

## BOOK CLUB NOTES

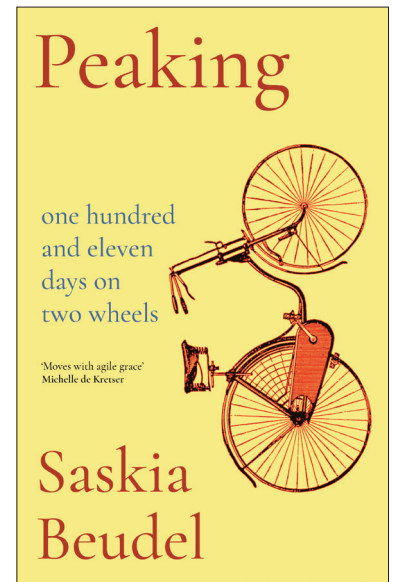
# Peaking

## One Hundred and Eleven Days on Two Wheels

**Author:** Saskia Beudel

**Publisher:** Monash University Publishing (2026)

**Genre:** Memoir/ History / Women's Studies



### Key Themes for Discussion

#### 1. The Ageing Body and Physical Agency

Beudel enters this 'ultra-marathon' on wheels in her late fifties. The book explores what it means to ask new things of an ageing body. Does our society view ageing and physical ambition as being at odds?

#### 2. Gender in Endurance Sports

Cycling – particularly gruelling alpine challenges – has traditionally been male-dominated. Discuss how Beudel navigates this space and how the history of women's cycling (mentioned through figures like Simone de Beauvoir) mirrors broader struggles for female autonomy and freedom.

#### 3. Connection to Landscape

The Victorian high country is a central character. The book reflects on the love of Country and how endurance sports change our relationship with

the natural world – especially during a time of environmental collapse and climate anxiety. Discuss.

#### 4. The Psychology of Endurance

Training for 111 days requires immense mental fortitude. How does Beudel describe the transition from the turmoil of inner life to the shifting outer world while in the saddle? Does the repetitive motion of cycling serve as a form of meditation or escape?

#### 5. Memory and Legacy

The inclusion of family history (like her grandmother) suggests that our physical pursuits are often tied to our lineage. How do the stories of the women before her influence Saskia's own drive to complete the challenge?

### Discussion Questions

1. The book is described as 'genre-defying'. Did you find the blend of personal training notes, history and philosophical reflection effective? Which element resonated with you most?
2. How did the author's age impact her experience on the Peaks Challenge? Is 'peaking' a moment in time, or a state of mind?
3. Saskia asks: *'How do we take pleasure from our bodies and nature at a time when the world seems to be collapsing around us?'* How would you answer this based on the book?
4. The bicycle has long been a tool of women's liberation, causing moral panic and even concern about the false medical condition 'bicycle face'. Why do you think the bicycle has caused such controversy, and how is it used for liberation in *Peaking*?
5. The three peaks are literal mountains, but what do they represent metaphorically for Saskia?
6. How does the author handle doubt and failure during her 111 days of training?

7. Tony Birch describes the book as ‘*narratives embedded in our bodies and landscapes*’. Can you think of a physical activity or a place where your own personal story feels ‘embedded’?
8. Did reading about the gruelling nature of the Peaks Challenge make you want to try something similar, or did it make you appreciate the view from the couch more? What kind of person do you think is drawn to these challenges, and why is that? Compare Saskia’s experience with the stories she tells of Simone de Beauvoir. How have the challenges for women changed – or stayed the same?
9. Ultimately, what do you think it means to ‘peak’? Is it the completion of the race, or something that happens during the training?

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## About the Book

### One woman’s genre-defying account of training for a gruelling alpine bicycle challenge

*We’re sitting around a wood stove as she tells these stories. There’s a gale force wind outside, forest heaving. Another woman in the group ran the New York marathon a few years ago. ‘I wouldn’t do Peaks,’ she says. ‘It’s beyond a marathon, more like an ultra-marathon. You’ll be on the bike all day, maybe eleven hours.’ She’d run the marathon in just under five.*

The three peaks are Tawonga Gap, Mt Hotham and Falls Creek in the Victorian high country. Organisers describe the Peaks Challenge as the most demanding one-day cycle event in Australia – the ultimate personal challenge. In her late fifties, Saskia Beudel decided to take that challenge.

*Peaking* is her genre-defying record of the hundred and eleven days spent preparing for Peaks – and of the event itself. An accomplished writer of both fiction and nonfiction, Saskia weaves together her training notes and wide-ranging reflections, the history of the bicycle and her own personal stories of cycling. She tussles with the state of contemporary life and the questions that come after long hours in the saddle.

What does it mean for a woman to enter this male-dominated event? As our bodies age, what new things can we ask of them? How do we take pleasure from our bodies and nature at a time when the world seems to be collapsing around us? How far can body – and mind – respond? Ultimately, what does it mean to ‘peak’ (or not)?

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## About the Author

Saskia Beudel is a writer of fiction and nonfiction. She is the author of the novel *Borrowed Eyes* and nonfiction works *A Country in Mind: Memoir with Landscape* and (with Jill Bennett) *Curating Sydney*. Her books have been shortlisted for the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards, a Dobbie Award and the

Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature. Saskia’s essays have appeared in *Best Australian Essays*, *The Saturday Paper*, *The Sydney Review of Books*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *HEAT*, the *Virginia Quarterly Review* and *The Iowa Review*, among others. Her website is [www.saskiabeudel.com](http://www.saskiabeudel.com).



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