

MISSISSIPPI BOOKS

AUTHOR Q&Q

Climbing mountains, facing fears

Jana Hoops
Special to Mississippi Clarion Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

Vanessa O'Brien endured family tragedy as a teenager and a deep career dive as an ambitious career woman before she found peace in the indescribable dangers of mountain climbing – not once but seven times.

As she shares in her memoir and debut book "To the Greatest Heights: Facing Danger, Finding Humility, and Climbing a Mountain of Truth," this unexpected passion changed her life and ultimately gave her the courage to deal with her strongest fears.

It also gave her multiple international recognitions in the mountaineering world as she achieved many firsts for women, plus an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records for climbing the Seven Summits in 295 days.

O'Brien is now a public speaker and an advocate for women's causes, and, as a dual citizen of America and the UK, she lives in New York City and London with her husband, Jonathan.

In your debut book, you share how you survived family devastation, a career dive, and amazing success in your life's biggest physical challenge: climbing the Seven Summits in less than a year. Your story is written with a wit that shines through the entire volume. Was that a challenge sometimes, considering the dark edges of the story?

I think I have an optimistic outlook on life with occasional flashes of humor. When I experience something that I think is funny, the first thing that happens is an instantaneous flashback that has me wondering, "What scene am I in or where have I heard this before?" Closely followed by "Where is the hidden camera?" Within seconds, my brain starts reviewing every association — which includes comedies like "Seinfeld," "Curb Your Enthusiasm," "The Office" and The Far Side and Dilbert cartoons. Maybe I find something from real life or something from educational archives in my head or entertainment.

Adding humor wasn't actually as challenging in the writing process as being authentic about personal pain. I suppose the litmus test for me on whether to include a painful personal experience was whether that experience could or would help someone else. If I thought it could or would help someone else, it went in.

At what point in your mountain-climbing marathon did you make the commitment to yourself to climb all seven?

Not until after I summited Everest,

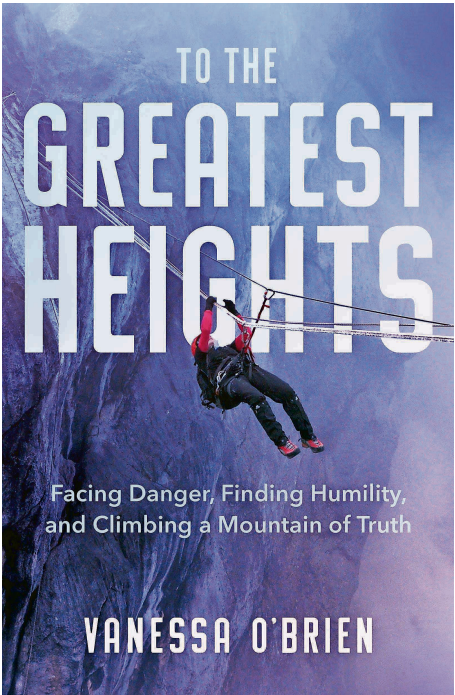


Vanessa O'Brien is the author of "To the Greatest Heights: Facing Danger, Finding Humility, and Climbing a Mountain of Truth." SUBMITTED/SPECIAL TO CLARION LEDGER

so that would have been 2012. I had heard about the Seven Summits from different climbers I met along the way, but I really had my eye only on Everest. Part of the team I climbed Everest with were heading straight to Denali after our summit, so initially I had a big scramble just to join that. Then there was a snowball effect – I followed some onto some mountains, while I organized others to follow me.

I did not even realize until after Everest which mountains had which climbing seasons, nor even which companies specialized on what mountains. I really flew by the seat of my pants during some of those short turnaround times, but I was fortunate to get Everest, Denali and Elbrus all back-to-back in May, June and July 2012 before having to think what's next?

See AUTHOR, below.



MISSISSIPPI READS

- 1. "A Place Like Mississippi," W. Ralph Eubanks, Timber Press
- 2. "Maverick Gardeners," Felder Rushing, University Press of Mississippi
- 3. "Klara and the Sun," Kazuo Ishiguro, Random House
- 4. "A Time for Mercy," John Grisham, Doubleday
- 5. "Nick," Michael Farris Smith, Little Brown
- 6. "Pappyland," Wright Thompson, Penguin
- 7. "World of Wonders," Aimee Nezhukumatohil, Penguin Press
- 8. "Cold Reading Murder," RJ Lee, Kensington
- 9. "Alpha Dawgs," Steve Robertson, Crane Publishing
- 10. "Tennessee Williams 101," Augustin J. Correrro, Pelican Publishing

Children and Young Adults

- 1. "Dog Man: Mothering Heights," Dav Pilkey, Graphix
- 2. "Follow That Frog," Philip Stead, Porter Neal
- 3. "Big Monty and the Cyborg Substitute," Matt Maxx, Homestead Pub
- 4. "Charlie Thorne and the Lost City" Stuart Gibbs, Simon & Schuster
- 5. "Stretch Like Scarlet," Emily Liner, Friendly City Books

Events

W. Ralph Eubanks discusses "A Place Like Mississippi," 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Facebook Live, Friendly City Books, 662-570-4247.

