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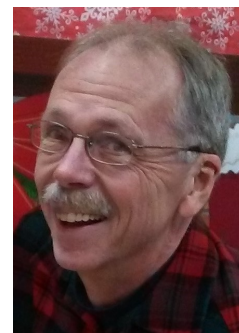
# THE PAIDEIA LETTER

SPECIAL EDITION (October 30, 2023)

D. Bruce Lockerbie, Chairman/CEO/Editor

## THE PAIDEIA LETTER INTERVIEW: DOUG HOUSER AND HIS NOVEL COLTER'S MOUNTAIN

In 2020, a former student named **Bill Oliver** introduced me to his friend **Doug Houser** (photo right), who was writing a book and had requested editorial advice. More than 67 years ago, I had known his father, Frank Houser, then a professor at **Wheaton College**. I agreed, and as I became acquainted with Doug, I learned that one of his boyhood friends had also been my student at **The Stony Brook School**. Connections such as these serve to remind me that there are no strangers in the Body of Christ—and no “coincidences” nor “accidents” either!

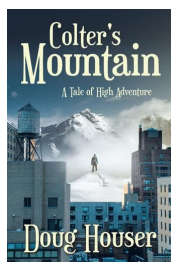


Over the course of our working relationship, Doug Houser and I met in person only once, when he came to Long Island to help care for his adult son Adam, who was in the final weeks of his earthly life. So I know that the dedication of his first novel *Colter's Mountain*, published by **WestBow**, a subsidiary of **Thomas Nelson**, comes from the heart of a proud father.



From his own early childhood Doug Houser recalls his family's summer travel to national parks and the mountains of the Pacific Northwest. Then his father accepted a position at **Whitworth University** and moved the family to Spokane, Washington; so Doug grew up in that region with its spectacular Cascade range, where he and his family made time for hiking and picnics on the lower slopes of Mount Rainier.

During the Vietnam War he served in the United States Army medical corps and later in Ranger mountaineering. Upon discharge and completion of his undergraduate degree at Whitworth, he moved to New Jersey in 1978, where he continues to reside. He has traveled with a contemporary Christian band, been associate pastor of a newly-planted church, taught in both Christian and public schools, is currently an elder in his local church, and leads a **Royal Rangers Outpost** for boys ages 5-13 with an outdoor adventure theme and activities.



From reading its first draft, I have considered *Colter's Mountain* to be a modern likeness to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the 17th century Christian allegory by John Bunyan (photo right)—but in this case, instead of an account of a metaphorical journey “*From This World to That Which Is to Come*,” Houser's story is presented as a mountain climbing adventure. Here is our conversation.



**DBL/PAIDEIA LETTER:** *Doug, how do you account for your knowledge of and fascination for mountains, and your choice to set your story in that context?*

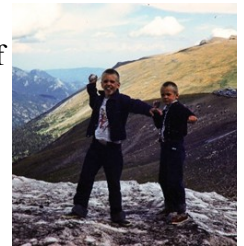
**DOUG HOUSER:** My very first memory is sitting on the side of a mountain in a vast field of wildflowers, glaciers towering many thousands of feet above into the azure sky. I didn't know if it was a dream or vision of some sort, or reality, until many years later when it popped up on the screen watching a slide show of family vacations. I was sitting next to my mother on the side of Mount Rainier.





Mount Rainier

I was one and a half or two and a half years old. My parents would take us camping for three weeks every summer in the national parks of the American West, singing songs about “purple mountains’ majesty above the fruited plains,” as we crossed the endless prairies. Glacier National Park, the Colorado Rockies, the Grand Tetons, Yellowstone, were my summer friends. My fascination with alpine environs and altitude has never waned; as I grew older and gained more skills, and means, I would always venture farther into the wilderness; and higher up, as I was able.



Pike’s Peak 1958

**DBL/PL:** *What’s the highest mountain peak you have climbed? Are you still an active mountaineer?*



**DH:** Two friends and I climbed Abercrombie Peak, 7308 feet, the second highest in Eastern Washington, in the middle of winter. We used snowshoes the whole way in fairly foggy conditions. We were rewarded by reaching the summit, just a few feet above the sea of clouds, at sunset. A few years before that, (1974) two of us bushwhacked into the Cabinet Mountains in Montana in an endeavor to climb Snowshoe Peak, (8738 feet) but were chased off on the morning of our summit attempt by an approaching thunderstorm. Here (photo left) is a picture of me forlornly assessing our planned approach before we high-tailed it to a lower elevation. I used that experience in *Colter’s Mountain*. So nothing of any remarkable altitude. After moving to the East Coast, my efforts eventually focused on technical rock climbing: mostly, multi-pitch ascents rated 5.10 or 5.11.



