

BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY DAVID STEVENSON

On the Ridge Between Life and Death: A Climbing Life Reexamined.
DAVID ROBERTS. NEW YORK: SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2005. 415 PAGES.
HARDCOVER. \$26.00.

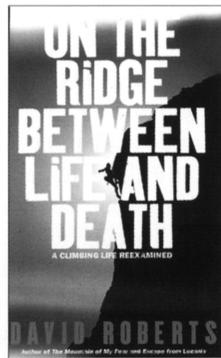
My introduction to the writing of David Roberts was by way of his novella, “Like Water and Like Wind,” published in the 1980 edition of the celebrated mountaineering journal *Ascent*. At the time, Roberts was best known for his groundbreaking climbs in Alaska, adventures that dangled like fat hams to those of us who hungered for more than the endless baloney of adolescence. As an aspiring alpinist, I rejoiced that this piece of fiction, based loosely on the Maestri-Cerro Torre controversy, seemed to have been created to indulge my personal fascinations.

Sex, death, and lots and lots of climbing, these were the themes that Roberts distilled from his experiences and imagination—although it seemed as though he’d been rooting around inside my head as well. Reading and rereading his story, I remember feeling both exhilarated and vaguely unnerved that Roberts seemed to be speaking directly to me (the fact that he set his tale in Minneapolis—my home turf—only deepened this conviction).

In the decades since, Roberts has pretty much abandoned fiction; instead, he’s built an enviable literary reputation and an oeuvre based primarily on adventure journalism that includes a proclivity for risk-and-reward introspection. Meanwhile, having survived my own youthful and rollicking indifference to the dangers of icy peaks, I have now reached the cusp of middle age, where—like a salmon who has successfully completed her run and is a bit bewildered as to how she should feel about that and what to do next—I find that Roberts is still talking to me.

On the Ridge Between Life and Death is Roberts’ latest and perhaps final jab at a windmill he first charged over 25 years ago in a landmark essay titled “Moments of Doubt.” I say “latest jab” because readers of this book who are familiar with Roberts’ earlier work will find familiar material here. Once again, he recounts his significant mountain triumphs and tragedies (indeed, some of this material represents at least the third or fourth go around for true Roberts devotees), and again he lays it all out as pretext for reflecting upon the 800-pound gorilla lurking in the complex psyche of the mountaineer: “Is climbing worth the risks?” I say “final jab” because of the exhaustive nature (over 400 pages!) of this new effort and the sixty-plus years of perspective that ultimately lead Roberts to a new and compelling result. And I apply the metaphor of tilting at windmills, not because Roberts is undertaking a futile or misguided quest, but because this is ultimately a deeply personal question that Roberts can really only hope to answer for himself. For the rest of us, however, he certainly knows how to get the ball rolling.

Roberts’ themes still include sex, death, and lots and lots of climbing. This time however, he isn’t making anything up. Although the jacket copy emphasizes philosophy over memoir, this is misleading. In *On the Ridge Between Life and Death*, Roberts lays open his life—warts and



all—from teenage sexual fumbblings to adult insecurities, in remarkable, even excruciating detail. Compared to reading the classic Homeric accounts served up by Terray, Buhl, and Bonington, reading Roberts feels decidedly voyeuristic. In less skilled hands, such candor and minutia might feel overwrought—like a cathartic exercise rather than content germane to the premise—but Roberts binds it all together with enough continuity and gripping adventure narrative to produce what is arguably the first truly honest climbing autobiography.

It's the means to an end. Roberts' full and eventful life is context for the friends and partners whose terms were cut tragically short pursuing the very activity that has given the author his identity. The difference, it seems, between the romantic notions espoused in "Moments of Doubt" and this new take on the measures of risk versus reward, is the realization that life is a cumulative and evolving experience—and that transcendence (or whatever it is we seek battling a mountain) comes via the more frightening, more difficult, and truly courageous act of meeting life's myriad challenges, day after day, year after year. The other profundity pushing Roberts to his conclusions is a newfound appreciation for the seemingly boundless depths of grief. Through interviews and correspondence with the close friends and families of his long lost climbing companions, he discovers that ripples in a pond of heartbreak never fade, but bounce endlessly from shore to shore, eroding the edges with as much force and definition as in the first moments after the falling pebble shocked them into being. Whether or not readers agree with Roberts' conclusions, these passages are certain to give climbers pause each time they tie to the rope.

So then, must we play it safe, just to avoid gravely wounding our parents and siblings? I don't think that's what Roberts is advocating at all. What he's telling me—writing with that uncanny ability to communicate as though he's addressing my personal insecurities about how to gracefully transition from one stage of life (and climbing) to the next—is that climbing can be a vehicle for growth, challenge, spirituality, etc., but it will not provide *the* answer. Lasting peace, satisfaction, transcendence—whatever we choose to call it—must be sought in more selfless pursuits. Roberts has clearly wrestled long and hard with the bugaboo of selfishness. Even here, in a volume dedicated to "reexamining a climbing life," it dogs him. A primary focus of Roberts' adolescence is the relationship with a girl he calls "Lisa." The fact that he paints himself as utterly self-serving throughout the affair is not out of step with the nature of young love (at least, not from a boy's perspective). And yet, by the time the relationship is over, the price Lisa has paid is considerable, with at least the potential to haunt her as completely as the death of a loved one. Surely, in the end, as Roberts gingerly explores the enduring traumas of long-ago climbing tragedies and paints them in a broader context, he must at least acknowledge the obvious parallel. Instead, Lisa's experience is marginalized—in truth, ignored—and she is reduced to a metaphor for failure. It seems a conspicuous and chauvinistic omission that will likely anger some readers.

Honest writing, however, demands no pretense or false modesty. What matters is not that readers like the author, but whether they believe him. I now recognize that in my very first encounter with Roberts' prose, it was his candid and unflinching voice that made my skin crawl. *On the Ridge Between Life and Death* feels even more personal and relevant. Here, climbers are likely to grin and cringe in sympathy with experiences and feelings that deserve conversation, but few are ever brave enough to voice. At the same time, non-climbers will find the best exposition ever crafted about why someone would risk life and limb to top a mountain.