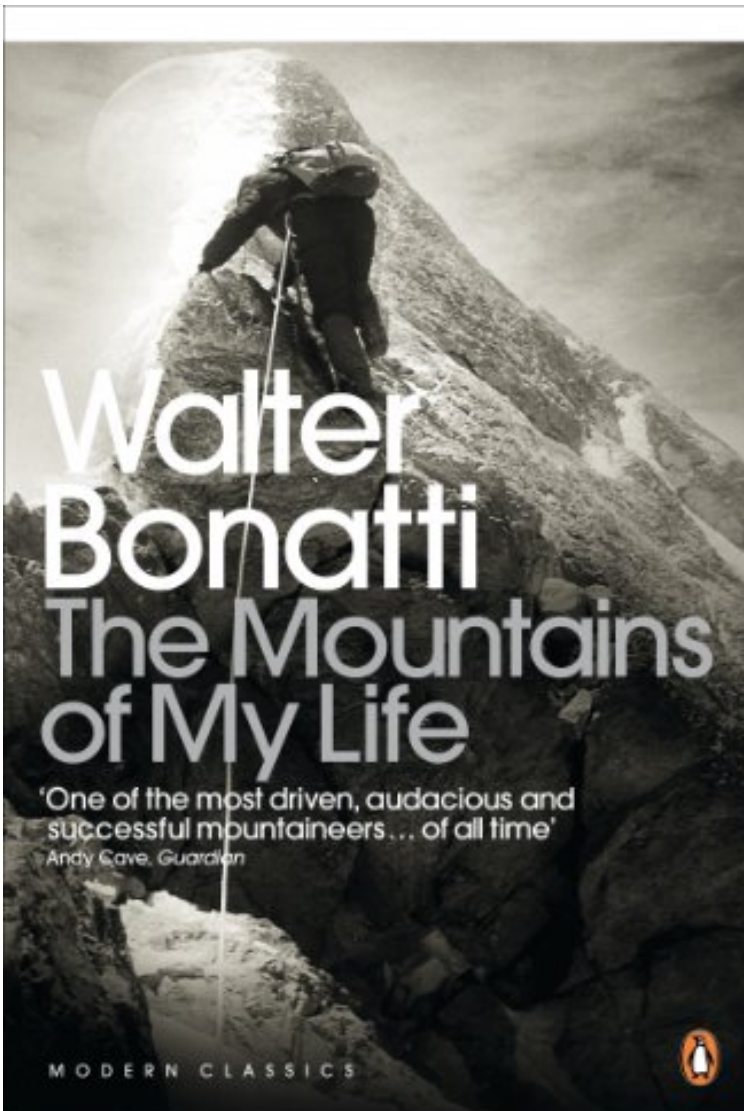


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# The Mountains of My Life



*Par Walter Bonatti*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe Mountains of My Life collects Walter Bonatti's classic writings detailing his exploits on numerous expeditions to different mountains of the world, as well as the real story behind the controversy over the events on K2 that changed his life. Bonatti is one of the greatest mountaineers of all time, and these awe-inspiring writings capture the adventure, audacity and magnitude of his craft.ExtraitChaper 1: Beginnings(1948)When I was a child I used to get away from home on one pretext or another during the school vacations and go where I could watch the eagles fly. It really was so, because in those days eagles did fly in the skies of the Prealps, and a pair of these predators had chosen for their nest a rock just above the area where I played-Vertova di Valseriana, one of the valleys to the north of

