

# ENGL 391: The Literature of Mountains and Mountaineering

## Fall 2020

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Mountaineering is an uncommonly literary activity: climbing mountains and writing about the experience go hand in hand, and the literature of mountaineering has developed distinctive codes and conventions. This course will analyze ways in which mountains and mountaineering have been represented. It will examine selected works from the literary canon, primarily from the romantic, modern, and contemporary periods, but will concentrate on narratives by and about climbers themselves. We will cover a wide range of topics—formal, aesthetic, environmental, political, social, and so on—but we will be guided by the overarching questions of why people travel to (and up) mountains and how they choose to depict them. The works to be studied include narratives of youthful misadventure, portraits of the climber as antihero, works that reflect an ambivalence about the very enterprise, and other variations on the theme of the excursion into the mountains. There is no expectation that you have any experience of climbing. Armchair mountaineers are, of course, most welcome; being a rope gun does not automatically make you a good literary critic. It will be useful, however, for everyone to have some basic knowledge of climbing terms and concepts, so we will spend time in class discussing both *belay* and *Bildungsroman*, *crevasse* and *characterization*, *ice axe* and *irony*. And you will probably be asked to make a bold ascent of Mount Tolmie.



Caspar David Friedrich *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (Pixabay)

### Tentative reading list:

- J. Krakauer, *Eiger Dreams: Ventures among Men and Mountains*
- R. Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination*
- B. McDonald, *Freedom Climbers*
- D. Roberts, *The Mountain of My Fear*
- J. Simpson, *Touching the Void*
- Poems, essays, catalogues, videos, etc., to be circulated in class or online

### Tentative assignments:

- Essay proposal and bibliography
- Major research essay or project
- Final examination