

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Crisis on Mount Hood

Stories from a Hundred Years of Mountain Rescue

by Christopher Van Tilburg

In this gripping narrative of rescue, endurance, and place, Christopher Van Tilburg traces a century of search-and-rescue history on Oregon's iconic peak. This guide invites readers to explore the book's central questions: why people take risks, why others come to their aid, how mountains change, and what responsible adventure requires.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. What expectations did you bring to a book about mountain rescue, and how did the book confirm or disrupt them?
2. Does the book read to you more as adventure writing, social history, medical narrative, environmental warning, or something else? Why?
3. How does Van Tilburg balance suspense with respect for the real people and tragedies he describes?
4. Which story or moment most changed the way you think about Mount Hood?

1. THE MOUNT HOOD PROBLEM

1. Mount Hood is both accessible and hazardous. How does that tension shape the book's central argument?
2. In what ways does the mountain's popularity create its own dangers - crowding, overconfidence, rushed decisions, or social pressure?
3. Which feels more threatening in the book: natural hazards such as weather, ice, fumaroles, and crevasses, or human factors such as poor planning and inexperience? Defend your answer.
4. How does the mountain's beauty contribute to the risks people take on it?
5. What does the book suggest about the difference between being outdoorsy and being truly prepared for alpine terrain?

2. THE CRAG RATS: VOLUNTEERISM, COURAGE, AND COMMUNITY

1. What motivates volunteers to leave home in the middle of the night, often in dangerous conditions, to rescue strangers?
2. How does the history of the Crag Rats deepen the book beyond a collection of rescue stories?

3. What values seem to define the culture of the Crag Rats - discipline, humility, service, camaraderie, local knowledge, or something else?
4. How does the book portray the emotional cost of rescue work?
5. What role do family, friendship, and community support play in sustaining long-term volunteer service?

3. CLIMATE CHANGE AND A CHANGING MOUNTAIN

1. How does the book connect climate change to the future of recreation and rescue on Mount Hood?
2. In what ways do retreating glaciers, unstable snowpack, warmer temperatures, and increased rockfall change the mountain's character?
3. Why is Mount Hood presented as a warning sign for other mountains in the Cascades and beyond?
4. How do deceptive spring and summer conditions create a false sense of safety?
5. What responsibilities do climbers, local communities, and policymakers share in responding to these environmental changes?

4. SURVIVAL, TRAGEDY, AND PREPAREDNESS

1. Across the survival stories, which qualities matter most: calm, teamwork, patience, shelter, or decision-making?
2. What lessons emerge from the book's tragic events, including the 1986 Oregon Episcopal School disaster?
3. How do historical tragedies shape modern mountain safety, wilderness medicine, and group leadership practices?
4. Which items from the Ten Essentials seem most important after reading this book, and why?
5. After reading the book, what preparation would you consider non-negotiable before stepping onto Mount Hood?

5. RISK, RESPONSIBILITY, AND RESCUE

1. Does the existence of a rescue safety net encourage people to take risks they otherwise would avoid?
2. Where should we draw the line between personal freedom in the outdoors and responsibility to rescuers who may have to intervene?
3. Should people who need rescue be billed for the cost? What ethical and practical arguments support each side?
4. When does an adventure become a preventable crisis?
5. What does the book suggest about self-reliance in a world where help can often be summoned electronically?

6. LEADERSHIP UNDER PRESSURE

1. The book repeatedly shows rescuers making choices in unstable conditions. How does the priority of protecting rescuers before reaching the subject complicate the usual heroic rescue narrative?
2. Where does the book show that leadership can mean stepping back, slowing down, or delaying action rather than rushing in?
3. How do teamwork, trust, and shared culture help rescuers act decisively when information is incomplete?

4. Where does the book reveal the limits of individual courage and the necessity of disciplined group judgment?
5. How might the leadership principles in the book apply beyond mountain rescue - in medicine, public service, family life, or community work?

7. TECHNOLOGY, SKILL, AND FALSE CONFIDENCE

1. How does modern technology change the way people enter the mountains and the way rescuers search for them?
2. Which tools seem most valuable in the book, and where can tools become liabilities if climbers do not understand their limits?
3. The book contrasts advanced equipment with old-school judgment and embodied mountain knowledge. Which matters more in a crisis, and why?
4. How does the possibility of calling for help alter a climber's sense of responsibility?
5. What does the book suggest about preparation that cannot be outsourced to devices?

CLOSING REFLECTION

1. What single lesson from this book would you want every hiker or climber to hear before entering the mountains?
2. Did the book leave you more inspired, more cautious, or both? Explain your answer.
3. How does *Crisis on Mount Hood* enlarge the idea of rescue - from a dramatic event to a form of community responsibility?

OPTIONAL EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Compare a historical rescue in the book with a modern one and identify what changed in gear, communication, and decision-making.
- Research the Ten Essentials and create your own Mount Hood day-pack list.

[Ten Essentials](#) from Washington State Parks

- Discuss how climate change is altering a local landscape familiar to your group.
- Write a short reflection: What does responsible adventure mean to me now?