



# Student Reading & Discussion Guide

## Common Reading Program 2015 Pacific Lutheran University

**Featuring:**  
*Into Thin Air*  
by Jon Krakauer

As you read *Into Thin Air* this summer, we encourage you to use this reading guide to assist you in thinking deeply and critically about the book. While you will not turn in your responses, it will be an important tool to help you prepare for the small group **discussion you will have with a faculty member** and your peers.

**To be prepared and organized** for the small group discussion you should **make notes** of items of particular interest to you, **including page numbers** so that you can easily locate information **to support your claim/opinion** during the discussion.

## Theme: Audience & Style of Writing

### Background

Jon Krakauer traveled to Mt. Everest in the spring of 1996 on assignment for *Outside* magazine.

As a journalist and author with a mountain climbing background, Krakauer seemed a natural choice for the assignment. As Krakauer notes, the events that unfolded “left me badly shaken” (XV) and compelled him to write *Into Thin Air* just months after tragedy, in November 1996.

### Questions to consider

Is Krakauer clear about who he is writing his account for? Who does he say it is for? Does his writing style -- his word choice, his vocabulary, his fast-paced storytelling -- match up with his intended audience? Why might he have chosen to write the story the way he did, and how does the way he chose to present it affect you as a reader? How might the story Krakauer told have been different if he had waited longer to write it?

### Notes

## Theme: Body, Self, & Others

### Background

*Into Thin Air* contains numerous references to the physical demands placed on individuals attempting to summit Mt. Everest. Krakauer describes in detail the effects of the altitude and the extreme weather conditions on both himself and his fellow climbers.

### Questions to consider

What are some examples of physical hardships or illnesses that Krakauer mentions? How do the very bodily, physical challenges of ascending Mt. Everest impact the climbers' mental states, their decision-making, and their relationships with each other?

### Notes

## **Theme: Ethical Issues**

### **Background**

Krakauer is clear in his narrative that the reasons for attempting to climb Mt. Everest vary from person to person. Some people who attempt to ascend Mt Everest for apparently noble reasons find themselves challenged and make unethical choices; on the other hand other people who attempt the mountain with what some might judge as less than noble reasons find themselves challenged and yet respond ethically. These choices often have distinct implications for the individual, for the other members of the expedition, and for the environment itself.

### **Questions to consider**

What are some examples of how individuals in the book responded both ethically and unethically to the challenges they faced on Mt. Everest? How might the severity of these challenges have influenced what the climbers felt was appropriate, acceptable, or excusable? How did the international climbers treat each other? How did they treat the Nepalese Sherpas? How did the two groups treat the environment?

### **Notes**

## **Theme: Economics & Social Justice**

### **Background**

It is evident in Krakauer's account that finances play a significant role in an individual's ability to participate in a mountain climbing expedition. He is clear that some people who are ill-suited for expeditions still manage to finance their way to the summit. Krakauer also notes that the increasing number of international climbers on the mountain has had a significant impact on the local communities.

### **Questions to consider**

Identify and evaluate how class and status enter into Krakauer's narrative. How might these factors have shaped his understanding of the events? What role did money (and the subsequent sense of entitlement that goes along with it) play in the events that unfolded on Mt. Everest? How has the commodification of Mt. Everest changed the lives of the Sherpa communities?

### **Notes**

## Theme: Community

### Background

Jon Krakauer flew to Kathmandu as part of a team of climbers, but they were strangers to him before the climb. He writes that confidence in one's climbing partners and guides is essential; a knot tied incorrectly can mean the difference between life and death (40).

### Questions to consider

What examples do you find in the book of the bonds that formed between people? How do these bonds vary depending on the different levels of expertise or the role of the individuals (e.g. expedition leaders and climbers; guides and leaders)? How would you describe the relationships/bonds that develop between the visiting international climbers and the members of the Sherpa community?

### Notes

## Theme: Global Education

### Background

On 12 June, 2015, four tourists were jailed and fined for posing nude on Mt. Kinabalu in Malaysia and for verbally abusing guides who tried to stop them from violating what is for many Malaysians a sacred space. The hikers uploaded the photos of themselves on their social media sites as proof not only that they were on the mountain, but that they were on the mountain on *their terms*. This case—along with far too many like it—highlights complications that arise from casual global tourism, cultural arrogance, and narcissism, all factors addressed in Krakauer's account.

### Questions to consider

As a student entering into an institution that values global education, what about Krakauer's account makes you explore your own assumptions about responsibility towards land and values different from your own?

### Notes