

# 'Why?' 'Because it was there!'

*I can understand a text about mountaineering.*

- 1 **SPEAKING** Describe the photos and read the title of the lesson. Why do you think people attempt dangerous challenges like this? What qualities do you need to achieve them?

## Reading Strategy

In gapped text tasks, you sometimes have to choose carefully between two paragraphs and decide which is the most logical paragraph to fill the particular gap. Look for words and phrases which indicate the logical development of the text, e.g. adverbs of time and reason, words that express contrast, pronouns that point forwards or backwards to nouns, paraphrasing of vocabulary, repetition of names or ideas and the use of verb tenses.

- 2 Read the **Reading Strategy**. Read the text on page 59 before and after the first missing paragraph. Decide which paragraph, F or G, matches it. Explain your reasons.

- 3 Read the text again and match gaps 2–6 with the remaining paragraphs. There is one extra paragraph.

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

- 4 The text is the introduction by a famous mountaineer, Joe Simpson, to a book by another mountaineer, Heinrich Harrer. Find examples in the first five paragraphs of the completed text of the following devices that Simpson uses to draw the reader in and make them want to read Harrer's book.

- 1 emphasising his personal reaction to the book
- 2 talking about the effect it has had on his life
- 3 giving us a taste of highly dramatic or gruesome events without giving too much away about the story
- 4 using colourful dramatic language, with metaphors and similes
- 5 drawing a parallel with a book he himself has written
- 6 a rhetorical question



**A ▶** It is also impossible not to ask why they chose to do such a thing. Unfortunately the only way to understand the answer to that question is by going and doing it yourself. A climber would never ask such a question, and a non-climber would never understand the answer.

**B ▶** Today we still think about returning to this seminal mountain to complete our farewell ascent to a lifetime of mountaineering that was inspired, for me at least, almost entirely by reading *The White Spider*.

**C ▶** It leaves you with a haunted sense of wonder. As you close the book you are confused by the life-enhancing delight of climbing that shines through stories of the most appalling human experiences. It leaves you filled with apprehension and wondering what it would be like to be up there on the forbidding fastness of that storm-lashed face.

**D ▶** It is not done to win a game, to gain a gold medal, to beat a fellow competitor. It is a nonsensical game of life, and it is this absurd pointlessness that makes it so addictive. If death were not ever present many would not be drawn to it. Death, in a paradoxical way, validates the life-affirming nature of the game played. It becomes, in the end, a lifestyle rather than a sport; a game of risk in which what you stand to lose far outweighs whatever you could possibly win. After many years I finally understood what Toni Kurz thought was worth dying for, and yet I could never describe it properly to others. That in itself was enough reason to do it.

**E ▶** Despite this, the men who climbed the Eiger in 1938 were ill prepared, with inadequate equipment and a very sketchy knowledge of the mountain, the route they were planning to follow and the weather conditions. Something was bound to go wrong.

**F ▶** Today, thirty years after reading Harrer's book, I am astounded by the number of young people who tell me that my account of this survival epic in Peru, *Touching the Void*, inspired them to take up climbing. It is some consolation that my rather odd decision-making processes as a fourteen-year-old are being replicated today.

**G ▶** When I closed the book, my head was filled with grim black-and-white images of men fighting for survival in a ferociously steep and unrelentingly dangerous landscape. I could not imagine a more frightening way to die. Avalanches, rock falls crashing past like gunshots, lightning lashing through storm-lashed days, men pinned down unable to escape, dying slowly before the horrified gaze of tourist onlookers in the valley below – why would anyone want to place themselves in such a nightmarish situation? I had no idea, so I read the book again.



5 Read from the sixth paragraph of the completed text to the end. Answer the questions.

- 1 How do we know that *The White Spider* was written a long time ago?
- 2 In what ways does Simpson believe that climbing is much more than a sport?
- 3 What does *The White Spider* allow readers to do?
- 4 What evidence of previous climbing accidents is described in *The White Spider*?
- 5 What happened when Simpson and his climbing companion attempted the same route up the Eiger?

