

Books and Media

A Light through the Cracks: A Climber's Story

By Beth Rodden

Little A, 2024, 301 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-5039-0379-1. Price: \$16.99 (paperback).

BETH RODDEN'S HUSBAND HASN'T READ HER BOOK. SHE ALSO DOESN'T expect to find an eager reader in her ex-husband, Tommy Caldwell. But she told me she didn't have either of them in mind when she wrote this autobiography.

Rodden was thinking of younger versions of herself—the girl who was manipulating her diet through starvation and binging to stay under 80 pounds, the young adult who dropped out of college because she believed that nothing but being number 1 in competitive climbing would lead to fulfillment, the sponsored athlete who was abducted by terrorists and suffered PTSD for more than a decade before accepting therapeutic help, the pregnant athlete who would go through a difficult postpartum.

“Those were times in my life where I felt especially alone because I was too nervous to talk about things,” Rodden said in a phone interview from California's Yosemite Valley, where she lives. “If I had seen other people talk about it, then I would have been more apt to talk about it and would have felt less alone.”

Rodden, of course, is one of the best traditional-style rock climbers, male or female, of all time. In 2005, she became the second woman to free-climb the 2,900-foot-tall Nose on El Capitan in Yosemite. In 2008, she made the first ascent of a thin, vertical crack in Yosemite called Meltdown, still considered one of the hardest traditional routes in the world. Since then, Meltdown has been climbed by only four other people (three men, one woman).

So it might be hard to imagine someone as seemingly fearless as Rodden, who is comfortable hanging thousands of feet in the air by a thin nylon cord, dealing with such commonplace fears as shyness. But she freely admits to these and many other struggles in *A Light through the Cracks*, which is a well-crafted, well-paced coming-of-age story. Rodden doesn't hold back in self-criticism or in other-criticism, and this book is full of revelations and zingers about herself, Caldwell, and others.

“About ten years ago, I started writing on social media about the subjects that I always thought were taboo, like fear, body image, pregnancy, injuries,” Rodden told me. “I got a great response, and that’s when I really started to realize how much deeper and stronger a connection I had with people when we share our vulnerable selves. That’s when I started toying with the idea of writing a book.”

A Light through the Cracks is divided into three parts. Part one alternates between her early relationship with Caldwell and their kidnapping ordeal in Kyrgyzstan in 2000. This is by no means the same story that Caldwell—himself one of the best big-wall climbers in the world—told in the documentary *The Dawn Wall* (2018) and in his autobiography *The Push* (Viking, 2017). Rodden hasn’t seen or read either of those. “I think it’s good for Tommy to have space to tell his story on his terms without my input, and vice versa,” she explained.

We learn about their first date to the Cheesecake Factory in Boulder, Colorado, when Rodden was 19, and how they cuddled afterward in the back of his van while watching climbing movies. We learn about the unique challenges Rodden experienced during the Kyrgyzstan kidnapping, including having her period while held hostage for six days. After their escape, when she took her first shower, her blood-hardened underwear was glued to her pubic hair and “stiff as a board.” She ripped it off with one pull.

A few weeks before Kyrgyzstan, Rodden had tried to break up with Caldwell, but he asked her to take one more climbing trip with him. Afterward, as they dealt with post-trauma, they latched on to each other for support and became the inseparable “BethandTommy.” They got engaged, moved in together, and shared one email and one phone number. But their relationship lacked romance. On their wedding night, lying in Caldwell’s arms, Rodden felt trapped.

Part two tells the story of their six-year marriage, during which time they built a house in Yosemite and Rodden completed her historical ascent of Meltdown. A film was made about them called *The First Couple of Rock*. But Rodden struggles with PTSD, including a paranoia of anyone with darker skin. On September 11, 2001, her first thought was that the Kyrgyzstan terrorists had come to America looking for her. She also struggled with her body image, swinging between binging on Joe-Joe’s cookies and starving herself.

