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Years of living dangerously

Suffolk-born journalist Jonathan Green has been beaten up by skinheads, reported on jihadist militias, been to the guerilla-controlled jungles of Colombia to follow the cocaine trail, and exposed corruption in Kazakhstan. But, he tells STEVEN RUSSELL, it was his suffocating East Anglian schooldays that inspired him to champion the underdog

IN the autumn of 2006 shots cut through the thin air of Cho Oyu, a mountain on the border of Tibet and Nepal and about 20 miles from Mount Everest. Chinese guards allegedly opened fire on about 70 men, women and children attempting to flee Tibet via the Nangpa La pass for the relative freedom of a life in exile. A 17-year-old nun, Kelsang Namtso, was killed. Her body lay in the snow, on "the roof of the world".

She and best friend Dolma Palkyi had left their hillside village the previous month, aiming for Dharamsala in India and powered by their frustration of life under Chinese rule. After weeks of harsh travelling, sick and frost-bitten, the group's ill-fated journey ended in tragedy.

It might have proved just another violent incident that few ever learned about but for the fact it was witnessed by dozens of Western climbers. Even then, apparently, many kept quiet – unwilling to risk the potential wrath of the soldiers there or the regime in Beijing, which could easily put a lid on future climbing adventures.

The teenager's death was filmed on video by a Romanian photographer who was part of an expedition. Word seeped out and the incident brought condemnation from human rights campaigners and some politicians.

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GIVING PEOPLE A VOICE:
Jonathan Green, who
grew up in Suffolk and is
now a Massachusetts-
based journalist

Photo: JONATHAN GREEN

From page 27

A short news item about this young woman who had been shot caught the eye back in the West and an editor asked freelance writer Jonathan Green "Do you think there's a wider story in it?"

The Suffolk-born journalist began investigating. He spoke to the Tibetan independence campaign and learned 3,000 people crossed the pass each year, against the strictures of Beijing.

Jonathan was offered the help of a guide to take him to the borders and meet Tibetans coming through, "though they'll be sacred and won't want to be seen talking with you".

He went, of course.

The writer hiked up to the Nangpa La and followed the Tibetans through before travelling back to Nepal and then India.

"It was like meeting people escaping a war zone, really," he says of those resorting to desperate measures to avoid Chinese rule. "They were all frostbitten and limping."

A stroke of good fortune came in meeting three brothers escorting their sisters across the border. They had witnessed the murder and were willing to talk.

All the stories Jonathan heard on his trip were told in an article for a national newspaper's weekend magazine. He went on to write a piece for an American publication – about the reluctance of witnesses to talk about the shooting – and then a book called *Murder in the High Himalaya*. "The story obsessed me," he admits.

The hardback was out last year and is now followed by the paperback – serendipitous timing, bearing in mind Chinese premier Wen Jiabao's talks with David Cameron and the signing of £1.4bn of trade agreements.

The Prime Minister might well have said that political and economic progress must go hand in hand, but Jonathan is scathing of the way the West treats this massive



SANCTUARY: A safe house in Nepal, used by Tibetans fleeing their homeland, and Chinese authority, for exile elsewhere

Photos:
JONATHAN GREEN

emerging economy with kid-gloves.

The international community is complicit in not rocking the boat, he argues, because it wants its companies to gain a foothold in new markets.

"The Tibet thing is a microcosm of how we deal with China at the moment. People don't say anything if it's not in their interests. They'll know about human rights abuses and all the other terrible stuff, but they won't say anything.

"It's quite complicated for most people to understand the background to Tibet, but I felt that by humanising it – one girl who was shot: who was she? Where did she come from? – I felt it was a very clear opportunity to put a face on this whole China/Tibet issue, and get a human rights story into the mainstream. It was a powerful story."

Others think so, too. Jonathan won the 2011 American Society of Journalists Outstanding Non-

Fiction Book Award – the latest in a string of awards for his work.

Some in the publishing industry warned him against writing the book and rocking the boat, as he would find it impossible in future to enter China – a handicap for a journalist. "But if I think like that, doesn't that make me the same as the people on the mountain?" – a reference to those who, during and after, kept their own counsel instead of speaking out.

"It's very important that people hear and understand the story, because it shines a very bright light not just on China but other places where terrible things happen, with people knowing about them but not saying anything."

