THE AVALANCHE BOOK
by Betsy Armstrong and Knox Williams.
Reviewed by Daniel T. Blumstein

In the United States, an estimated 100,000 avalanches fall annually, catching roughly 140 people and killing about 17. If you are buried more than two feet, or for longer than thirty minutes, you have on average, a 50% chance of surviving. So if you go into the backcountry, it would be wise to know something about avalanches in order to avoid becoming a statistic. Betsy Armstrong (associate head of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center) and Knox Williams (head of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center) have written The Avalanche Book, a highly readable and extremely interesting introduction to avalanches and safety.

Beginning with a chilling summary of the 1982 Alpine Meadows disaster which killed seven people, Armstrong and Williams define terminology, and outline the where, when, and how avalanches interact with humans. The next chapter discusses the history of avalanches and humans. The discussion has a global perspective, but continually focuses on the U.S., and specifically on Colorado (where the authors are most experienced). Richard Armstrong wrote the third chapter discussing the physics of avalanches. Chapters on weather, route-finding and risk taking, what to do if you (swim!) or a friend (Don’t go for help!) are caught in an avalanche, professional avalanche control, the legal system and avalanches, and a history of avalanche studies follow.

Together the authors had previously written The Snowy Torrents: Avalanche Accidents in the United States 1972-79, and Williams had compiled The Snowy Torrents: Avalanche Accidents in the United States: 1967-71. Their motto, “accidents teach lessons” is a wise one. The Avalanche Book is punctuated with numerous case studies in which some people survived while others died.

While reading The Snowy Torrents may scare you out of the backcountry, reading The Avalanche Book gives you information and suggestions to make winter backcountry travel safer. One of the best pieces of advice about stability evaluation is concisely stated on p. 109. “In the avalanche game, there really are no rules of thumb — which is itself a very good rule to remember... exceptions kill.”

The Avalanche Book is clearly written and states complex subjects simply. There are several distracting typographical errors which hopefully will be removed in subsequent printings. I would have liked a more detailed discussion on avalanche transceivers and their use. The emphasis on history and the analysis of previous accidents make this a fine introductory book. It is, however, no substitute for additional reading and actual experience studying snow and weather with more experienced people. Armstrong and Williams realize this and include an excellent bibliography and the names and addresses of numerous avalanche schools.

THE ABC OF AVALANCHE SAFETY
by Edward R. LaChapelle.
$3.85.
Reviewed by Daniel T. Blumstein

Ed LaChapelle knows about mountains and avalanches. The former head of the U.S. Forest Service Avalanche Center in Alta, Utah, an accomplished mountaineer, and the author of one of the first books on avalanche safety, LaChapelle has revised this book into an up-dated second edition.

This concise, small-format, paperback holds considerable information about avalanche terminology, snow physics, stability evaluation, safety rules, and rescues. It should be read and then re-read each year before the snow begins to fall. While the book is filled with many rules of thumb, LaChapelle cautions that “the fuzzier the answers, the wider the safety margin that must be allowed in practical decision.”

LaChapelle stresses constant evaluation while travelling in and around avalanche terrain. He discusses snow pit analysis and other ways to estimate snow stability that can be performed by

Avoiding a crack in the snow, such as this one, can keep you out of the path of a deadly avalanche. It’s wise to be familiar with avalanche warning signs, thoroughly discussed in the newly revised ABC OF AVALANCHE SAFETY by Ed LaChapelle. Photo courtesy of Mike Kennedy.
anyone while in the backcountry. He ignores a
detailed discussion on weather forecasting (see
the U.S. Forest Service’s Avalanche Handbook
for an excellent discussion on mountain meteor-
ology) and I think, he stresses the use of prob-
ing and other secondary rescue techniques a bit
too much. But this discussion on avalanche trans-
civers is very good.

The book ends with several case histories
which illustrate the necessity of avalanche fore-
casting as an ongoing process while one is in
the backcountry. The size, price, and content of this
book make it an excellent addition to a moun-
taineering library and should probably be read,
understood, and then carried when venturing
into avalanche terrain.

THE CLIMBERS GUIDE TO NORTH
AMERICA — East Coast Rock Climbs by
John Harlin III. Published by Chockstone Press,
1986. 397 pages with numerous black and white
photographs, maps, line drawings and sketches.
$22.00

Reviewed by Richard DuMais

East Coast Rock Climbs is the third volume in
the Climbers Guide to North America series
published by Chockstone Press. It is similar in
format, size, and presentation to the two pre-
ceding volumes. As a group, these books present
extensive coverage of most of the rock climbing
areas of the country and are a very worthwhile
source of reference.

As in preceding volumes, the amount of infor-
mation contained in this book is substantial and
represents an impressive amount of research and
work by the author. Not only does Harlin de-
scribe the major areas of climbing in the eastern
United States, but also previously lesser known
areas there, and in eastern Canada are brought
to prominence by his coverage.

The introductory section has much valuable in-
formation on matters such as travel, ratings, bib-
liographical information, general climbing and
climbing considerations, and climbing history.
Following this there are fifteen chapters, arran-
ged geographically from south to north,
each dealing with a different climbing area. Each
area has coverage of its unique features, data per-
tinent to travel, camping, climbing, services and
history. However much of this latter segment is
a rehash of material covered in the main historical
segment. A final chapter then provides a brief
synopsis of another sixteen minor rock outcrops.