In 2008, Caldwell began climbing regularly with a laid-back group of Californians, including Randy Puro. They opened several difficult bouldering

routes in Yosemite, which is documented in a Reel Rock video called *The Valley*. The same year, Reel Rock featured a video about Rodden sending “Melt-down.” But behind the scenes, something else was happening. Rodden had felt an almost instantaneous attraction to Puro. Everything missing romantically from her relationship with Caldwell was thrown into relief.

“I wanted to know real love, even if it meant real heartache,” Rodden writes. “I wanted to have real sex.”

Part three of *A Light Through the Cracks* is about Rodden building a new life with Puro, coming to healthier terms with her body, and accepting therapeutic help for her PTSD and neuroses, which had become increasingly debilitating. In her younger years, Rodden’s obsessive-compulsiveness had pushed her to greater heights. She could hang for weeks on a thin rope while memorizing every divot and dimple on a rock wall. She could starve her body into lean form. But as she aged, her body broke down from years of malnutrition. Her inability to control everything about her pregnancy was overwhelming.

“Control was such a blessing and a curse for me,” Rodden told me. “I couldn’t keep that tight grip of control forever without things unraveling.”

A Light through the Cracks reminded me of the tennis player Andre Agassi’s bestselling autobiography, *Open* (Knopf, 2009), which Rodden said she has read and is a fan of. Like Rodden, Agassi had a love-hate relationship with his sport (mostly hate), which he buried for decades under a public facade.

“I spent so much of my career smiling and nodding and saying just the right thing,” Rodden said. “I look back at my career and think about what a horrible time it was. This book was definitely an opportunity for me to say the things that I didn’t feel like I could say.”

The book ends, sure enough, with light shining through the cracks. Now 44, Rodden has a 10-year-old son with Puro. They have rebuilt a friendship with Caldwell and his second wife, Becca, whom Rodden thanks in her book’s acknowledgments for “such an unlikely yet rich and valued friendship.” On social media, Rodden has gained respect for challenging social norms about what a climber’s body is supposed to look like.

“I lived a lot of my life like I needed to be this robot,” Rodden said. “Realizing we’re all human and humans are diverse and messy—it gives a lot more grace for yourself and others.”

—Stephen Kurczy

Blood Sweat Tears

Edited by Christine Reed

Rugged Outdoors Woman, LLC, 2024, 294 pages.

ISBN 978-1-7348418-2-4. Price: \$22 (paperback).

THE FIRST TIME I HAD MY PERIOD IN THE BACKCOUNTRY I WAS IN GRAYSON Highlands State Park in southwest Virginia with a college friend and his friend—someone I did not know. I had organized the trip to train for my upcoming thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail. I was unprepared for what my body delivered; I had no pads, tampons, or menstrual cup. Rather than turn the entire group around, I folded a pair of cotton socks (I was unprepared in numerous ways) and stuck them in my underwear. As Christine Reed points out in *Blood Sweat Tears*, this experience is not unusual. In fact it—menstruating, at least—is something that half of the world experiences for days each month, numerous weeks each a year, for multiple decades.

More people need to talk about this as this biological cycle is a part of billions of lives (and an integral reason for the existence of the rest). Reed writes, “This book is an acknowledgment that being on trail while existing in an assigned-female-at-birth body comes with a specific set of challenges. Some physical, some societal, and many mental. And we aren’t doing ourselves or each other a service by minimizing and acting like nothing is happening.”

But this book is about more than periods. It is about female bodies in the backcountry; thru-hiking and setting fastest-known-time (FKT) records; testing their physical and mental limits; and walking to find themselves, heal, learn, and share. Reed has collected an impressive list of authors including former *Alpinist* editor Katie Ives, long-distance hiker and author Heather Anderson, and writer and hiker Liesl Magnus (who has written for *Appalachia*). The stories come from hikers, runners, mothers, former military members, trail-builders, record holders, researchers, lovers, the heartbroken, and outdoor professionals. The contributing authors are diverse in a myriad of ways, and the one thing that binds them is inhabiting a body that bleeds and a deep love for moving through nature along trails.