The journalist thinks the human rights situation in China is the worst it's ever been, "as it's seen the pro-democracy protests in the Middle East and is worried the same thing is going to happen there, so the level of repression is so intense".

That said, he hopes for a happy outlook... eventually. "I remember what the Dalai Lama [the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people] said: that in the short term we're pessimistic, but in the long term we're optimistic." Jonathan would like to believe in karma, and that somewhere along the line "the bad guys always get caught".

He's seen quite a lot of bad guys during a couple of decades in investigative journalism. As well as his visits to Sudan, Colombia and Kazakhstan, the writer has opened eyes to the destruction of the rainforest in Borneo – with tribes starving as firms clear natural habitat to make way for lucrative palm-oil plantations – and human rights abuses surrounding gold-mining in Africa.

It was never like this in Suffolk . . . Jonathan, 40, grew up on the family pig farm at Glemsford, near Sudbury. It was sold when he was about 13 or 14 and the Greens moved

nearer to Sudbury; and, later, to Bury St Edmunds.

Much of the 1980s was spent at secondary school in East Anglia – not the Bury area – and absolutely hated it.

Pupils were actively discouraged from raising concerns about the regime, he says, and that quashing of freedom of speech seemed completely alien.

"Because there was such rampant injustice at that place I think it really made me want to become a journalist, actually. It was run on a very militaristic system and the punishment was quite draconian.

Rugby was valued highly. If you weren't interested in sport – and he wasn't, preferring books and writing – you weren't really part of things.

"I was so angry about it. I was so unhappy there. I decided I didn't want to go to university, because I'd had enough of formal education. I hadn't learned anything there at all. I left with one D, in politics, at A-level.

"All I wanted was to be a journalist. I loved George Orwell and Aldous Huxley and all this taking on of the system, and I got into American writers like Norman Mailer, who just loved to stir things up."

The riled schoolboy found himself part of a little group of non-conformists. "I think it rather consumed me, and perhaps other people. I certainly had a sharpened sense of right and wrong, justice and honour, and things like that. It actually made me quite angry."

After leaving school he had periods of work experience at local newspapers, including the EADT. From the off, he was always drawn to the edgy side of life.

He had a placement in a Suffolk town where heroin-dealing was said to be rife at a local pub. The editor agreed the 19-year-old rookie could work on an expose. He did, it was printed, and it caused a fuss – and, recalls Jonathan, the pub was closed down. It confirmed journalism could be a powerful force for good.

They were recessionary times, however, and jobs were hard to come

THE RISKS DON'T TURN ME ON

JONATHAN Green still has his roots in Suffolk. Parents Sarah and Anthony are in Bury St Edmunds and he's got a sister and brother in the UK, too. He does miss them, "but it just seems to be so hard to get ahead in England, financially. It just appears so set against you. I'm a bit loath to get back into that. I lived in London for 12 years and it's radically hard to have any standard of life."

The journalist suspects his mum and dad do worry about his trips to the world's troubled corners, but try to shut it out. "Now, when I go away, I don't tell them where I'm going!"

He remembers them once ringing and, during the conversation, asking where he was. Borneo, actually. "You could hear the jungle in the background." Borneo suffered huge devastation from an earthquake later that day, though luckily he wasn't near the affected region. But his parents understandably "freaked out" and called again to check he was OK.

Does he relish the riskiness of his vocation?

"I don't enjoy it. I absolutely

don't. I think some editors think I get a thrill out of the danger. No, I don't. Yes, it's exciting, but being at risk is no fun. Anything can happen in these places, at any time, but you sort of block all that out and focus on the story.

"It's this anger, again, I learnt from school and working in the bottling plant, and fighting hard to get onto newspapers, and competing with graduates – almost feeling like an underdog. Always feeling 'Well, if I don't push the boundaries...' I always felt I had to work twice as hard as anybody else. I didn't have that background. It's that anger that drives me."

Does he ever get ill on his adventures abroad? "Always. When I was in Borneo I got very sick – actually thought I had dysentery."

During his first book-research trip to Kathmandu he went out to eat with friends and it appears the food wasn't properly cooked. Again, Jonathan was very ill, losing 25lb in about a fortnight. He came home and had to go on antibiotics.



ROOF OF THE WORLD: Jonathan Green inside Tibet, reporting on the shooting in the High Himalaya

by. He had some freelance jobs, but not enough to make a living – hence a series of posts ranging from forklift-truck-driving to bottling plant work. He was employed for a while at a factory making glass-wool insulation and also at a petrol station. “Maths is not my strong suit and I could never quite work out the till and the pumps, and ended up handing out too much! I didn’t last very long!”

