by Greg Hurwitz

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