Another binding aspect is the historically, and currently male-dominated, outdoor industry and backcountry culture. This societal challenge characterizes any woman or female body on trails. The majority whiteness of trail culture is also a salient challenge for some of the contributing authors. This collection expands to encompass a variety of experiences, and sharing these stories, as Reed writes, is “a powerful form of connection.”

The book is divided into three thematic sections, per the title. Blood is more than shed uterine lining, it also comes from scrapes and wounds while attempting to beat a record. Sweat is undoubtedly part of every story, as bodies move through difficult terrain, intense weather, and tough training regimens. Tears fall at the lowest point of hikes and at blissful realizations of self-worth and growth.

This book is for those who bleed and, almost more so, for those who don't. After all, if one bleeds in the backcountry, one must bring the necessary extra gear and pack it out. Bodies that bleed bring more, carry more, and endure unique challenges that roughly half of the world can't fully understand and will never experience. So, read on.

—*Elise Wallace*

Pack Light: A Journey to Find Myself

By Shilletha Curtis

Andscape Books, 2024, 236 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-368-09469-6. Price: \$27.99 (hardcover).

EVERY THRU-HIKER'S EXPERIENCE IS UNIQUE. FOR SHILLETHA CURTIS, THE Appalachian Trail was “a place where I could be myself, *with* severe depression, anxiety, and ADHD, and be accepted by nature, a loving force that did not judge.” Instead of presenting a straightforward narrative from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Katahdin in Maine, the author, who wrote for *Appalachia* (“Dragonsky Is Born,” Winter/Spring 2024), explores new territory in *Pack Light*. She describes what was inside her heart and mind. With searing honesty, she shares many challenges, setbacks, and trauma from her first three decades of life.

Sometimes new troubles arose during her solo hike sponsored by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. Known to those on the trail as Dragonsky, the 27-year-old Black woman had to confront not just her own demons but also issues of personal safety. Real and potential threats often arose not from natural forces but from interactions with humans living near the trail.

“Like the moon, mental illness is a continuous cycle, one that waxes and wanes from light to dark and dark to light. I carried that darkness through the trail in a heavy pack, one that weighed me down but also made me stronger.” By trail's end she found new strength, self-acceptance, and a new path to happiness, something she knew that she might have to fight to attain. But Curtis

has proved herself to be a fighter. She fully intends to be the second Black woman to complete the Triple Crown: the Appalachian Trail, Continental Divide Trail, and Pacific Crest Trail.

—Lisa Brownell

Alpine Rising: Sherpas, Baltis, and the Triumph of Local Climbers in the Greater Ranges

By Bernadette McDonald

Mountaineers Books, 2024, 272 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-68051-578-7. Price: \$29.95 (hardcover).

Headstrap: Legends and Lore from the Climbing Sherpas of Darjeeling

By Nandini Purandare and Deepa Balsavar

Mountaineers Books, 2024, 320 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-68051-640-1. Price: \$29.95 (paperback).

HOW MANY HIMALAYAN MOUNTAINEERS CAN YOU NAME? READERS OF THIS journal could likely tick off a quick list of notable high-altitude climbers over the decades, be it Maurice Herzog of France, Edmund Hillary of England, Reinhold Messner of Italy, or David Breashears of the United States.

But how many mountaineers can you name who are actually from the Himalaya? Behind the exploits of each of the aforementioned mountaineers were critical support teams made up of Sherpas, Baltis, and others who over the past century have sacrificed fingers, toes, and their lives to enable the accomplishments of Western climbers. Their names are much less known, their stories less heralded.

Two new books aim to put a spotlight on these underappreciated Nepali and Pakistani mountaineers. In *Alpine Rising: Sherpas, Baltis, and the Triumph of Local Climbers in the Greater Ranges*, Canadian author Bernadette McDonald gives a revisionist retelling of some of the most famous Himalayan expeditions over the past century from the point of view of the local climbers and support crews.