Vanessa O'Brien discusses "To the Greatest Heights," 5:30 p.m. Thursday, Facebook Live, @LemuriaBooks, 601-366-7619

Kevin Brockmeier reads "Ghost Variations" and Karin Tidbeck reads "The Memory Theater," 1 p.m. Saturday, on Zoom, rsvp@squarebooks.com, 662-236-2262

— Compiled by University Press of Mississippi

Reported by Book Mart & Café (Starkville); Friendly City Books (Columbus); Lemuria Books (Jackson); Lorelei Books (Vicksburg); Square Books (Oxford); Turnrow Book Co. (Greenwood).

REVIEW

Cancer survivor pens inspirational, forthright memoir

Mary Garner Rees
Special to Mississippi Clarion Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

Suleika Jaouad's life was just beginning in 2010. As a recent graduate of Princeton, she set her sights on a career as a war correspondent when, suddenly, she faced a personal war of an entirely different nature.

In "Between Two Kingdoms: A Memoir of a Life Interrupted" (Random House), Jaouad takes the reader through a rare leukemia diagnosis and the subsequent years of survival that followed. What results is an emotional tale of triumph over years of "incarceration" and a life reimagined while picking up the pieces that illness left scattered.

"To learn to swim in the ocean of not-knowing—this is my constant work," Jaouad writes. She walks her audience through love, loss, and longing through this lens. Jaouad falls in love a few months before receiving a life-altering diagnosis and candidly details the effects that cancer has on a relationship. Meanwhile, she stumbles upon a group of kindred spirits while in the hospital, some of whom do not survive their illnesses. All the while, the author longs for purpose amid hospital monitors and normalcy

See MEMOIR, Page 6B

Author Continued from above

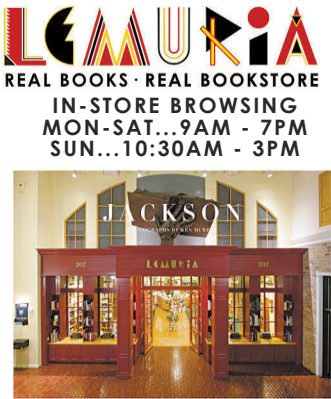
Which mountain climb was your most rewarding?

I think most people will answer that with the mountain they had to work the hardest for. For me that is K2, and I de-vote a third of my book to it. But let me answer your question with a second choice for similar reasons and it is what I would have said before attempting K2. For me that was Shishapangma, the 14th highest mountain in the world, and the only one entirely in Tibet (China). It was rewarding because at the time, no guiding companies really went there, and I had to lobby the guiding company to go – no promises. The whole team –guides, Sherpa, clients – we all felt it was really a reconnaissance mission. Everyone had to pitch in and be on alert, for avalanches, for rock fall, for changes in weather, for potential routes. We even had an earthquake in 2011 which created confusion at high camps, and plenty of people turned around without a summit. It was a unique landscape, in a special country, on a special climb that we really had to work for and that work paid off. It has all the attributes that make a climb special.

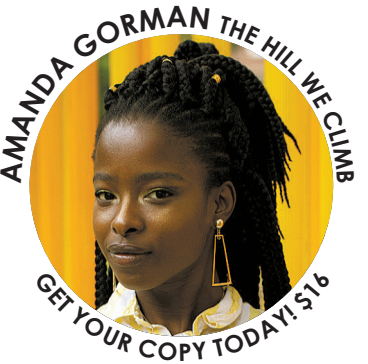
Tell me about the "humility" side of this challenge and why it became a part of the book's title. The humility side of the climbing challenge is basically how the mountains kick the crap out of me over and over and over again, until my ego implodes. I am busy stuffing myself with humble pie time and time again until I undergo a powerful

transformation. Much more powerful than being an introvert before coffee, and an extrovert after coffee. It is not just on-one mountain, like Everest, but over many expeditions, including Carstensz Pyramid. I continuously push myself outside of my comfort zone and fail, which is so unlike anything in business where we are taught and expected to always be in control. However, with Mother Nature, she is the only one in control and you can't force her to comply with your timetable or you will die. I learn to accept failure as a data point and to learn from my mistakes. I also learn through the kindness of others that I cannot fail in absolute terms unless I quit. The mountains will always be there. The danger you overcame is breath-taking, and you were fully aware, with each climb, that you might not make it back alive. How did you gather that courage, and how did this experience change your life? My courage comes from my experience, knowledge and skills over time. It also comes from early influences and role models, some of which I never knew I had. My great-grandfather enters the United States, missing a finger from working in the coal mines. He

is 45 years old and from Austria-Hungary. At 45 years old, he is three years younger than when I am on the summit of Mt. Everest. Yet he makes this great journey to America to fight for the survival of his family. I find that incredibly courageous. My climbing experiences do change my life and allow me to use my voice. I add "advocate" to my business card simply because I can no longer travel and pretend not to see the effects of climate change or female inequality, or like any good sign in a subway station –if you see something, say something!



LEMURIABOOKS.COM



REAL BOOKS FROM A REAL BOOKSTORE
202 BANNER HALL, 4465 I-55 N. JACKSON, MS 39206 | 601.366.7619