

The man who fell to earth

Joe Simpson's escape from death as a young mountaineer in the Andes brought him fame as an author and has now been made into a film. But can he ever let go? **Jasper Rees** speaks to him



In the void: Joe Simpson in the Andes

Jasper Rees

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Joe Simpson was brought up to believe that men don't cry in public because "they don't do it very well". So no one was more uncomfortable than he was by his sudden fit of weeping at a recent film screening. "When the lights came on I was in tears. Everyone turned round and stared at me. I found it very disturbing."

Disturbing, maybe, but unsurprising. The film, released next month, is Joe's own story of his extraordinary escape from death in the Andes, as first told in his book, *Touching the Void*. He was closely involved in the film's making, giving 25 hours' worth of interviews to the director Kevin Macdonald. He didn't, he says proudly, cry once on camera, although the filmmakers evidently hoped he would, even taking him back up the mountainside where his life should have ended almost two decades earlier.

In Peru in 1985, Joe - then 25 - and his 21-year-old climbing partner Simon Yates were descending the remote mountain Siula Grande, which was hard to get up but even harder to get down, when Simpson broke - no shattered - his leg. They both assumed it was a death sentence, but Simon gave him a couple of paracetamol, dug himself into the snow and heroically lowered the broken Joe down the mountain slope, carefully inching down out 300ft of rope, then climbing down and doing it again, and again, for hours. All of this in temperatures of -20c and near darkness, meaning Simon could barely feel or see his hands. And the men had run out of supplies, no food or water left.

And then a bitter blizzard blew in. Joe was numb all over from the intense cold and being lowered over an overhanging ledge, and at that point the rope ran out. Dangling above the huge drop of a crevasse, Joe knew - and knew that Simon knew - that eventually his partner would lose control and tumble past him, killing them both. Yates made what seemed the only possible choice: he cut the rope to save himself.

The next morning Simon trudged back to base camp, believing Joe was dead. He wasn't. He had fallen into the crevasse (a deep ice cave), only to land, without further injury, on a

narrow ledge. It was impossible to climb upwards so his only option was to abseil deeper in the hope of finding some way out.

The crevasse turned out to be a huge ice cavern. Joe spotted brilliant sunshine peering through a hole high in its domed roof and, using ice axes, hauled himself up a steep snow slope towards it. He finally lugged himself out, only to face a six-mile downhill crawl, backwards on his bum, through terrain mazy with ice and huge drops, and then through a field of boulders.

He was dehydrated, in agony, and unsustained by food or the hope that Simon would still be at the base camp. Joe knew he was going to die. He just didn't want to die alone. The journey took him four days, and he was just in time: Simon was due to leave the camp in hours.

There are three questions that Joe gets all the time. "Are you and Simon still friends?" "When you were in Peru did you call on God to help you?" "Would you have done the same thing?" To which the answers are "Yes"; "Definitely not"; and "Actually, I don't think I could have done what Simon did."

"Simon was putting his life on the line absolutely full-on for hours on end. He knew logically that he did the only thing possible, but guilt is not logical. He actually said to me, 'Jesus, if I'd just walked back for a couple of hours I'd have found you.' And I remember saying to him, 'Why would you do that? Quite rightly you thought I was dead.' "