Bergamo. Higher up the ridge was Mount Alben, the peak that, of them all, most triggered my imagination, thanks to its white limestone spires, which were often wreathed in mist. At that point in my life, Mount Alben was the best example of nature at its most austere that I had ever seen, and I used to idolize it with all the ingenuousness of a child, making it the very symbol of my aspirations to adventure. I was disappointed many years later, when from the heights of the Grigna I realized, seeing it from a distance, my fabulous Alben was lower and squatter than the peak on which I was standing. I was still living in Monza in the years after the Second World War. They were hard times, too, for a boy with no prospects facing life in a defeated country. It was during those years that I came to know the Grigna, the slim rocky pyramid that overlooks the Brianza. And despite the fact that, in those days, I only went by the paths, I couldn't help but be fascinated by the spires and crests of that beautiful peak on which, with wonder and envy, I used to see climbing ropes at work. I would stand for hours on end watching those lucky people, then try to imitate them only a few feet from the ground on a nearby boulder. One day my usual companion arrived with his mother's clothesline in his knapsack. This was the first time I ever tied on to a climbing rope, but from then on I tried to put into practice what I had been watching. A real, genuine climb was to follow not much later, thanks to a sympathetic chap called Elia who was to become a friend of mine. One day, at the foot of the Nibbio, one of the Grigna towers, Elia came upon me raptly watching the progress of a rope pair that was busy on the rock face above. It must have rather touched him because he came up to me, decked out in all his climbing gear, and, with the air of an expert, said, "How'd you like to try it?" "I couldn't think of anything I'd like more!" I replied. Five minutes later we were climbing up by way of the path to the direttissima, which took us to the base of the pinnacle known as the Campaniletto (Little Bell Tower). We roped up and, after giving me some instructions, Elia set off. However, after no more than ten feet or so, my new friend seemed to founder and run aground. I watched him as he tried to go on, bending first to one side, then to the other. He curled himself up, then tried again, and yet again. But he stayed right where he was, ten feet from the ground, as I watched in silence. Finally he decided to turn back. "My soles are slipping!" he said to excuse himself, then added, "I'll try farther over to the left." He repeated the moves as before, as I silently urged him on and encouraged him with all the intensity I could muster, but with no better result. Go on! I said to myself. Keep it up! Or my first climb is going to vanish into smoke! In the end he came back down to the starting point. I was terribly disappointed and was about to resign myself to failure when, amazingly, Elia said, "Go on! You have a try with those boots of yours!" I was in fact wearing a pair of enormous army surplus boots with square toes, tethered to my ankles by a wide leather strap. If Elia couldn't get up wearing climbing boots, I thought, how on earth will I be able to do it without a rope holding me from above? In spite of this, I wanted to try so much, I took his place. I don't know how I did it, but I somehow managed to climb that first difficult pitch. Suddenly I felt I was at the center of a delirious dream. When the rope ran out, Elia, now held by me from above, was able to come up and join me, but just as we were about to change places he said, "Great! Why don't you just carry on, right up to the top?" And up to the summit I went. It was in this way I had my first encounter with a real rock face. It was August 1948, and that first climb on the Campaniletto galvanized me. More climbs on the Grigna peaks followed, many of them, as many as I could accomplish between dawn and dusk on all the Sundays that followed. I was now devoted heart and soul to rock faces, to overhangs, to the intimate joy of trying to overcome my own weaknesses in a struggle that committed me to the very limits of the possible. More than that, I came to know the satisfaction of passing where others had not been able to go. In a sort of direct communion between thought and action I discovered more and more about my own powers, my own limits. Perhaps I was repaying myself for what life had denied me in other ways, but it became clearer to me how up there, in direct contact with unsullied nature in an uncomplicated environment, I felt alive, free, and fulfilled—more and more every day. In this way I was discovering adventure, rich in everything that uplifts and exalts humanity. Above all, I was discovering my way of life. As I gained experience, the climbs I attempted demanded ever more single-minded commitment. In this way I progressed from the easiest to the most difficult routes on the Grigna peaks. It was a brief but intense cycle, which lasted all winter and ended in late spring—that is, at the beginning of the real, genuine Alpine climbing season of 1949. My usual companions, neophytes like myself, were Oggioni, Barzaghi, Casati, Aiuzzi, and, later, Carlo Mauri. The great Alpine peaks we now confronted bore prestigious names that put them in the top rank of the grades of difficulty: the direttissima of the Croz dell'Altissimo in the Brenta Dolomites, the north face of the Badile, the east face of the Aiguille Noir de Peuterey in the Mont Blanc group, and, in the same area, the Walker Spur on the north face of the Grandes Jorasses. A straight flush of successes for a nineteen-year-old lad, which was all I was then, less than a year after that first timid climb

with Elia on the Campaniletto. CHAPTER 2 Bregaglia: Three North Faces (1949) The major preoccupation of the thirties for all the best European climbers was the conquest of the six most difficult north faces in the Alps: the Lavaredo, Badile, Dru, Matterhorn, Eiger, and Grandes Jorasses. The Badile ("shovel") is a gigantic granite peak on the Italian-Swiss border, and its northwest face is indeed a smooth and almost vertical wall of rock closely resembling the back of an upturned shovel, including a huge central groove in its exact center that runs halfway up the wall toward the sharp transverse summit ridge. It was first climbed in 1937 by the great Italian climber Riccardo Cassin, accompanied by Esposito and Ratti. They succeeded in reaching the top on their first attempt, but it took them three days. Two Lecco climbers, Molteni and Valsecchi, were independently attempting the face, but were in difficulties and joined Cassin's three-man rope\* after the first bivouac. All five reached the summit as a single team in a blizzard after two more terrible days on the face, but Molteni and Valsecchi both died from exposure soon afterward during the descent. These two young men were experienced climbers, and their deaths serve to emphasize what a serious undertaking the Badile was in those days. To climb such a face and survive took great skill and extraordinary endurance. Yet in 1949 Bonatti, still a teenager, tackled the northwest face of the Badile in his very first alpine season with his friend Barzaghi not so much as a goal in itself but as a training climb for the north face of the Grandes Jorasses. Just beyond the Swiss frontier, on the borders of the Engadine, lies the most beautiful Alpine landscape I know: the Bregaglia, a typical Swiss valley where lush pastures, picturesque cottages, and dense conifers, overlooked by the rugged profiles of ice-clad mountains, typify the picture that has so often inspired painters of mountain scenery and is most eagerly sought by lovers of the Alps. The whole Bregaglia is wonderful, but among the valleys that converge on it is one most dear to mountaineers, the Val Bondasca. It begins at the little village of Bondo on the left-hand slope, then rises, fantastic as a fairy tale, to the foot of some of the greatest granite colossi in the Alps. What mountaineer has not at least dreamt of knowing the clear faces of the Badile, the Cengalo, Gemelli, Sciora, Trubinasca, and many other peaks? Some of them symbolize stages in the evolution of mountaineering, and I wish to speak of climbing three of their beautiful north faces, the memory of which binds me forever to these mountains. The first time I got to know them was in July 1949, when I set out for the northwest face of the Piz Badile: a gigantic granite rampart 2,200 feet high that had first been climbed in 1937 and ascended only once since then. Together with my faithful friend Barzaghi, I set out with all the enthusiasm of my nineteen years. At that age, with strong muscles and burning ambition, it was easy to believe no mountain obstacle could prevent us from succeeding. We didn't know the area; it was the first time we had encountered granite mountains and, even worse, we had the unfortunate idea of reaching the Badile from the Val Masino—that is, on foot from Italy after crossing the extremely tiring Porcellizzo and Trubinasca passes. The principal reasons for this were a shortage of cash and a complete absence of passports. As if this wasn't bad enough, we were also given confusing directions: "Take the first pass on your right after you've crossed the Porcellizzo," my friends had told me. It actually should have been the first on the left, so we had to climb up and down four steep, diffic... *Revue de presse*" Bonatti's voice reaches us from another world. . . . It is enchanting to realize that the magic of the mountains can still return."