

These are not distracting but lend credence, context, and depth to the discussion at hand.

But primarily this is a story that delves deeply into the hubris, ethics, and racism that is consuming modern mountaineering. One of the thorniest questions is, what is a hero? Who were the heroes of that tragic event—were there any true heroes at all? As Wilkinson states, history is written by the white guys with the sat phones and the blogs.

Like a good climbing route, this book is honest, fearless, passionate, relentless, direct, and fully captivating.

CHARLEY MACE

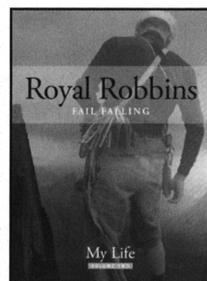
***Fail Falling*. Royal Robbins. California: Pink Mountain Press, 2010. 190 pages. Paperback. \$19.95.**

Royal Robbins is writing his life story, and what a story it is. The whole project will stretch over eight chronologically ordered volumes. This one goes from 1950 to 1957; in that time Robbins becomes a legit climber. He starts with top-roping and small boulders, but by 1957 he's putting up the Northwest Face route on Half Dome. Along the way there's stirring climbing, life as a high school dropout in a fatherless household, car crashes, and Los Angeles in the blazing fifties.

The title of Volume Two is *Fail Falling*, which is not just a bold approach to climbing, but Robbins' credo. It means trusting yourself to succeed. He explains that "attitude makes all the difference between success and failure." His life story certainly demonstrates the benefit of grit and enthusiasm (along with really good balance). The book's many photos give you a lot of ropes tied around waists, trailing straight and clean through space, the only protection the gleam in the climber's eye. And these are first ascents done in sneakers—you'll see them wearing Chuck Taylors, not my first choice for the Steck-Salathé, but that's how Robbins did it. And with his introductions of fellow climbers from the era, a community comes alive.

Fail Falling is best in its extended descriptions of memorable climbs like the Northwest Face. Robbins can craft a narrative with depth of character and uncertainty of outcome. We can then sit back while his memory returns to the rock he consumed with ferocious skill. Robbins has the spotlight throughout but is generous in praise for the many people who helped him succeed. He makes it clear that his early climbing was enabled by a social structure that's no longer influential in American climbing: the climbing club. Robbins got his start with the Rock Climbing Section of the Sierra Club, which offered tutelage to beginners, guidance to youths, and organized outings for all. His subsequent prominence as an environmentalist-climber—he advanced the clean-climbing movement in word with *Basic Rockcraft* and in deed with the Nutcracker—likely owes much to this provenance. Robbins' evolution embodies John Muir's dream that the Sierra Club outings would take urban citizens into the wild and inspire them to take the wild under their protection back in the city. In *Fail Falling* the virtuous cycle from wild experience to environmental ethics spans the era of Yosemite's Golden Age.

Fail Falling brings to mind the old paradox, "Great men make history. History makes great men." Should we praise the individual for achieving in the circumstances, or recognize the circumstances that elevated the individual? The fifties and sixties combined the technological revolution of nylon ropes and lighter gear with an unprecedented expansion of disposable income and inexpensive transportation. *Fail Falling* shows that Robbins' generation and the Baby Boomers right behind



it were in the right place at the right time to scoop what the circumstances gifted them and get credit for doing it. *Fail Falling* also shows a few heroic men and women grasping their moment and blowing through the limits that restrain the rest of us. Robbins is such a hero.

Fail Falling shares a remarkable story. Robbins' early days run on the jet fuel of enthusiasm, and these pages reveal a unique spirit to his life that can possess and inspire the willing reader.

JEFF MCCARTHY

***Climbing—Philosophy for Everyone: Because It's There.* Stephen E. Schmid, ed. Foreword by Hans Florine. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 256 pages. Paperback. \$19.95**

Eric Shipton once said “climbing is a form of philosophy,” or something like that. His philosophy was a woolly mix of Emersonian transcendentalism and nature worship—pretty much what most of us subscribe to. But you'll not find any of it in this collection of 17 essays by contemporary professional philosophers—nor by the writer-climbers mimicking their style. In his introduction editor Stephen E. Schmid, a devotee of Ayn Rand, whose Objectivism is hardly everyone's idea of philosophy, declares that his goal is to pose “intriguing questions that make philosophy interesting and exceptionally so when applied to the activity of climbing.” But most of the questions raised cover familiar ground: the justification of risk, the pursuit of virtue or character, and thumb-sucking on ethics. This may have been no bad thing had the philosophical perspective yielded originality. But there is too little of that. I felt as if I'd landed in the same old climbers' bar, thrashing the same old conversations about reasons *why?*, the same natter on bolting, trad vs sport, only this time with guys with a compulsion to stick Wittgenstein, Hegel, John Stuart Mill, Locke, Aristotle into their shop talk. I give Schmid high marks for intellectual audacity. His attempt to shoehorn the ideas of great philosophers into a sporting activity that requires no self-knowledge—the lack of which may improve performance (action at its purest)—is riskier than climbing the Eiger wearing flipflops.

The few creditable pieces in this collection make their point without belaboring ties to the philosopher pantheon. “From Route Finding to Redpointing: Climbing Culture as a Gift Economy,” by Debora Halbert, is a fine discussion of the value created by new routes and how they are unique objects—never mind that gift economy is an old idea in anthropology and not philosophy. Another piece I liked looked at the climber's access to his or her inner mental states and the unreliability of remembered impressions. Stephen M. Downes in “Are You Experienced?” references psychological experiments that illuminate how we are not as we seem to ourselves. “Consider another familiar predicament: you reach the anchors of a route and while clipping in declare ‘That felt easy.’ Everyone watching, including your nervous belayer, witnessed a desperate by-the-skin-of-your-teeth, wobbler of an ascent. Were you experiencing what it feels like for a climb to feel easy?” He warns us to be aware of the unreliability of our impressions and to get feedback from others and, further, that “failure to remember can easily be understood as a failure to access an inner state.” This trait, he surmises, explains the wide prevalence of inaccurate reporting of first ascents and of post-accident narratives.

In “Why Climb?” analytic philosopher Joe Fitschen explores evolutionary explanations of