6 **VOCABULARY** In the second and eleventh paragraphs of the completed text, find intensifying adverbs that qualify the following adjectives.

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_ steep
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_ dangerous
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_ gripping

➔ **Vocabulary Builder** Intensifying adverbs: page 128

7 **SPEAKING** Work in pairs. Having read Joe Simpson's introduction to *The White Spider*, would you now like to read the whole book? Why? / Why not?

The North Face of the Eiger has always held a lingering fascination for me from the moment I finished reading Heinrich Harrer's *The White Spider* at the age of fourteen. This gripping account of the first ascent in 1938 and the subsequent and often disastrous attempts that followed should really have put me off mountaineering for life. Only a week earlier I had been taken rock climbing on a small limestone crag on the edge of the North York Moors. I was unaware that the arcane world of extreme mountaineering even existed, let alone that I would consider devoting the rest of my life to it.

1

I was no better informed at the end of the second reading, but I knew one thing: I wanted to find out. Despite the terrible hardship and awful deaths, I was forcibly struck by the fact that these men had chosen to be there. They couldn't all be idiots. There must be something very special about mountaineering for these people to think that such risks are worth it. I became a mountaineer inspired by the most gripping and frightening mountaineering book I have ever read.

Eleven years later, much to my chagrin, I found myself hanging helplessly from a rope, battered by avalanches and storm winds, badly injured, and about to plunge into a nightmare every bit as bad as those described in *The White Spider*.

2

In many ways *The White Spider* is an unlikely success. The language can seem archaic and incongruous today. The grainy black-and-white photographs seem old-fashioned compared to the sumptuous photography in modern mountaineering literature. Today, standards of climbing have far outstripped anything that would be found on the 1938 route. It should really be a relic of mountaineering history accessible to only the most avid of climbing aficionados. And yet it is these very criticisms that make it such a fascinating and seminal book.

It is not solely about mountaineering. It is about humanity, courage, strength in adversity, and the power of the mind. It is impossible to read this book without being awed by the single-minded determination of a small band of poorly equipped climbers struggling to survive in a world that few of us can imagine.

3

When I read of Toni Kurz enduring such a terrible, drawn-out death, hanging alone on a rope, his companions dead around him, his rescuers tantalizingly out of reach, I was horrified and fascinated in equal measure. This, I was later to discover, is the essence of mountaineering: that strange mixture of fear and excitement, the addiction of apprehension and anticipation without which mountaineering would simply be another sport. It is far, far more than sport.

4

*The White Spider* is at once the most exciting and compulsively gripping of books and at the same time repellent and disturbing. Heroic in scale, legendary in the stories of long-lost lives that it recounts, it allows readers to experience vicariously the terror and the exultation of mountaineering from the warm comfort of their armchairs.

5

Harrer writes about the aura of fatality of the Eiger's North Face and of the 'hunted' feeling that climbers experience on the climb. The grim history lies scattered all around. Broken pitons, the shattered rocks strewn with the debris of past ascents, torn rucksacks, tattered ropes drifting in the wind, indistinguishable scraps of colour-drained clothing, the unshakable sense of other people's tragedies found in lonely spots all over the face. I had always been haunted by the North Face of the Eiger.

In September 2000, when Ray Delaney and I made our first attempt on the 1938 route, it was less of a climb and more of a pilgrimage in the footsteps of our heroes. It was exciting and frightening and loaded with the psychological baggage of all that we knew about it. We too felt that hunted sensation as we mutely witnessed the deaths of two young men, then crept, cowed and haunted, back to the safety of the valley. We tried again during the following two summers, beaten back each time by foul weather and cold, uncomfortable bivouacs.

6

One successful ascensionist described his time on the face: 'I seemed to have been in a dreamland; not a dreamland of rich enjoyment, but a much more beautiful land where burning desires were translated into deeds.' That to me was inspirational. The words of an intelligent, sensitive man who had 'in complete harmony ... a perfectly fashioned body, a bright, courageous mind and a receptive spirit.' A man who thought that sometimes in life it was worth gambling far more than you could ever possibly win.

Joe Simpson, Sheffield, September 2004