Am I still an active mountaineer? I would have to say no. My first date with my wife was a double date; my climbing partner and I took the young ladies on a simple rock climb, not knowing that my future wife was terrified of heights. (And very little else in the universe!) So that was my last technical climb. However, I have been very involved in teaching basic climbing skills to young people for many years. I do have designs on a future attempt on Mt. Rainier from the west, up the Success Divide and Success Cleaver.

**DBL/PL:** *I surmise that the idea of writing Colter’s Mountain has been percolating in your mind for a long time. What motivated you to settle in and devote the time necessary to compose this story?*

**DH:** I’ve always been an avid reader. Perhaps it was escapism, but I loved losing myself in that alternative universe. I began writing creatively when I was about 14, and found it even more enrapturing to create my own world, letting my imagination run. I must have started 30 or 40 books or short stories, only getting a chapter or two done, or even just a couple of pages, before I would lose focus and start another two or three stories. About 15 years ago I realized this was silly. If I ever wanted to fully enjoy this, or ever see any fruit from it in a practical sense so that I could share my creations with others, I had to pick one story and finish it. So I asked myself several questions: *Which story am I most invested in? Which is the most unique, or the most captivating tale? If I could only finish one in my lifetime, which one would it be?* The answer was easy: *Colter’s Mountain*, by a furlong. I then chose to discipline myself to work on that exclusively.

**DBL/PL:** *Who is your real-life model for Colter? How do you know him so well?*

**DH:** I think he is me. Perhaps borrowing some additional character traits from my younger brother and my sons; when I was 13, I did not have the necessary self-confidence, athleticism, quick wit and boldness, social skills, or even the analytical intelligence to grasp the realities of a situation and deal with it like Colter did. Those other boys did. Together, we make a good team.

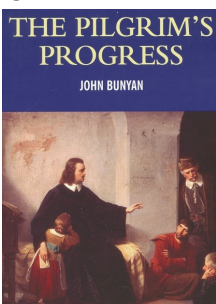


**DBL/PL:** *I note that you’ve dedicated much of your time to a boys’ ministry—a Christian version of the Boy Scouts as that organization was intended to be! This brings you into regular contact with the age-group in Colter’s Mountain. Is there any conscious cross-over between your knowledge of the boys in your church and the boys you have dramatized in your novel?*

**DH:** I don’t think it’s a conscious cross-over; but that’s a good suggestion for the future! Current contact with young people keeps your perspective and your own memories of being that age fresh. Most of the characters are composites of people I have encountered along the way, especially when I was young.

**DBL/PL:** *It’s not often that a reader of fiction discovers that the protagonist or “hero” of the story isn’t a person in the narrative but an inanimate object: For instance, Mark Twain’s raft in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn or the golden bowl in Henry James’ novel of that title. In your book, the central “character” appears to be the mountain that suddenly appears and changes the lives of the human beings who climb it. At what point in your writing did you decide or discover that your format was a Christian allegory?*

**DH:** I think it snuck up on me slowly. Unfortunately, I can't remember what led me to the idea of planting a rock that grows into a mountain. I soon realized that there are obvious similarities to Jack's planting his magic beans and climbing it to the giant's domain. Very early I recognized the dream God gave Nebuchadnezzar in the second chapter of Daniel had a tremendous connection: *"While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands ... the rock ... became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth,"* speaking in allegorical terms of the Kingdom of God (Daniel 2:34-35). But I didn't realize it would have so many universal applications. The more I wrote, the more parallels to the Christian life I saw. So, a few of the components are intentionally allegorical, but not most.



**DBL/PL:** *As already noted, the most famous such literary work is John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, written in 1684. Did you reread that book or make any conscious attempt to imitate its structure or style?*

**DH:** No; but of course, I had read *The Pilgrim's Progress* early in my Christian experience. I read somewhere that C. S. Lewis's original inspiration for the *Chronicles of Narnia* began with a picture in his mind of a glowing lamp post in the middle of a snow-covered evergreen forest. By the way, here's a rendition of that scene, painted by my son Adam Houser (photo left). From such a simple but intriguing picture in Lewis's imagination evolved the story of children entering a magic wardrobe to get there, and their ensuing adventures.

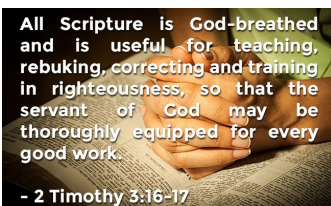


I think that if we are truly committed to a Biblical worldview and a relationship with Christ, then from our subconscious, as well as our conscious awareness, our creative endeavors will tend to take form and solidify in the mold of those deeply-held beliefs. But I am honored that you think there are similarities!

