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'Hiking With Nietzsche' Review: Highest Education

A freezing night alone in the Alps only sharpened a future philosopher's longing for the peak experiences celebrated by the German thinker. Geoff Wisner reviews "Hiking With Nietzsche" by John Kaag.



The Waldhaus Hotel in Sils-Maria, Switzerland.

PHOTO: OLAF PROTZE/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES

By Geoff Wisner

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For John Kaag, philosophy is more than a sterile intellectual exercise. It can be a matter of life and death.

In "American Philosophy: A Love Story" (2016), Mr. Kaag described his discovery of a cultural treasure at the end of a dirt road in New Hampshire: the library of William Ernest Hocking, a Harvard philosopher celebrated in his time but little

remembered today. Hocking was steeped in the work of Emerson and Thoreau and on intimate terms with American philosophers like John Dewey and William James.

Even as he was numbing the pain of a failing marriage with alcohol, Mr. Kaag began rescuing the volumes in Hocking's library, some of which were gradually being converted into porcupine droppings. As he did so, he found strength and encouragement in the American strain of pragmatic philosophy, grounded in the question of whether our lives are worth living.

In "Hiking With Nietzsche," Mr. Kaag turns from these homegrown, largely optimistic philosophers and considers Friedrich Nietzsche, the German thinker best known for such pronouncements as "That which does not kill us makes us stronger" and "If you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you."

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PREVIEW

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Why? What is it about Hitler's favorite philosopher that holds Mr. Kaag's attention? Mr. Kaag admits that "Nietzsche's philosophy is sometimes pooh-poohed as juvenile—the product of a megalomaniac that is perhaps well suited to the self-absorption and naïveté of the teenage years but best outgrown by the time one reaches adulthood." Mr. Kaag's own wife, a student of Immanuel Kant, loathes Nietzsche.

True to cliché, Mr. Kaag's fascination with Nietzsche is rooted in his adolescence. Years later, having reached a period of relative calm and happiness in his life, he feels compelled to reclaim and come to terms with a raw, wild element from his past that Nietzsche inspired and exemplified.

In the summer after his junior year of college, Mr. Kaag recounts, he set off for Switzerland. He was at work on a thesis about Nietzsche and Emerson, and his adviser had secured \$3,000 for him to visit the country where Nietzsche did his most important work. Mr. Kaag landed in Basel, where Nietzsche spent years as a young academic, but quickly left the city, finding the streets "too straight, too