East Coast Rock Climbs should go a long way
to dispel the attitude that the only good climbing
in the eastern part of North America is in the
Shawangunks. The most appealing sections of
the book are those dealing with the southern
areas. Indeed one of the strong points of East
Coast Rock Climbs is its coverage of these pre-
viously less-known crags. Conversely, it is in the
presentation of the traditionally more significant
crags, especially the Gunks, that the book is
weakest. Harlin’s attempt to depict the Shawan-
gunk climbs by topo-style drawings is a dismal
failure. They are generally far too vague and it is
immediately apparent that the complex nature of
the Shawangunk cliffs do not lend themselves to
this type of descriptive presentation.

The overall visual presentation created by East
Coast Rock Climbs is a good one. It is profusely
illustrated and the mix of scenic and action photos
nicely complements the many standard descriptive
views of faces and routes. The result is that
they convey a good feel for the overall nature of
the climbing depicted. Furthermore, the use of
continuous dotted lines to show the routes is
good, and a definite improvement on the random
usage of various symbols in the preceding volume
of this series. While a significant number of the
pictures are excellent, the quality, both in selec-
tion and reproduction is rather uneven. This has
resulted in many of the pictures being blurry or
uninteresting, detracting from their ultimate
impact.

As in the other two volumes of the series, a
considerable number of line drawings by Adele
Hammond have been sprinkled throughout the
book. I felt that these constitute one of the book’s
highlights, being invariably excellent. They
create a playful tone, and their subtle touch adds
immensely to the attractiveness of the book.

In summary, despite any minor shortcomings,
the book is well done and very worthwhile. By
itself, and as a part of the whole series, this con-
stitutes a major contribution to the information
on the American climbing scene. It will serve
as a most handy reference for visitors as well as
eastern climbers looking for new vistas.

FIRST RAINS OF AUTUMN
by Aubrey Diem
Published by Aljon Print-Craft Limited, Kit-
chener, Ontario, Canada 1985, 115 pages.

Reviewed by Sally Moser

One thought furthest from most mountain-
eers’ minds is that of using their outdoor skills
to destroy other people or things. Yet in certain
parts of Europe during World War II, the de-
defensive manipulation of mountain crags kept small
pockets of the resistance alive and operational.
One of the enclaves naturally formed by sur-
rounding massifs is the Valle d’Aosta, situated in
northwestern Italy. First Rains of Autumn pro-
vides the reader with a brief glimpse of the war-
time struggles that occurred in this small moun-
tain area.

The first rain precipitates an American flyer
who bails out over the Po Valley after a bombing
mission. Smuggled into a remote mountain inn to
recover from his injuries, his long winter stay
results in an affair with the beautiful innkeeper.
While they are sharing body heat, the resistance
movement rages in the frigid confines of the Alps.
In one memorable sequence, a group of night
raiders is chased up a pass by Nazis after destroy-
ing an iron ore cable car which fed the steel
works. Breaking trail for themselves and their
pursuers through several feet of snow is com-
ounded by the Nazis shooting at them. This
nightmare is suddenly terminated when three
strategically tossed grenades launch a propitious
avalanche which buries the pursuers.

Written in a narrative style and based on true
incidents, Aubrey Diem’s first novel weaves a fic-
tional thread through historical events. Maps and
photos enable the reader to locate the action.

The strength of the book is its description and
chronicle of the wartime milieu, which evolved
out of Diem’s research for his master’s thesis. He
is obviously more comfortable writing the action
scenes than the bedroom dialogue. The charac-
ters remain rather flat and are not fully devel-
oped. The dialogue is used as a vehicle for infor-
mation more than to expand their personalities.
However, this may make the point that they, like
everyone during war, are merely pawns of
greater forces and their aspirations matter little.

First Rains of Autumn has all the elements
of a great adventure movie — romance, intrigue,
chaos scenes, mountain scenery and, as a bonus,
historical significance. In these days of tension
and aggression in various parts of the world, the
reader would do well to be thankful that the major
decision of the day is which mountain to climb
and not which military installation to bomb.

“HARD MUSIC FOR HARD CLIMBERS”
THE NEW VULGARIANS

Reviewed by Jeff Smoot

Just when you thought it was safe to go back to
the crags...The “New Vulgarians” have pulled off
a first, a 12-song, 30-minute recording of music
in the finest garage band tradition, music
dedicated entirely to the pastime and way of life
we all know so well...” Well, sort of.

The recording, titled “Hard Music for Hard
Climbers” comes across not so much as a fine
collection of original songs about climbing, but
as a revolt against climbing as a mainstream Ameri-
can activity. According to band member and
spokesperson Jim MacLean, the songs are in-
tended to “educate our fellow climbers about the
despicable dangers that are threatening our
sport.” And what are these dangers? Hangdog-
ging? Rappel-bolting? Not even close. According
to the New Vulgarians, crass commercialism and
athletic respectability — not to mention John
Bachar and Ron Kauk being on TV. — are to
blame for what’s happening to climbing. “With
this tape,” promises MacLean, “climbers every-
where will be inspired to even greater depths of
profanity and degradation, enough to ensure that
we will never have to endure a climbing Super
Bowl, corporate sponsorship or public accep-
tance.” To this end, there are three rather gratu-