**DBL/PL:** *More than mere "similarities," I believe you may have been touched by the same literary gift that made Bunyan's story about Christian and his imagined trek toward the Celestial City the next bestselling English-language book after the Bible itself! However, I do hope that, unlike John Bunyan, you don't have to spend years in prison for the crime of your professed belief.*

*Now, Doug, without giving away the plot of your tale, what are some of the clues to understanding how climbing a mountain or learning more about that skill by joining a mountaineering club can be interpreted in your allegory?*

**DH:** Joining a mountaineering club is like joining a church. There are no Lone Ranger Christians; and there no mountaineers with a long-life expectancy who persist in solo efforts, especially as difficulty increases. There are basic pieces of equipment which those who choose to venture into the wild must become familiar with. There are core principles in being a Christian which we must adopt; spending time with the Lord in prayer, studying the Bible and applying it to our daily actions and our world view, fellowship in spiritual activities with those of like precious faith, and oversight by and accountability to spiritual leaders.



All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

- 2 Timothy 3:16-17

May I add another? Catching the vision and excitement for our own spiritual calling and adventure. Something most likely beyond what we think we are capable of; possible only because of the Holy Spirit's ability and purpose in us. Such *paideia* (as St. Paul says) is critical as we commit to live the Christian life. I love the NIV's rendering of 2 Timothy 3:16-17, *"... teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in all righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

**DBL/PL:** *Doug, who is your intended audience? Which readers are most likely to enjoy your book and pass it along to others?*

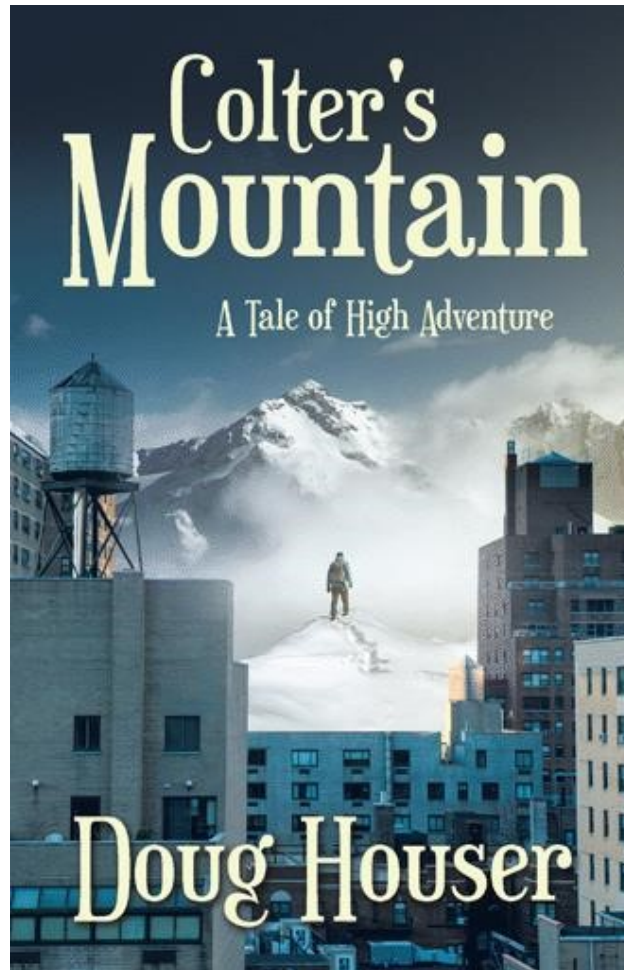
**DH:** My publisher requires me to pick one category, so I picked "children, ages 9 to 12." However, as it is a young adult fantasy, my hope is that the strength of the characters and the universal nature of their adventures will extend its appeal much farther into the teen years. The main characters are 13 and 14 respectively. **Colter** is the main character; **Chrysanthemum**, or **Chrys**, serves as guide and mentor to Colter and his friends. So hopefully the appeal is to boys and girls. As for which readers will be most likely to enjoy and pass along the book to others . . . it could be any Peter Pan who has never really grown up in that deep core of wonder and adventure. If they can't put the book down, they will eventually pass it along to others.

**DBL/PL:** *Thank you, Doug. I'm happy to endorse your novel as a 21st century Christian allegory suitable for young readers—and adults!—to read, enjoy, interpret, and apply to their own lives.*

For information about obtaining copies of *Colter's Mountain* for yourself and your students, see page 4.

*D. Bruce Lockerbie, Chairman/CEO/Editor*

  
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The book is published by WestBow Press (a division of Thomas Nelson)  
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