

DANGER ON HIGH

In 1996, Mount Everest was the scene of one of the worst climbing disasters in history. Bizarrely, that only spurred more climbers and thrill-seekers into tackling the world's highest peak. Now a mountain of cash has turned Everest into a scene of prostitution, drug use, petty theft, murderous rages, unscrupulous guides, clueless climbers who endanger not only their own lives but also others, and more. The slopes are so crowded that climbers must walk past the dead and dying — sometimes out of callousness, sometimes because they have no choice and can barely save themselves.

Climber and journalist Michael Kudas demystifies Everest and tells of the dangers he faced when attempting to summit himself in his new book "High Crimes: The Fate of Everest in an Age of Greed" (Hyperion; \$24.95).

Climbing Mount Everest is usually seen as a noble, even spiritual experience. You really shatter that image by showing the impact of the climbers on the impoverished people that live there, the brutal and nasty in-fighting that plagues many teams and the Wild West lawlessness that dominates.

M.K.: It's myth-busting. So much that comes off the mountain is exaggeration at best. It's like the celebrity journalism that surrounds athletes now, except it's in a location so remote you're unlikely to be able to puncture anything they want to say.

One really important point you make is that this isn't just a story of innocent climbers being taken advantage of by thugs. In a lot of cases, this is also about inexperienced climbers who think they can summit Everest on the cheap — like your team in 2004 — and don't take responsibility for doing so safely or bother to check the credentials of people they're entrusting with their lives.

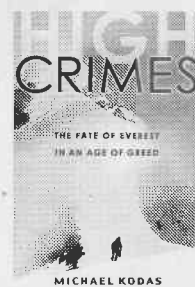
M.K.: I was blinded by this, too. You get an opportunity to be a part of an expedition to Everest and you put the blinders on and don't want to look at it too

closely because you're afraid you're going to lose this chance. Some people spend more time and diligence looking into the background of the person who is going to paint their house than the person they're going to be tied to on Mount Everest.

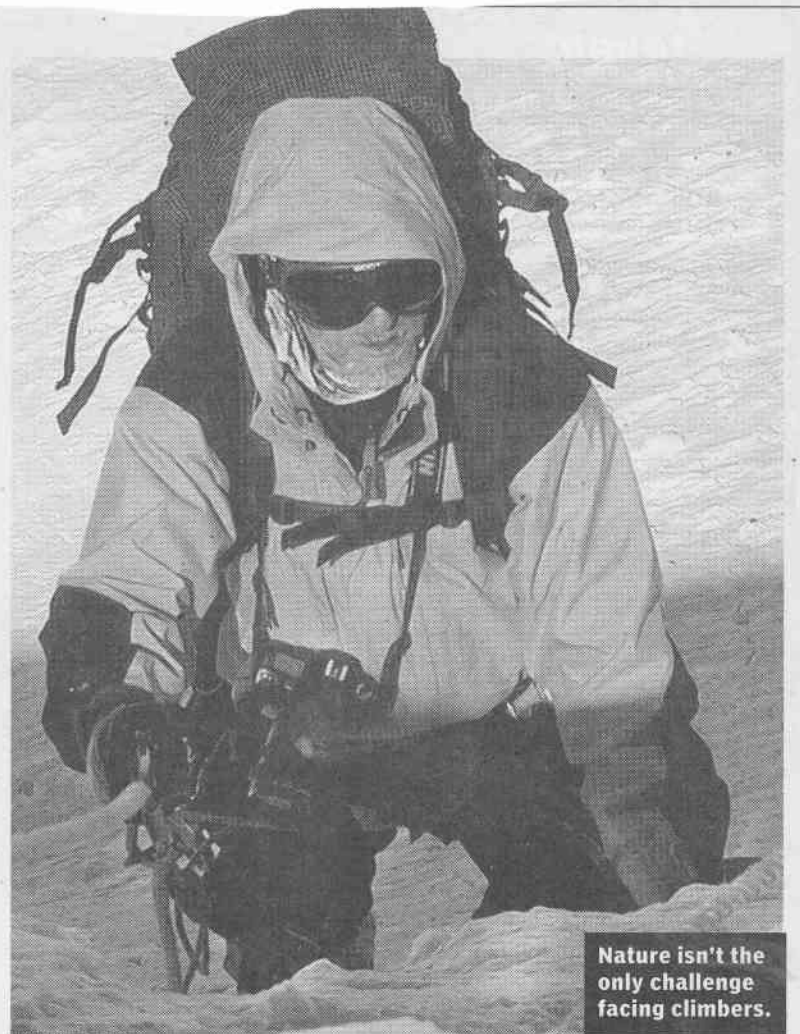
A positive review of your book in Outside magazine concluded that Everest is now a place "any sane person would avoid." Yet you went back in 2006 and tried and failed to summit again. Will you go back?

M.K.: I've said never, but as to whether that will stick I can't say.

Michael Giltz



**High Crimes:
The Fate of Everest
in an Age of Greed**
Michael Kudas
Hyperion, \$24.95



Nature isn't the only challenge facing climbers.

MICHAEL KUDAS