



# PETER ZUCKERMAN THE CLIMB UP

Former *Just Out* intern turned award-winning journalist, Peter Zuckerman, is now the co-author of the best-selling *BURIED IN THE SKY: The Extraordinary Story of the Sherpa Climbers on K2's Deadliest Day*. The book was recently nominated for the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award. *Men's Journal* called it a "work of obsessive reporting." More honors are no doubt on the horizon.

Zuckerman and Amanda Padoan tell the gripping story of the tragic 2008 climb of K2 in which 11 climbers died. The Portlander spent two years researching and writing the book, traveling the world to unravel the complicated story.

The author is brainy, candid, thoughtful, and clearly a master of the written word. But one-on-one what stands out is Zuckerman's "aw shucks" demeanor. Likeable he is. And somehow that makes *BURIED IN THE SKY* all the better.

**JK:** The last time I saw you, in person, you were a kid.

**PZ:** This is true.

**JK:** You were interning at *Just Out*, going to Reed College. And you were eating a sandwich.

**PZ:** I remember those days.

**JK:** What do you remember about that time in your life?

**PZ:** I remember... I had just come out, I had my first boyfriend, and I decided that I didn't want to be a scientist. I wanted to be a journalist. I went into the office of *Just Out* and said, "I want to be your intern." It was my first job. It was really exciting.

**JK:** At that time, what did you imagine your future to be, say, in 10 years?

**PZ:** I didn't really know what my future would be. I thought I was going to still be in school. I liked academia, so I was thinking, "I'm going to stay in school as long as possible."

**JK:** I've always wanted to ask an author who writes a book like *Buried in the Sky*, what's it feel like when you type the last word — in your case, it was "then it would begin again," the last words of the book on page 230 — and then you hit enter?

**PZ:** My feeling was "I've got a lot of revisions left to do." (He laughs) I might have finished the book but I haven't finished the editing and rewriting. I think to a large extent, how successful you are as a writer is how willing you are to continue to edit and rewriting until the pros are what you think are great.

**JK:** *Buried in the Sky* is very emotional. When I read it, I literally felt pain

in my stomach. Did you feel that writing it?

**PZ:** There are moments when this story is absolutely terrifying and horrifying. And all the more so because it's true. This really happened to people. And I definitely felt that way writing it. But where I really felt it was when I was interviewing people and they were telling me these stories. It was really a challenge to ask people questions about how they'd seen their loved ones die because in a lot of cases the characters are related to each other. So, ya, I really felt it. In the interviews there were a lot of tears...they were intense interviews.

**JK:** It surprised me that the men in the story, particularly the Asian men, were so emotional. It goes against the stereotype of these men. Did that surprise you?

**PZ:** It somewhat surprised me that they'd be so emotional, but the circumstances were so dramatic. And when they were on the mountain, they were oxygen-deprived, they hadn't eaten or slept for days. They were at their most elemental level. And I think that caused them to be much more emotional on the mountain. Off the mountain, these were really difficult circumstances they were under. For them to recount it, in a lot of cases, they hadn't told somebody what happened in the amount of detail they were telling me. I think anyone would be really emotional in those circumstances.

**JK:** Tell me about the moment you said to yourself: Yep, I'm quitting my job at *The Oregonian*. I'm going to go chase this story.

**PZ:** My cousin called me. She was really upset because her friends had died in the disaster — someone she was really close to, who had been there for her under really difficult circumstances. She called me and said, "Peter, I want you to quit your job at the *Oregonian*, and come with me to Nepal and Pakistan and we're going to find out what happened." And I said, "No, that sounds like a terrible idea." It seemed dumb for me to quit a job I really enjoyed and for me to spend several years trekking through remote regions of northern Pakistan that were technically off-limits to journalists; that the U.S. Embassy told me to stay away from. Especially when I'm a gay Jewish American.

And then I started looking into the story. This was a very compelling adventure story. You have people at their most elemental, clashing with each other when they need to get along. You have people making huge decisions that are going to affect themselves, and other people, under the worst of circumstances. They are stuck in the same tent. They are clashing with each other when their lives depend on each other.

It's rare that I've seen an adventure story that's this compelling. I like that these characters were not the kind of people that you bump into every day. It takes a unique personality to climb the most dangerous mountain. A lot of them have very big, larger-than-life, personalities and they pull off

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