

BYRON SHIRE ECHO BOOK REVIEW No 3

Publication date: Random House Australia

Book Title: Dead Lucky

Author: Lincoln Hall

Reviewer: Howard Whelan

Everest is a graveyard littered with the bodies of friends. Beautiful Marty Hoey rests at the bottom of the North Face; Narayan Shresta, the joker, on the West Ridge. Rob Hall lies beneath the summit slopes and so it goes. Known by the Tibetans as Chomolungma, Mother Goddess of the Earth, the Earth's highest mountain can be a demanding mistress.

So last May when I picked up the phone in our Mullumbimby home to hear, "Mate, I have some dreadful news – Lincoln's dead", you'd think I'd be used to it, but the floor still dropped from beneath me.

I'd shared an Everest expedition with Lincoln Hall in 1984 and came away with an impression of a self-contained man with an acerbic wit and penchant for puns. Severe bronchitis put paid to his summit hopes, but he was key in helping those who reached the top to get down alive.

Since then he'd pursued an adventurous path: physically through rock-climbing and expeditions to remote parts of the world, professionally through journalism and filmmaking, personally through marriage and fatherhood and spiritually through Buddhism.

At 9 a.m. on 25 May 2006, in clear weather and seemingly good health, Lincoln reached Everest's summit. He spent 20 minutes on top and as he began his descent, he was struck by cerebral oedema, a form of high altitude sickness. For the next eight hours, four Sherpas struggled to bring him down, but without success. Late in the day Lincoln collapsed and was left for dead.

Just before sunrise the next morning, in one of the miracles of mountaineering history, American guide Dan Mazur and Jangbu Sherpa discovered Lincoln alive, "sitting cross-legged on the crest of the ridge at 8600 metres". He had taken his arms out of his down suit, pulled off his gloves and yet had somehow survived. His first words were, "I imagine you are surprised to see me here."

Surprised too were his family and friends, when late in the afternoon of 26 May, emails began to appear suggesting Lincoln wasn't dead at all! Live websites from Everest carried snippets of information that coalesced into fact. Within three days Lincoln was safely off the mountain, badly frostbitten but with an unbelievable tale to tell.

Dead Lucky is an extraordinary book, not just as a chronicle of the lost hours that took Lincoln from life to death and back again, but because it sets the miracle of his survival in several contexts. Lincoln explains what drew him back to the mountain, and is frank about his self-justification for leaving his wife, Barbara, and Dylan and Dorje, his two teenaged boys, to do so.

Everest 2006 was one of the deadliest and most controversial years ever, with more than 480 people reaching the summit and 11 deaths. Lincoln's account sometimes reads like that of a correspondent reporting from the battlefield.

When he comes across two bodies lying side by side, less than 40 metres below the summit, he writes, "I knew the names of other bodies I had seen on the mountain: Igor Plyushkin, David Sharp, Marko Lihteneker. And I must have passed, unaware in the dark, Vitor Negrete and Jacques-Hugues Letrange. Even Green Boots, the Indian man who had been lying half in a cave by the track for years, had some kind of identity. But I knew nothing about this pair."

Lincoln also writes passionately about life and the love that drove him to survive. The commitment he'd made to return to Barbara, Dylan and Dorje was the strongest thing that kept him alive.

I found most interesting was that after Lincoln had been "confirmed dead", he experienced a series of complex, vivid hallucinations. Even before he began writing *Dead Lucky* Lincoln had mentioned these to me and I was intrigued. When I first learned that Lincoln had "done a Lazarus", I'd put it down to his decades of yoga and meditation practice. I was only half-right.

Lincoln writes, "Meditation and hallucination are, effectively, opposites. Meditation is a stilling of the mind where thoughts no longer have control, while hallucination is the mind desperately scrambling for a foothold in a brain that is no longer doing its job properly. Hallucination was my friend on the mountain."

As a practising Buddhist, Lincoln believes that he "had been drawn into the first and second levels of death, as described in the Tibetan texts . . . From here I was able to turn back from my spiral through the levels of death." Buddhism gave him a spiritual road map to chart his passage across the membrane of life.

Dead Lucky is Lincoln's eighth book and his best. It will appeal not just to mountaineers, but to anyone with an interest in the journey of life and death. He writes beautifully of the impact his passing had on his family and friends and celebrates their joy in discovering he's alive. Not many authors have been delivered such a golden opportunity. Lincoln makes the most of it.

831 words