Another job involved making panels for sheds. “Carpentry too was not my thing. I always made the panels the wrong size. So they’d drive them to Manchester or somewhere to build a shed in a garden and realise it didn’t fit. I’d be in the workshop and could see the foreman answering the phone and then staring out of this glass window at me and saying ‘Come here!’”

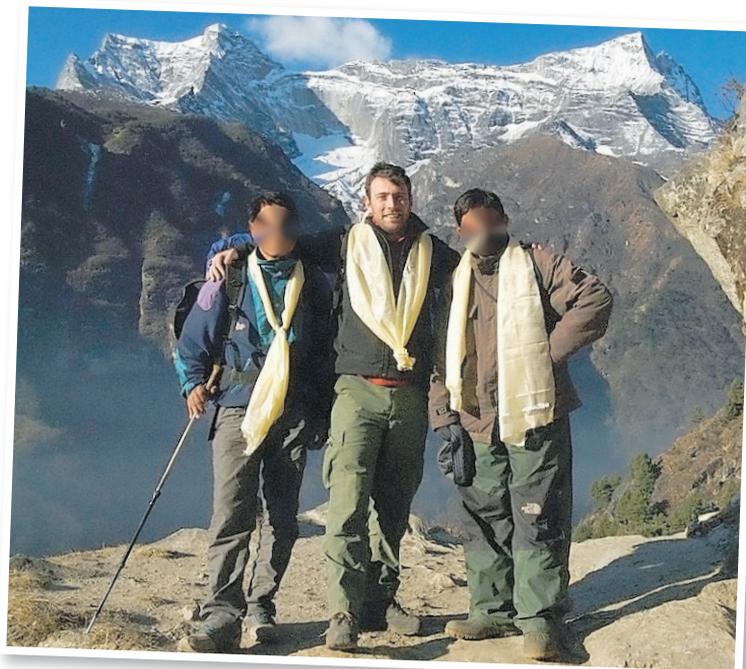
“I had hundreds of jobs. I think it helped in an odd way. I was quite comfortable talking to people and feel I understand some of the misery people have to put up with in order to survive.”

Things picked up when he worked on The Big Issue for about 18 months and loved it – undercover work and campaigning stories – before the focus began to shift towards celebrity interviews that were not his cup of tea.

Jonathan left to go freelance – writing a piece for Esquire magazine about being beaten up by skinheads in a London pub and detailing how, the morning after the assault, he had to cut away his dried, matted and blood-covered lashes so he could open his eyes.

There was work for national papers and other publications, but by then the media industry was truly obsessed with the notion of celebrity.

He remembers working with a particular magazine “which was doing really good foreign reportage stuff, and having one ridiculous conversation with an editor. I’d done a story about female paedophiles, of all things, and pitched it, and she said ‘Well,



LIVING DANGEROUSLY: Jonathan Green fact-finding on ‘the roof of the world’, in the High Himalaya. His caption: ‘Just south of Namche with two brave friends... we had gotten what we came for’

what’s the celebrity angle in that?’ ‘Well, there isn’t one, as far as I know!’ I don’t really care! It’s not important!”

The journalist had been going backwards and forwards to the United States on assignments and took to the country. Magazines were doing the kind of writing he loved – serious investigative work. There was some celebrity stuff, “but it was more tongue in cheek, and none of the fawning seen in the UK”. It’s been home for a good few years now.

Jonathan lives in a small town in Massachusetts, with a population of not much more than 16,000. “Longmeadow, in an odd way, is like Bury. It’s like a typical Suffolk market town, on a smaller scale. It is New England, after all! It’s a lot like home.”

He met wife Keisha, a doctor, in New York and they moved north when she got a job in urogynaecology at a medical centre in nearby Springfield, a larger city.

“There’s a lot wrong with the States, but you can have quite a good standard of life,” the writer reckons. “It seems to be more of a freer country than England. It’s not so much of a nanny state. But there are some negatives with that, too.”

He is quite angry with his homeland in many ways. “I really dislike the class system – the entitlement people have there – and I think that’s a huge

downside to Britain, and so deeply entrenched in the culture.”

Jonathan’s now working on magazine assignments, while also hoping to find another book project. He’s going to south America, has another project in Africa, and has TV work in the pipeline, too.