Authoritatively rooted in historical documents, archival research, and interviews with nearly 100 mountaineers and mountaineering experts, *Alpine Rising* takes the reader far beyond history's most famous Sherpa, Tenzing Norgay—who with Hillary was the first person to summit the tallest mountain

in the world. Even Norgay once wryly observed that his account of that 1953 climb was never taken seriously: “My story is not official. I am not an Englishman but a Sherpa.”

The other new book, *Headstrap: Legends and Lore from the Climbing Sherpas of Darjeeling*, features many of the same characters in its Sherpa-focused retelling of mountaineering history, although in a much more free-flowing, anecdotal, and sometimes haphazard fashion. Indian authors Nandini Purandare and Deepa Balsavar essentially take the reader on a stroll through the Himalayan city of Darjeeling, which has long been a breeding ground for mountaineers, including Norgay.

Whereas most mountaineering books tend to focus on one person or expedition, these books focus on a group of people covering about a century. A weakness to this approach is that *Alpine Rising* and *Headstrap* both lack narrative arc and can feel episodic. On the flip side, these books strongly reinforce the breadth, skill, and triumph of local mountaineering.

The reader learns about Ang Tsering, who was on the 1924 British Mount Everest expedition when George Mallory disappeared near the summit. Tsering was also on the 1934 German Nanga Parbat expedition that saw ten people die and Tsering lose all his toes. “In later years, Sherpas were compensated for amputations due to frostbite—ten rupees per digit and twenty rupees for the index finger, thumb, or big toe,” McDonald writes. “But not in 1934.”

Then there’s Pasang Kikuli, who led a push high up K2 on the 1938 American expedition that laid the groundwork for Fritz Wiessner’s near-successful but ultimately disastrous 1939 American expedition, which Kikuli was on alongside Pasang Dawa Lama, “one of the greatest Sherpa climbers of his generation.” Without supplemental oxygen, Pasang Dawa Lama and Wiessner climbed within 230 meters of the summit—a high point unmatched for more than a decade. Fifteen years later, Pasang Dawa Lama made the first ascent of Cho Oyu, the world’s sixth-highest mountain.

We also meet Ang Tharkay, “the father of modern Sherpa guides,” according to McDonald. In the 1930s, Tharkay was on four expeditions to Everest and two to Nanda Devi. None reached a summit, but all showcased Tharkay’s skill in route-finding and his high-altitude strength inside a 5-foot frame. In 1950, Tharkay climbed within 600 meters of Annapurna’s peak; he turned back because his feet were beginning to freeze. Expedition leader Maurice Herzog continued going up, becoming the first person to summit an 8,000-meter mountain, but he also lost most of his fingers and toes to frostbite and had to be carried down by Tharkay and other Sherpas.

McDonald traces a line between those early climbers and Nirmal Purja, arguably the first modern celebrity Nepalese climber, who led an all-Nepalese climbing team up the world's fourteen 8,000-meter peaks in a record-setting six months and six days in 2019—a feat chronicled in the Netflix documentary *14 Peaks: Nothing Is Impossible* (2021). Outspoken about the discrimination faced by Sherpa climbers, Purja said he was fighting to lay his people's claim on mountaineering history.

Purja continued to lay that claim in 2021, when he, Mingma Gyalje Sherpa (Mingma G), and eight other Nepalis made the first winter ascent of K2, which Purja described as “one of the last remaining grand prizes in mountaineering.” “Somehow,” writes McDonald, “they found the energy to belt out the Nepali national anthem as they stepped onto the pinnacle of K2.” A video of them singing at the summit went viral, and “ten Nepali climbers became ten global superstars.”

