

To boldly go

Travel writers are taking their lives in their hands, reports Brian Schofield in his roundup

The best travel books of the year reveal that the genre is in fine health — it's just had to toughen up a little. Writers are taking on trickier, darker and more urgent journeys, combining their wanderings with genuine investigative reporting. A perfect example is Barbara Demick's **Nothing to Envy: Real Lives in North Korea** (Granta £8.99), which folds the LA Times reporter's impressions of the country into long interviews with exiles, who expose the routine lunacy of life in a communist basket case. The winner of the 2010 Samuel Johnson prize, it



Topping: climbers at the summit of K2

is a story of epic stoicism and suffering illuminated by such jaw-dropping details as the doctors who have to donate their own skin to conduct operations. Another trip that you are happy the author took, rather than you, is Ed Vulliamy's traverse of the US-Mexican border in **America** (Bodley Head £20). This gripping investigation of the bloody "war about nothing" that is raging between various drugs cartels and the Mexican police and army is so current that in the two months since its publication, one of the leading characters, cartel chief Antonio "Tony the Storm" Guillen, has been gunned down after a 12-hour battle with Mexican marines.

One young debutant who's caught the mood perfectly is Oliver Bullough, who clearly put his heart and soul into his grand, furious **Let Our Fame Be Great: Journeys Among the Defiant People of the Caucasus** (Allen Lane £25). It is an unashamedly partisan book, in which the "laughter and kindness" of the highlanders is constantly

compared with their brutish Russian homogenisers. The facts support the sympathies. I'd not heard of the nomadic Nogais, slaughtered in a swamp in 1783 by Peter the Great's troops, nor of the "expulsion of the Circassians" in 1864. Bullough puts this century's Chechen rebellion into that context of subjugation and exodus.

The year's best adventure book, another painstaking piece of reportage, disguises its morality tale beneath the plot of a high-octane thriller. Reading Graham Bowley's **No Way Down: Life and Death on K2** (Viking £9.99), about the 2008 mountaineering disaster in which 11 lives were lost, you're so ensnared by the terrifying tale of snapping ropes, tumbling bodies and freezing bivouacs, you barely notice the subtext of the dangerous commercialisation of modern climbing.

A maestro of a gentler brand of travelogue is Jonathan Raban, whose **Driving Home: An American Scrapbook** (Picador £20) collects almost 20 years of feature writing on his adopted home in America's Pacific Northwest, in which he elegantly unpacks the grand themes of the Wild West.

The book of the year, though, has to be Frank Westerman's **Engineers of the Soul** (Harvill Secker £14.99), about the Soviet writers who, at Stalin's behest, threw themselves in the 1930s into recording and celebrating their new nation, writing epic novels about desalination plants or crossing the country in giant "travel brigades", in search of proletarian stories. The author's dry, funny, erudite journey follows them, exploring the gaping divide between their eulogies and the country's grim, corrupted reality. To wrestle travelogue, literary biography, social history and bad communist cinema into such a light, readable book is an engineering triumph all of its own — highly recommended.



Madness, alcoholism, family discord — it's all in this year's most potent Robert Collins picks his

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN WINTER: A Memoir In Blindness

by CANDIA McWILLIAM
Cape £18.99

After 12 years of writer's block, two failed marriages, a descent into alcoholism ("I drank whatever I could get. This included household cleaners") and finally the loss of her eyesight, McWilliam, a prize-winning novelist, dictated these pungent, poetic memoirs, her eyelids clamped shut by blepharospasm. Her caustic account of her childhood — she was adopted by a friend's family after her mother committed suicide when she was eight — and of her subsequent addiction is one of the year's most engaging, sardonic and self-flagellating works of confession. "Even my last child," she recounts (and you have every reason to believe this is true), "was an attempt to please my mother-in-law."

MY FATHER'S FORTUNE A Life

by MICHAEL FRAYN
Faber £16.99

It seems remarkable that Frayn has waited so long to write about his own life, and the wait alone makes this near-faultless memoir a treat. Clearly uncomfortable with the spotlight himself, Frayn revels in bringing to life his exuberant, travelling-salesman father. At the heart of his bustling evocation of his suburban, middle-class childhood in Surrey is his mother's death from a heart attack when he was 13, or perhaps 11 — the event is so entirely banished from family memory he doesn't know which year it was. Movingly, he here calls her "Mummy" for the first time since she died: "There — done." Frayn's book is as warm, vivid and endearing as it is modest.

HITCH-22

by CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS
Atlantic £20



He may be contradictory and orotund in equal measure, but, as shown in this entertaining, piquant memoir, Hitchens clearly embraced his mother Yvonne's mantra before she took her life in

Athens in unforgivable You could simply for style, as h double ex and card- and again soul-search Even as h bury his r waylaid o demonstr lying cold we do. M:

THIS PA

by RUPEE
Granta £1

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DID YOU TELEVIS

by MAX H
HarperPre



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