

Question: What do these have in common: Mount Si, James Tabor, Nanga Parbat, Willi Unsoeld, Grand Jorasses, Les Droites?

Answer: They're all misspelled in the book. It seems doubtful to me that Hauptman himself does not know the correct spelling of these, so, can we no longer get an editor or proof-reader who knows or will learn these things? I fear this situation will only worsen in the future.

Many of the subjects are, well, the *usual subjects*, climbers who have been in the spotlight (our somewhat dim spotlight, anyway) for a long time: Roskelley, Ridgeway, Houston, Wickwire. These are, of course, some of the most interesting and storied fellows in our pantheon, but we know their stories, don't we? There is perhaps a hint of diplomacy or perspective from them here that may have been absent when we last heard from them. Like any good book, one of the effects of this one is to remind the reader to return to some of these subjects' earlier works, and, my quibbles aside, I expect to return to this book in the future as well.

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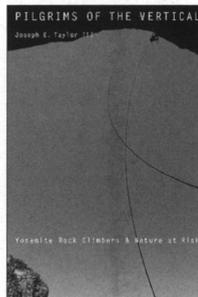
Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk.
Joseph E Taylor III. Harvard University Press, 2010. 384 pages.
Hardcover. \$29.95.

Taylor's unique book stems from an earlier article that has evolved to 276 pages, with another 72 of notes. *Pilgrims* is intended as both a detailed climbing history and an environmental essay. We traverse a myriad of anecdotes and details as climbing mutates from Victorian beginnings through bucolic Sierra Club stewardship to the extreme sacred practices of our current vanguard. Few have worked this hard to write the American Climbing Story. The text is strongest and most interesting as a standard history, specifically up to about 1960. Bringing us to the current day, the second half is more ambitious and apparently difficult for Taylor to resolve. He is a bit of a climber but more an environmental historian. Accordingly, Taylor is trying for much more than climbing history.

He sketches how climbing has mirrored the general social forces of each era. In recent decades top participants—think Robbins or Harding—have helped foster a seldom-questioned image of climbing as rebellious but also elitist. The story behind this essentially Romantic image presents many serious issues. Taylor holds all accountable in a sympathetic and humorous near-polemic, while warning of climbing's heavy use of the natural world—the pinning out of cracks, climbers' trails, uncontrolled camps, chalk on everything, crowds abounding.

Taylor loves to point out how in the Sierra Club days climbing was vigorously heterosocial, but when the new assumption of risk reached serious extreme, women were whisked out of "harm's way" in a Byronic runaway toward chimerical icons on high. Taylor then shifts gears from his rigorous, friendly perspective on our early years to a more skeptical gaze at modern climbers, which may be more emotional on his part. His sympathy ends; he smells a rat.

According to Taylor, climbers began to feel that authentic experience is based on the proposition that only risk and suffering bring genuine "passage," and that passage is the point. Risk and suffering become an ideal, rather than a ubiquitous but temporary part of growing up and of the cycle the individual takes in his society everywhere. He admits having bought into such rites of passage as



a youth, and even today they retain “latently powerful” influences on him. He assures us, however, that these fallacious ideals are easily “unmasked” once one understands what props them up: “false promises, elitist privilege, and a sense of entitlement.” And here is where the real fight begins, with Taylor’s deconstruction and dismissal of the Romantic heritage of risk—a heritage that is especially integral to the conventional narrative of climbing today. Perception of risk, often curiously flawed when one examines actuarial tables, is a subject dear to the hearts of many climbers. Taylor makes some excellent criticisms, but in the end his analysis is unconvincing.

His claims regarding the environmental costs of climbing are not established or convincing, either. They read more as stipulated bulwarks dramatized for his arguments. For the reader the damage and depletion remains apocryphal. All the bolt holes and pin scars in Yosemite occupy less volume than a dozen copies of his hardback. Trails worn down by climbers’ access, lichen scraped off walls, and dirt dug from cracks are all renewable and represent less biomass than a hundred yards of landscaped highway median.

In the final sentences all Taylor can offer is that sustainability and balance in future climbing might be reached by “restrained” use, which would be “respectable,” and we would thereby “grow up.” Concluding, he affirms that risk culture is an illusion, and that our idealization of the Wild, with the elite individual center-pieced within it, is a deeply flawed vision. It’s an end-of-days outlook. As a history, however, *Pilgrims of the Vertical* is one of our best. [Editor’s note: an AAJ editor who has read this book found it to be riddled with historical errors.]

PETER HAAN