The longtime *Alpinist* editor Katie Ives wrote in her foreword to *Headstrap* that it is “a body of adventure literature far more significant than the endless procession of I-Survived-the-Death-Zone and How-Climbing-the-Corporate-Ladder-Can-Be-Your-Personal-Everest accounts by Sherpas' Western clients that crowd bestseller lists and propel inspirational speaking tours.” I agree. While the storytelling doesn't meet the adrenaline-pumping rush of more well-known mountaineering tales, one hopes this is a foundation on which those stories will come.

—Stephen Kurczy

Tramping Monadnock! New Discoveries with Henry David Thoreau

By Robert M. Young

Self-published (lulu.com), 2023, 373 pages.

ISBN 978-1-387-31314-3. For price and to buy, contact ryoung731@gmail.com (paperback).

ANY BOOK WITH AN EXCLAMATION POINT IN ITS TITLE SHOULD BE ADMIRERD. In this case, it's both a gesture of appreciation and a form of accompaniment: two men from Massachusetts—a naturalist long gone and a living author who admires him deeply—traveling side by side across centuries and 300 acres of New Hampshire's Mount Monadnock. Separately and together, the two examine flora and fauna; make detailed notes; draw maps, trees, and rocks; and always, always keep records, down to the mile and the minute.

Henry David Thoreau wrote daily in his journals during three of his four trips to Monadnock between 1844 and 1860. “Concord was his place at home,” Young writes. “Monadnock was becoming a place in his soul.” Henry (for they would have been on a first-name basis) would have approved the scholarship that led Young, 170 years later on foot and a trusty bicycle, to follow Henry’s tramping and his transportation routes, along paths that are no longer paths and railroads that are no longer railroads. Young is adept at geology, history, botany, and geography. He is an apt pupil of a teacher who lived a century earlier. His careful research shows in 30 pages of appended notes and a 12-page bibliography,

This book is precise and loving. We get the benefit of Young’s close reading of Thoreau’s journals as he alternates Thoreau’s entries with his own reconnaissance missions. He chases down the locations of campsites, bushwhacks trails, and hand-sketches maps in which Thoreau is a stick figure climbing ever onward. We see the attentive illustrations by Thoreau (he was excellent at rocks) and Young (including one charming drawing of a frog in the genus *Hylode*, found on the summit). And the lists, oh the lists: precise measurements of everything Thoreau saw and everything he packed, with notes for improvement next time around. “Omit eggs,” he wrote, having brought eighteen of them.

In the midst of details and science, there is a constant appreciation of poetry. “Nothing escaped his attention,” Young writes. “Everything came into focus.” When, approaching the mountain, Thoreau described it as “that gray color of antiquity . . . color of unpainted wood, weather-stain, time-stain . . . the color of things that endure,” you hear yourself sigh.

—*Elissa Ely*

Ghosts of Glencoe

By Chuck Schwerin

North Country Books, 2024, 472 pages.

ISBN 978-1-4930-8508-8. Price: \$24.95 (paperback), \$23.50 (Kindle).

THIS IS A NOVEL CENTERED IN THE ADIRONDACKS, LOCATED AT AN EXPERIMENTAL boarding school for fifth to ninth graders. The mountains, the Adirondack High Peaks in winter, make this tale spring to life in a way new to this reader, yet old with the sense of storytelling. Here we have young teens coming to grips with their own identities, making for challenges that bring success

as well as harrowing failures that need to be set right. Author Chuck Schwerin has us gripped as he unfolds a plot that strains on a leash of multiple strands. This reader felt the authenticity in every word.

At the Glencoe School, near Lake Placid, we meet Tracy Barcomb, 15, son of an Ivy League college-educated farmer and all-but-PhD environmentalist mother who are at odds with which path is best for their son. Tracy loves cycling and mountain climbing, especially the challenge of winter.

Then there is Libby Goldman, daughter of an obscenely wealthy, upper-class, Upper West Side Jewish family. Dr. and Mrs. Goldman have mapped out their own path for their beautiful and talented daughter, which has her changing school much too often to be able to make lasting friendships. Libby feels unloved and unheard by her parents whose obsessively unbending interest is on the experiential learning of Rudolf Steiner. Libby gets the irony, but it angers her even more.