Driving him, always, is the desire to tell the stories of those who don’t have a voice. That’s why the media in general, and newspapers and serious magazines in particular, are so important, he insists. “Terribly corrupt places, like China and some nations within Africa, don’t have a healthy free press.”

In an ideal world he’d have the Government giving the UK newspaper industry some tax breaks, to help keep it financially robust and varied. Lower prices would help copy sales.

Is anything else vexing him – apart from the usual cross that has to be borne by Englishmen on the other side of the Atlantic: regularly being asked “Are you Australian?” (“It’s infuriating!”)

“Sarah Palin. She represents everything that’s wrong with this country. Doesn’t understand the rest of the world. Everything’s done in this folksy way.

“If she ever were elected president, I’d move back to England. Without a doubt.”

■ *Murder in the High Himalaya* is published by PublicAffairs, part of the Perseus Books Group, at £9.99

MEETING THE DALAI LAMA



SPIRITUAL LEADER, BUT ANGRY: Jonathan Green meets the Dalai Lama in India and found him very angry about the shooting of a teenage nun

THE foreword to *Murder in the High Himalaya* has been written by the Dalai Lama, the Tibetans’ spiritual leader.

Jonathan Green met him in India, after hiking up to the Nangpa La pass and following fleeing Tibetans on their journey into exile.

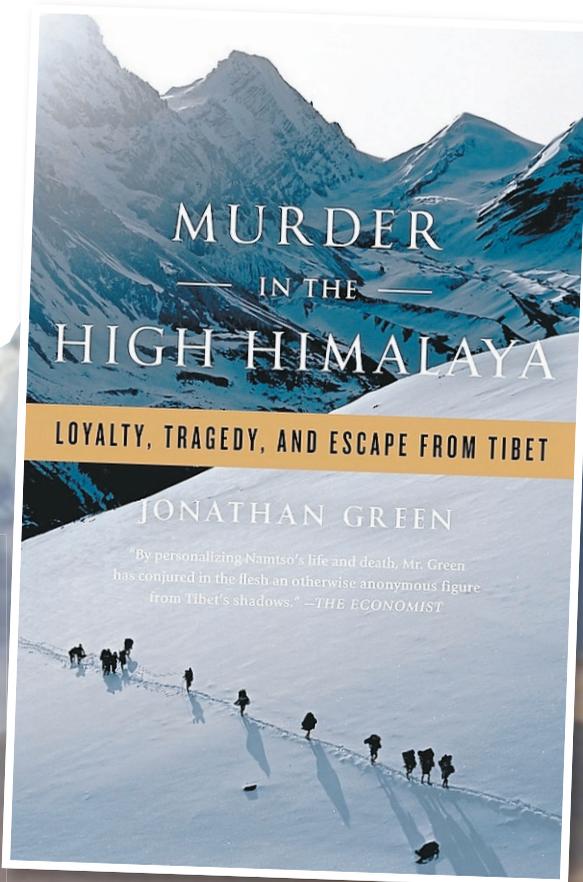
It’s hard to get an audience, but one of the Dalai Lama’s aides heard that the writer had experienced some of the harsh conditions the Tibetans endured in their break for greater freedom. “He looked upon me a bit more favourably, I think.”

The man he met was something of a surprise.

“I expected him to be this ethereal ‘god’, really – not floating in a cloud but this very powerful deity – and when I met him he was incredibly human and just angry.

“The last thing you expect with the Dalai Lama is for him to be angry. He was seriously p----- off the Chinese had shot a Buddhist nun, a girl committed to religious understanding, compassion and tolerance, and they’d murdered her in front of a lot of children and refugees escaping, and done it cold-bloodedly. They were so arrogant. He was very upset and angry.”

The Dalai Lama wondered why the West didn’t care enough. Perhaps, he suggested, because it was Asia. The point, says Jonathan, was that China’s Mao was responsible for more deaths than Stalin and Hitler combined, but the West had paid him much less attention. Probably because it had its own concerns closer to home – such as Soviet missiles on the doorstep.



TROUBLED STORY: Jonathan Green’s book *Murder in the High Himalaya*



PAID ULTIMATE PRICE: Young nun Kelsang Namtso, who died fleeing Tibet. Left, Dolma Palkyi, best friend of Kelsang Namtso, who was with her on the fatal attempt to leave Tibet and find greater freedom

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