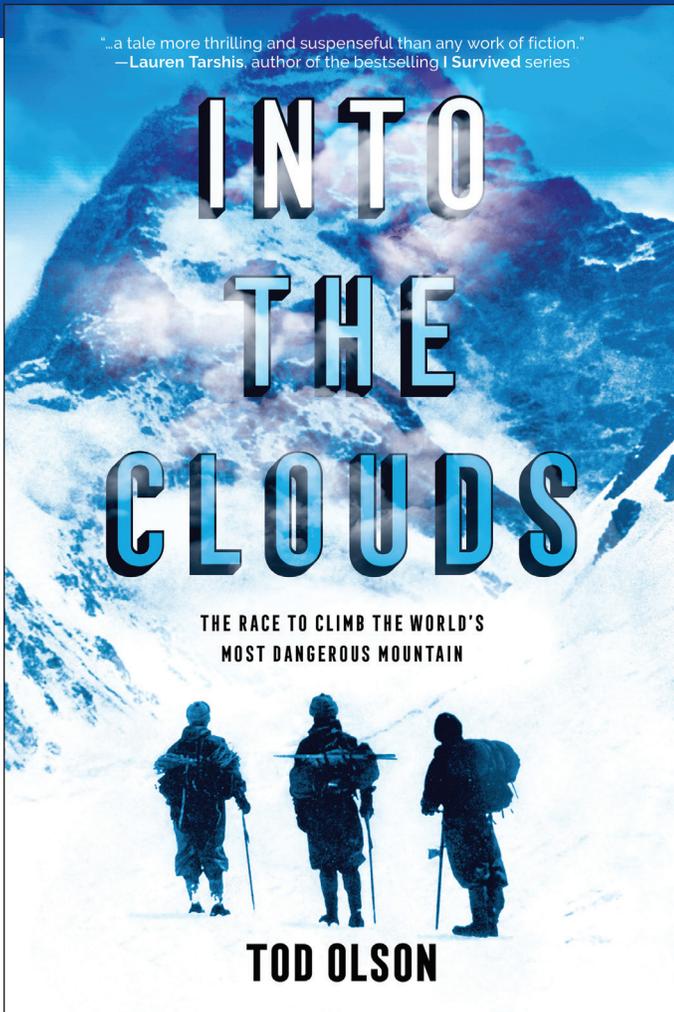


DISCUSSION GUIDE



INTO THE CLOUDS

The Race to Climb the World's Most Dangerous Mountain

By **TOD OLSON**

Author of **THE LOST** SERIES

A nail-biting true tale of survival and brotherhood atop one of the deadliest mountains on Earth.

IN 1953, AS TWO MEN SUMMIT Mt. Everest for the first time, Charlie Houston and a team of mountaineers carve a path up the second-highest peak on Earth: the deadly K-2. For Houston, reaching the top of the mountain is a lifelong dream, an obsession that began 15 years earlier on his first expedition there.

Since then, another American expedition has fallen apart on the remote, windswept mass of rock and ice. Now, Houston's team follows in their tracks. With the summit in their grasp, a vicious storm and sudden illness puts their own expedition on the edge of disaster.

Three expeditions and a high-mountain rivalry. Three attempts at one of the most grueling challenges the planet has to offer. Carefully researched and packed with historical photos, *Into the Clouds* takes readers on a nail-biting adventure at 25,000 feet—all the more heart-stopping because the story is true.

★ “An absolute must-have for all readers looking for well-researched and gripping adventure nonfiction.”
—**SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL**, *starred review*

“Gripping, well-researched, superb entertainment.” —**KIRKUS REVIEWS**

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The Common Core State Standards addressed by the discussion questions in this guide are listed below. For more information on the Common Core, visit corestandards.org. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1–5.4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1–6.4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1–7.4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1–8.4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9.1–9.4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.1–10.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.2–10.2

