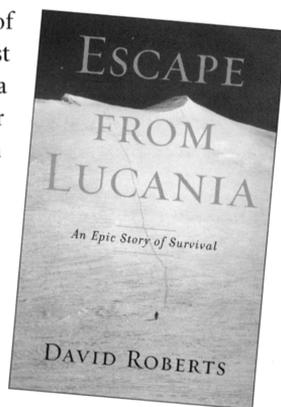


*Escape from Lucania: An Epic Story of Survival.* DAVID ROBERTS. NEW YORK: SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2002. 206 PAGES. \$23.00.

This is the full story of Bob Bates and Brad Washburn's first ascent of the St. Elias Range giant, Mt. Lucania, in 1937, at the time the highest unclimbed peak in North America at 17,150 feet. The ascent of Lucania is, as often, a small part of the story. The larger story is their utter isolation and necessary self-sufficiency in unknown territory. Upon dropping the men off on the glacier, bush pilot Bob Reeve found difficult snow and was just barely able to get his plane off the ground again. Thus Reeve was unable to fly in their other two partners, and even more crucial, unable to return after the climbing to pick up Bates and Washburn. They were on their own. On the way out they manage to knock off the second ascent of Mt. Steele (16,644'), but mainly they manage to find their way over 100 miles of mostly glaciated terrain and cross en route a raging Donjek River.



Throughout the book Roberts lets Bates and Washburn speak in their own voices: the trip moves forward in time but mostly without the overt use of hindsight. All three of them have tried to recreate what Bates and Washburn were thinking at the time of the climb. This strategy works well and Roberts intrudes gently with present day observations in parenthetical statements throughout, little asides from the present.

As anyone who is paying attention knows, David Roberts has a great sense of story, both what raw materials make a great story and how to tell it. In this case the story is so great a lesser writer may have succeeded in the telling. But Roberts brings a lot to the table here, most notably a 40-year mentor-protégé relationship with Washburn and a long personal resumé of climbing trips to Alaska. Though these are not the subject here, Roberts' presence in the book in the prologue and epilogue are terrific because they allow him to show Bates and Washburn in the present. In a way, their triumph on Lucania in 1937 was only the beginning—not only of their illustrious climbing careers, but of their lives as generous, graceful, and vibrant persons. Also, the reader realizes that Roberts is in a position similar to the reader: we admire these guys and wonder how we would measure up in similar circumstances.

In the prologue Roberts writes: "I felt it my duty, as I set to work on the Lucania story to dig beneath the surface of the interpersonal, to find out just what quarrels and tensions and unspoken doubts must have laced Brad and Bob's experience...."

If you know Roberts' work, you know that this is often his strategy: he wants the truth, warts and all, if they appear. He's one of the only writers I know whose work is criticized for not hiding the truth, as he sees it. His happy conclusion here is:

"In the end, however, I discovered something else: that as far as I could tell, Brad and Bob belonged to a different subspecies of human beings from myself and all the fellows my age I had climbed with." It's a very pleasing conclusion: the men you thought were gods are revealed, indeed to be gods. One of the great pleasures of reading this book is the reader's awareness that Bates and Washburn were able to collaborate extensively with Roberts, helping to get it right, and moreover that they're around to see their achievement recognized as one of the great North American mountaineering tales, as it surely is.