There is ninth grader Jake, who is Black and feels his mission in life is to speak for his race and to open the eyes of whites. He does this with intelligence and grace. He plans to go through the best schools to educate himself to be a leader for his race.

Malcolm Dandridge is a wild card. A chubby boy from Ohio, adopted by a single woman of wealth. He exhibits his unfitness for the hands-on education Glencoe offers—gardening, animal husbandry, maple sugaring, rock climbing, and mountain trips—by mean-spirited bullying that pleases him greatly.

Hamish MacLean is the headmaster of Glencoe, a visionary with a gift for unorthodox leadership. The book starts with a prologue in which we become privy to Hamish's safely guarded secret. This is the crux of the story. I was drawn along compulsively as Schwerin spins out the plot that thickens to add two escaped convicts from a nearby correctional facility, one of whom, Garth, is one scary dude. Hamish's secret festers and grows. We understand his issue having read the prologue. He does, too, but he is too scared, the risk is too great, his self-respect is too much at stake, his need to conceal is too overpowering—all conspire to prevent him from just dealing with his inability to open up. He soothes his wounds with good Scotch alcohol and painkillers.

The characters will fulfill their destinies in the form of a winter mountain overnight across a snowy MacIntyre Range that includes the second highest peak in the Adirondacks, Algonquin Peak. Here intense whiteout and extreme cold separate the party. Tracy, Libby, and Malcolm are stranded. We know that Tracy and Malcolm hate each other, that Tracy loves Libby, and that Libby despises Tracy.

Reenter the escaped convicts: Garth and Ramon, who have been camped out for weeks waiting to trudge north through deep snow through the mountains to Canada. The youthful threesome stumble into their camp. Ramon, a young Puerto Rican jailed for selling drugs, has his own backstory that I won't give away here, but he knows that the lives of these young people are at stake. Garth would not risk letting them go alive. Meanwhile, the Glencoe School and most of New York State become involved in the search for the three missing students. In a cliff-top fight for life, death appears inevitable. Hamish sees the writing on the wall for his future if they die.

Who dies? Who lives? What alchemy occurs to bring needed life changes? Here is the hero's journey writ large where environment—the Adirondacks in winter—is the character-shaping agent against which this coming-of-age tale is played out.

—*Laura Waterman*

The Lifer: Rock Climbing Adventures in the Gunks and Beyond

By Russ Clune

Catharsis, 2023, 274 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-955690-51-5. Price: \$25 (paperback).

Survival Is Not Assured: The Life of Climber Jim Donini

By Geoff Powter

Mountaineers Books, 2024, 272 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-68051-537-4. Price: \$22.95 (paperback).

IN 2019, BLACK DIAMOND PRODUCED A 17-MINUTE DOCUMENTARY CALLED *The Lifer* that chronicled the adventures of Russ Clune, an elder statesman of the rock-climbing community and a fixture at the Shawangunks ridgeline in New York. Now comes a breezy and rollicking version of Clune's story in book form, also called *The Lifer*, authored by Clune with what he acknowledges was "skillful editing" from Matt Samet, the former editor of *Climbing* magazine.

One of America's top climbers and most prolific travelers in the 1980s, Clune helped knit together an international climbing community as a self-made U.S. climbing ambassador long before the term became appropriated by outdoor goods companies as a way to sell their wares. Through his travels, Clune also helped accelerate the development of rock climbing

by cross-pollinating styles and bringing new tactics to other crags and countries.

As an example of that, in Germany in 1981, Clune was likely the first American to observe and take part in the new “hangdog” tactics of “sport climbing,” wherein a climber would hang on a rope to rehearse crux moves on bolted rock walls (acts deemed unethical by traditionalists). Later in Seoul, Clune used that tactic to tick off several first free ascents of cracks rated up to 5.13. His trip changes Korean climbing by putting a higher focus on achieving clean ascents of hard routes. A Korean climbing magazine even offers a reward to the first person to repeat all his routes.