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▲ Describe the dangers that Charlie Houston and his fellow climbers faced as recounted in the prologue of the book. Why do you think the author began the story with the injuries and hardships Houston and his team endured as they climbed K2?
- ▲ What did Houston mean when he described climbing as a “fellowship of the rope”? How does the rope symbolize Houston’s approach to climbing?
- ▲ Given the challenges of scaling the Himalayas, what reasons motivated climbers through the centuries to try and climb the formidable mountains?
- ▲ Who were the Sherpas and how did they play an important role in each effort to scale K2?
- ▲ Houston’s drive to reach the summit with Petzoldt was foiled by something as simple as a lack of matches. Even with great preparation, important items could be forgotten. Discuss the role of equipment and supplies in Houston’s climbing expeditions.
- ▲ Houston’s democratic approach to climbing emphasized the importance of the journey over the importance of the goal. Discuss the positive elements and the drawbacks to this philosophy when scaling such an immense mountain.
- ▲ Early in the 1939 expedition there were signs that the team was not functioning well. What were those signs and why do you think they were ignored? Cite specific evidence from the text in your answer.
- ▲ The disappointment for Weissner at having to turn back just 3,000 feet below the summit of K2 paled in comparison to what he and Pasang Lama discovered as they started to descend. Why do you think the camps were stripped of gear? What complicated set of misunderstandings led to the decision?
- ▲ Weissner made a fateful decision at Camp VII to descend without Dudley Wolfe. Why do you think he did it? It can be very hard to make ethical judgments about the decisions people make in extreme environments. Why is that? Do you think Weissner did the right thing?
- ▲ After the Weissner expedition, people in the climbing world debated whether or not he should be blamed for the deaths of the four climbers. What were the arguments on either side? What do you think, and why? Be sure to cite evidence from the text.
- ▲ Once word reached Houston that Weissner’s expedition had failed to reach the summit of K2, Houston was determined to once again set out for the mountain. Houston declared that he was not going to repeat Weissner’s mistakes. What did Houston do differently in his preparation for another climbing expedition to K2? How did his climbing strategy differ from Weissner’s?
- ▲ Describe in your own words what happens to the human body in the so-called Death Zone. How did the deteriorating effects of altitude influence the decisions Houston and his team made on the expedition?

- ▲ Describe the tremendous fall experienced by the team on their descent with a sick Gilkey and how Pete Schoening was able to keep everyone on the mountain.
- ▲ Houston described his time with fellow climbers during his second expedition to K2: “We started as strangers, but we came down the mountain as brothers.” Cite evidence from the story that supports Houston’s description of the climb and the climbers.
- ▲ Reinhold Messner, an Italian climber, described Houston’s second expedition to reach the top of K2: “They failed in the most beautiful way you can imagine.” Describe in your own words what he means.
- ▲ The Author’s Note talks about two competing impulses that draw climbers to the mountains. Describe what they are in your own words. Can you think of an activity in your life in which you feel a conflict between the two approaches?

Activities for Students

- ▲ The prologue to *Into the Clouds* sets up the inciting incident for the story of the 1953 expedition—the dramatic moment that forces the story toward its climax. The members of that expedition were acutely aware of two other expeditions that turned into battles for survival: the German expedition to Nanga Parbat in 1934 and the first summit of Annapurna in 1950. Research one of those expeditions and use the information to write your own prologue to the story. Try to focus on the moment at which the danger became apparent and end your prologue on a cliff-hanger.
- ▲ Tremendous forethought and attention to detail were necessary when planning a climbing expedition to the Himalayas. Locate K2, part of the Himalayas, on a world map. Research the geography and climate of the region. Examine how weather patterns change from season to season and the effects of altitude on the human body. Use this information to create a survival guide for potential climbers interested in climbing K2. Include detailed information about the location of the mountain, the expected weather patterns, the necessary equipment and provisions, and strategies for dealing with altitude and other hazards on K2. Your survival guide should include a detailed and labeled map of the area, diagrams of equipment, and dos and don’ts for ensuring a safe and successful climbing expedition.
- ▲ Trying to explain why he was repeatedly drawn to climbing K2, Houston said, “Is it not better to take risks . . . than die from within from rot? Is it not better to change one’s life completely than to wait for the brain to set firmly and irreversibly in one way of life and one environment? I think it is . . . taking risks, not for the sake of danger alone, but for the sake of growth, is more important than any security one can buy or inherit.” Do you agree or disagree with Houston’s stance on dangerous adventure? Write an opinion piece that states your reaction to Houston’s opinion, and which offers reasons and examples to support your reaction. Include information from *Into the Clouds* to help support your opinion.