

Peter H. Hansen  
Worcester Polytechnic Institute, England

## ***Mum's Last Mountain: Alison Hargreaves and British Culture in the 1990s***

In 1995, Alison Hargreaves climbed both Mt. Everest and K2. In the spring she became the first woman and the second person to climb Everest solo and without oxygen or sherpas by the northeastern ridge in Tibet. After her return from Everest, she spent two weeks with her family in Scotland before leaving for K2 that summer. She reached the summit of K2 during a brief period of calm weather. As she and other climbers descended from the summit, she was killed by an avalanche or strong winds upwards of 100 mph which were presumed to have “blown her off” the mountain. As soon as her husband, Jim Ballard, learned of her death, he vowed to take his children to see “mum’s last mountain,” a promise which he kept only a month later. That fall, Ballard took their two young children, doctors, friends, and a television crew from the British Broadcasting Corporation to see K2, an expedition that was duly recorded for television and a book.

Alison Hargreaves’ death and the television program about her family both initiated widespread debate in the popular press in Britain and in the climbing community around the world. The debates concerning Hargreaves’ multiple, and sometimes competing, roles as woman and mother and professional climber, illuminate the ways in which working women, new men, and grieving children are represented today. I analyze

these television programs, news reports, and books in this paper. I discuss Hargreaves' climbing career, her views about mountaineering and motherhood, and the relationship she had with her husband. I also discuss the public reaction to her ascents, her multiple identities, and her children's role in the public commemoration of her death. This paper thus examines an episode in the interaction of gender, media, and power.