Cold Mountain
By Richard Jerome

They were world-class mountaineers, members of an elite group of British climbers, but on June 8, 1985, Joe Simpson and Simon Yates outdid themselves: They became the first to scale the west face of Siula Grande, an imposing 21,000-ft. Andean peak 250 miles from Lima, Peru. Standing at the snowy summit, Simpson, then 25, and Yates, 21, had little time to savor the rush. A blizzard loomed, so they started hastily down the mountain. Their descent would be an epic test of physical strength and moral fortitude. But it also aroused controversy, ruined relationships and soiled reputations. Now Touching the Void—a new documentary chronicling the climb, by Oscar-winning director Kevin Macdonald (One Day in September)—has reopened old wounds.

Simpson and Yates had descended 3,000 feet in a blinding storm when they faced the first crisis. Negotiating a wall of ice, Simpson's axe failed to take hold and he fell 15 feet, shattering his right leg. "Simon had a choice of leaving me there to die or helping me," he says. "He chose to help." The pair had climbed Alpine-style, tied together; Yates now used the ropes to lower Simpson down the mountain, 300 feet at a time. For nine grueling hours, and 3,000 feet, it worked. Then, disaster: Simpson started to slide and went hurtling off a cliff. Unable to hear Simpson's cries over the wind, Yates held tight as his partner dangled 50 feet above a gaping crevasse. But after an hour his strength gave out, and again he faced a choice: slide over the edge to his death or cut the rope and save himself. He took out a penknife. "Then," Simpson says, "I just fell."

Plummeting into the crevasse, he landed on a small bridge of ice. And there he lay, in a dark, eerily silent hole, more alone than he ever thought possible. "I cried like a baby," says Simpson, who remarkably suffered no additional injuries in the fall. "I had to regain control to have any chance of getting out." Unable to climb up and with a limited supply of rope, he could only go deeper into the void. About 80 feet down he came to an outcrop of snow—and a glimmer of light. After crawling for two agonizing hours he poked his head through the glacier, into the open air, "the most stupendous view I had ever seen."

Meanwhile, Yates was making his way down the mountain, convinced Simpson was dead and that he too would perish.

Simpson's ordeal was just beginning. Slowly, he crawled across the vast glacier, using his arms and good leg to drag the broken leg, its fractured bones shifting with every inch. The pain was murderous. Freezing and weak, with no food or unfrozen water, he lost his bearings several times. "I knew I wasn't going to make it, so why not just sit there and die?" he says. "But I had a sickening sense of loneliness. And I think that's what made me keep going."
At the end of the glacier, six miles of jagged rocks lay between Simpson and safety. He set 20-minute goals, keeping time on a $4 watch. Delirious, he heard old songs in his head and started reciting Shakespeare. He had crawled eight miles in total, with an end almost in sight, but he was finally cracking.

Then, at 3 a.m. on June 12, the inimitable aroma of urine and excrement snapped him back to reality. Four days after being left for dead, he had made it to the base camp latrine. But was anyone still there? He cried weakly for help and waited. At last, Yates appeared with Richard Hawking, a fellow traveler who had watched over their camp while they climbed. "You imagine you'll be all heroic and say something like, 'Hello, Simon, I've had a bit of a rough time,' " Simpson says. "But I was so tired, I was in so much pain, I just started crying." Yates, who made it back to camp in a day, had been wracked with guilt. "If Joe hadn't crawled back into camp," he later told Britain's Times, "it would have been horrendous. I was still in a chronic state of shock." Strapping Simpson to a mule, Yates and Hawking headed for Lima and the nearest hospital. It was a two-day ride, plus 20 hours in the back of a pickup, but they made it.

Back in England, Yates came under withering criticism from some in the climbing community for abandoning Simpson. Friendly but not close, the pair kept in touch over the years. Filming Macdonald's documentary—based on Simpson's 1988 book of the same name—brought them together briefly. But now Yates, 41, wants to put the whole experience behind him and no longer talks to Simpson. (He declined to be interviewed for this story.) "In context you realize he had to cut the rope," says director Macdonald. "[But] if you've done something you're not particularly proud of, you don't want to be known for it for the rest of your life."

Yates's staunchest defender is Simpson, 43, who calls him a hero for even attempting a rescue. "It was a feat of extraordinary strength and determination," he says. "People ask, 'Would you have cut the rope in Simon's position?' Of course I would have. He made the incredibly brave decision to save me. But he's known as the guy who cut the rope, and I'm the guy who crawled out and wrote the book."
The well-crafted Cold Mountain has an epic sweep and captures the horror and brutal hardship of war. 71%. TOMATOMETER. Total Count: 231. 77%. Audience Score. User Ratings: 209,911. Cold Mountain Quotes. Ruby Thewes: This world won't stand long. God won't let it stand this way long. Ruby Thewes: Have you been shot? Inman In the waning days of the American Civil War, a wounded soldier embarks on a perilous journey back home to Cold Mountain, North Carolina to reunite with his sweetheart. Director: Anthony Minghella. Writers: Charles Frazier (book), Anthony Minghella (screenplay). Stars: Jude Law, Nicole Kidman, Renée Zellweger | See full cast & crew ». Cold Mountain is a 2003 epic period war film written and directed by Anthony Minghella. The film is based on the bestselling 1997 novel of the same name by Charles Frazier. It stars Jude Law, Nicole Kidman, and Renée Zellweger with Eileen Atkins, Brendan Gleeson, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Natalie Portman, Jack White, Giovanni Ribisi, Donald Sutherland, and Ray Winstone in supporting roles. The film tells the story of a wounded deserter from the Confederate army close to the end of the American Civil War. Cold Mountain opened to great reviews from critics and won several major awards. It was also a success at the box office and became a sleeper hit grossing more than double its budget worldwide. Contents. Cold Mountain is a novel about a soldier’s perilous journey back to his beloved near the Civil War’s end. Cold Mountain is quite possibly the most beautiful book that I’ve ever read. It’s not for the faint of heart, however, as it’s time consuming and requires a great deal of patience as Frazier takes his time with his descriptions of the landscape and the people as Inman, a soldier broken in spirit by the futility and waste of the Civil War, decides to walk home to Ada and his beloved Cold Mountain.