A native of New Jersey, Clune was introduced to climbing in 1977 at the University of Vermont. A few weeks later, he joined his instructor on a trip to the Shawangunks, where a “ridge of immaculate stone went on for miles,” as he writes in *The Lifer*. “I’d found it. This was my place, my cathedral, my home.”

Back then, the cliffs near New Paltz boasted the hardest climbs in the United States. Traveling there every weekend, Clune rapidly developed in skill and soon sought out new climbing areas: The Needles, Devils Tower, Grand Teton, Yosemite, Eldorado Canyon, and Smith Rock. He also went abroad—to Britain, Germany, France, Czechoslovakia (as it was then called), Australia, South Korea, and the Soviet Union. He climbed with such legends as Lynn Hill, Todd Skinner, and Germany’s Wolfgang Güllich.

Güllich and Clune together participated in one of the first-ever rock-climbing competitions, held in Bardonecchia, Italy, in 1985. Both performed miserably, though Clune won a consolation trophy for “coming the greatest distance to join the competition.” In that moment, Clune realized that climbing and his life were both at pivot points.

“I knew older climbers who had dropped out of the mainstream and became permanent dirtbags,” Clune writes. “Almost all of them had become cynical and bitter. Some became alcoholics. Many were essentially broke and homeless. I didn’t want to end up there.”

Clune opted to return to school in 1985, earning a graduate degree in sports psychology from Columbia University. Two weeks before starting that program, as a kind of last hurrah to his boldest climbing days, he soloed the route Supercrack (5.12c) in the Gunks, a feat that remains unrepeated. After graduate school, Clune became a sales rep for Chouinard Equipment, then helped buy that company out of bankruptcy and reconstitute it as Black Diamond Equipment. Based out of the Gunks, Clune worked for Black Diamond for another 25 years.

The Lifer succeeds because of its humor, lack of pretension, and keen eye for colorful details about wasp nests and cat food burritos.

This contrasts with another new book about a lesser-known figure in the climbing world: *Survival Is Not Assured: The Life of Climber Jim Donini*, by Geoff Powter. Donini's résumé includes the first ascent in 1976 of Torre Egger in Patagonia as well as a near-ascent of Latok I in Pakistan in 1978 with Michael Kennedy, George Lowe, and Jeff Lowe. In this authorized biography, Donini comes across as a solid climbing partner but not as solid a life partner. He leaves behind a trail of divorces (his second wife attempted suicide while he was in the mountains) as well as two children who died of drug overdoses.

Powter attempts to paint a nuanced portrait of Donini, but Powter seems to lack the personal distance to go all the way. In a revealing story, Powter recounts how Donini's friends were only talking about their own mountain projects during his son's funeral, which rubbed Donini's sister the wrong way. "Still able to conjure her frustrated puzzlement twenty years later," Powter writes, "she asked me, 'What the hell is *wrong* with you people?'" Powter quickly dismisses Donini's sister as someone who just doesn't understand climbers, but I felt more connection with Donini's sister in that moment.

Throughout *Survival Is Not Assured*, I could never quite connect with Donini. With Clune's *The Lifer*, I just enjoyed the ride.

—Stephen Kurczy

Everest, Inc.

The Renegades and Rogues Who Built an Industry at the Top of the World

By Will Cockrell

Gallery Books, 2024, 352 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-9821-9045-3. Price: \$29.95

MOUNT EVEREST HAS BEEN OVERCROWDED FOR YEARS. AN EXAMPLE FROM this book: In spring 2022, 670 climbers summited, all from the Nepal side. Typically, the route is sufficiently protected from storm and wind only a limited number of days. That is why you can see photographs of dozens of climbers in a tight line on summit day.

Will Cockrell traces this condition to 1985, when Dave Breashears, for a price, led 55-year-old Dick Bass, the wealthy "recreational mountaineer," to the top. It was clear that Everest could be a guided mountain—and for more