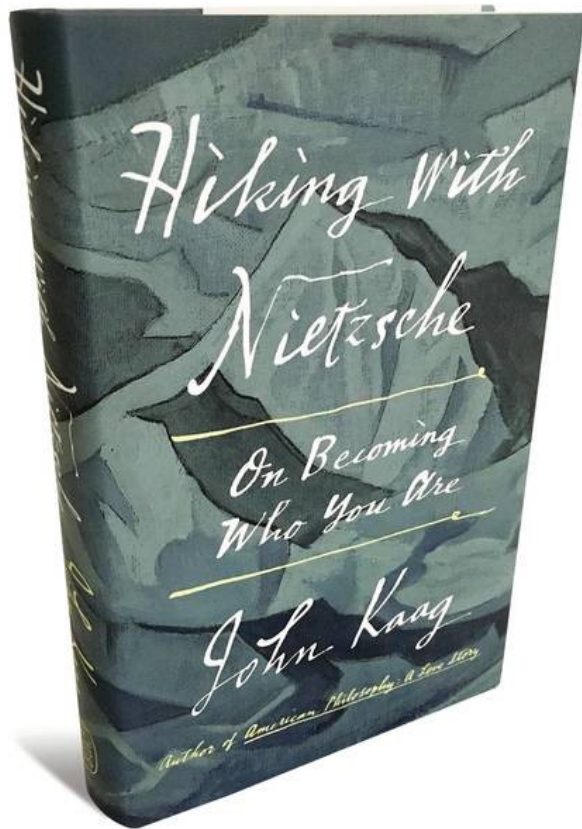


PHOTO: WSJ

HIKING WITH NIETZSCHE

By John Kaag

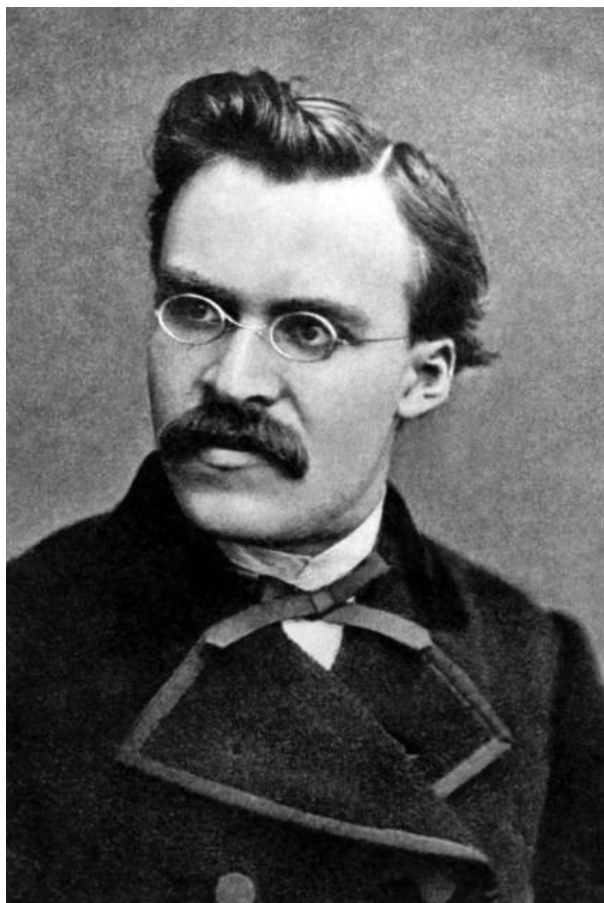
FSG, 255 pages, \$26

quiet, too mundane.” Following the path that Nietzsche took during a decade of “philosophical wandering through alpine terrain,” Mr. Kaag traveled to the tiny town of Splügen before continuing to Sils-Maria and staying in the boardinghouse where Nietzsche wrote “Thus Spoke Zarathustra.”

Intoxicated with freedom and solitude, the athletic Mr. Kaag decided to hike from Splügen to Sils-Maria by way of a peak more than 11,000 feet high. After 15 hours of climbing, he found a sheltered place in the granite and spent a bitterly cold night without a fire.

Most young men might have taken an experience like this as a warning. Not Mr. Kaag. “After that night, nothing frightened me, and I longed for depth and height.” Over the course of a month at the Nietzsche-Haus, he stopped eating and sleeping. His mother remarked on the phone that he seemed a “little off,” which he explains is the Calvinist way of

saying “completely insane.” Starving by inches, he began to understand the Nietzschean idea that “there is . . . something respectable about doing away with oneself, about taking control of time’s evanescence.” He climbed another lofty peak and literally stared into the abyss, tossing stones into a deep crevasse and wondering how long it might take to hit the bottom.



Friedrich Nietzsche.

PHOTO: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

In the end, Mr. Kaag pulled himself back from the brink, breaking his fast with a solitary meal at a “hulking hotel” called the Waldhaus. He never got to Turin, Italy, his original goal, where Nietzsche famously suffered a mental breakdown after seeing a horse being beaten in the street.

By 2016, Mr. Kaag is a twice-married professor of philosophy. Though he had never wanted children, he is now the loving and overprotective father of a little girl. At his wife’s perhaps misguided suggestion, he teaches an undergraduate course on Nietzsche. The students are intrigued—no one drops the class—but somewhat appalled by Nietzsche’s belief, as Mr. Kaag puts it, that “either suffering is the meaning of life, or there is no meaning of life.” One student remarks, “I used to be happy, then I started reading Nietzsche.”

Mr. Kaag plans a return to Sils-Maria, this time to stay with his family in the grand Waldhaus. It seems a fitting way to put the demons of his youth to rest. Soon,

however, he is setting off again on long, unplanned and risky treks into the mountains, toying again with thoughts of suicide and frightening his family when he returns hours late.

As in his previous book, Mr. Kaag deftly weaves his philosophical concerns with the small and large crises of daily life. His daughter's refusal to have her teeth brushed gives him insight into the stubborn refusals of Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*. His annoyance with a player piano recalls the Walter Benjamin essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

As narrator of his own story, Mr. Kaag is not as likable in "Hiking With Nietzsche" as he was in "American Philosophy." He is frequently angry, self-absorbed, compulsive and perfectionist. But his honesty is bracing, and he ends his story by describing a festival of masks and drumming in Basel that reveals something Dionysian about its people. They are not the sheep that he and Nietzsche might have taken them for. They struggle, like all of us, with responsibility and the adventure of living our lives.

Mr. Wisner is the author of "A Basket of Leaves" and the editor of "African Lives," "Thoreau's Wildflowers" and "Thoreau's Animals."