

deserves a prominent position in every climber's pantheon."

That's the tip of the iceberg. There are stories about climbing Aconcagua with a "hideous blue and yellow" \$45 Wal-Mart Wilderness Trails tent, "hoopsticking" desert towers in New Mexico, his first outdoor climbing trip with his then-fiancé (now wife) Ann, a hilarious account of a '93 ascent of El Cap, and the ultimate tick story, "Ticking a Few Routes in Montana." Just when you think you can't laugh any more, he hits you with another line that lays you out. Example:

"Tell 'em I watched a dozen ticks crawl up your shorts while you were climbing," my wife pipes up as I poke the keyboard. "Remember those nasty, tiny Coq Sportif shorts you had? Ooooooh. Dunno what was worse: the shorts or the ticks...."

My wife is glad I finished this book. I kept waking her up at 1 a.m. laughing. Burns reminds me of my favorite partners. No matter what happens, they manage to find humor in everything. Guys like that make climbing trips a lot more fun, and life on the edge more bearable.

AL HOSPERS

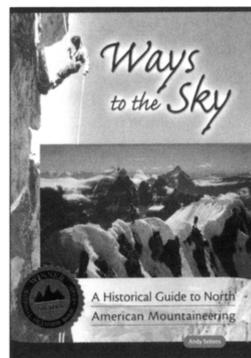
Ways to the Sky: A Historical Guide to North American Mountaineering, ANDY SELTERS. GOLDEN, CO: THE AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB PRESS. 334 PGS. 65 B&W PHOTOS, 15 MAPS. \$24.95.

When Jeff McCarthy returned this spring from the "International Festival of Mountaineering Literature," he remarked that "the Brits seem far more concerned with history than we are." Hard to argue with that, especially given that the first comprehensive book-length history of climbing in North America was written by Chris Jones—a Brit—in 1976. Here in the States guidebooks and instructional books compete for climbers' attention, followed closely, I suspect, by website chat rooms and forums. History accrues climb by climb in these *AAJ* pages, in magazine reports, and in very condensed form in *some* guidebooks. My general sense is that here in the United States we find something admirable in Salathé's brief query: "Vy can't ve chust climb?"

Selters does a good job of explaining why it may not be quite enough to "chust climb." His Introduction begins with a line from Rita Dove: "If you don't look back, the future never happens." The Introduction bears close reading, for here Selters lays out his parameters, his vision, his questions, and even his definition of and "rules" of mountaineering.

Selters sets out to give us "the story of original-style mountaineering." He then asks what the phrase means. He lays out three admittedly broad parameters: one, the territory is the "higher peaks" of North America (so the Gunks and Yosemite, for example, are excluded). This parameter is also exemplified by references to particular climbers in the indices: in this tome Robbins garners six; in Jones' book Robbins gets 31; and in Roper's *Camp 4*. (Although I found it unavoidable to compare Selters' book to Jones', it's not fair, since each is indispensable.)

Second parameter: "Climbs that have been done predominantly free." Fair enough, I suppose, but he implies that climbs that did employ aid do not count as "progress." He adds that big-wall climbs in Alaska deserve a companion volume, but includes some anyway, all but ignoring their use of fixed rope, which, after all, is not exactly "direct aid from anchors to make progress." Thus, by his



own criteria Selters probably should have left out the first ascent of Mt. Dickey by Roberts, Rowell, and Ward, but he rightly calls it “one of the most demanding climbs of the decade” (note the 30-year gap between its first and second ascent, just last summer!). Similarly, he mentions that on the first ascent of Mt. Kennedy’s north ridge fixed rope was used between camps, but doesn’t mention that an astounding 8,000 feet of it were placed on a route of about 6,000 vertical feet.

Third Parameter: He wished to understand “the progression of our mountain routes.” This is really the issue he’s grappling with: what is *progress*, “what yardstick do we measure with?” It’s a charge he does not take on lightly, and despite my quibbles here, handles nicely throughout. Nonetheless, this concern with progress occasionally gets muddled: “the truest measure of mountaineering progress, then, is the evolution of the idea of mountaineering.” Huh?

Selters does a good job of allowing chronology to structure the text. Logical enough you say, but easier said than done when you consider the importance of place and the force of personalities, either of which might compete with chronology as organizing principles. Chic Scott’s *Pushing the Limits: The Story of Canadian Mountaineering* (2000)—a terrific book—suffers a bit from this; too often it’s hard to be certain if you’re traveling through time, space, or personalities—the book succeeds by its sheer thoroughness.

Particularly smart is Selters’ breaking the book into four periods, which although tied to chronology are conceptual: I. “Discovery by Summiting,” II. “Adventure Realized,” III. “Better than We Raise Our Skill,” and IV. “When ‘Why’ Disappeared.” The introductions to these periods are fine essays and, coupled with the equally fine epilogue, comprise a thoughtful overview of our arena.

It’s not just in the introductions and overviews that Selters’ thoughtfulness is revealed. Smart, hard-earned observations abound throughout. For example, he remarks about Cheesmond and Freer’s disappearance on their 1987 Hummingbird Ridge attempt: “For many climbers, their deaths peeled away a layer of denial that says, if you’re good enough mountaineering is essentially safe. When climbers this good are killed, the core of the game is laid open, and we see all-too-mortal hearts perhaps playing the odds too many times.”

Peter Croft notes in his Foreword that the book not only introduced him to “new chunks of history but also helped to fire up recollections of my own.” I agree. One of the book’s great strengths is that even though much of the early history ought to be familiar to me, I feel that I am being re-shown freshly through Selters’ vision. One way he has accomplished this is by a terrific selection of photographs, clearly reproduced, that were new to me. Another way is through the closing section of each chapter: “mini-portraits” of representative climbs from the era. There I felt the book was at its freshest and most exciting. Selters chose these with “a bias to routes that haven’t seen as bright a spotlight as our best known classics.” I had done a few of the routes and knew of few others, but a surprising number were peaks that hadn’t appeared on my radar screen—a gift, to be sure.

My only real complaint is that although Selters brilliantly chooses passages to quote, he rarely provides their sources. It’s not that I doubt his accuracy; it’s that the book doesn’t facilitate further research very well. Not every reader will care, but people interested in history tend to be interested in the primary sources. Although Jones did not footnote his text (for which I’m grateful) he did provide a precise and thorough list of references at the end of each chapter.

To return to Selters’ choice of Rita Dove’s words as an opening epigraph, like most readers I am not personally pushing the future of our “life game” (Selters’ term). But I am pushing (very

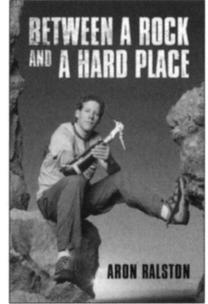
gently) the future of my own climbing, and this book both helps me contextualize where I've been and gives me much to dream about in the years ahead.

If I had to choose a single volume as a cornerstone for a young climber's library, this is the book. *Ways to the Sky* joins Jones' *Climbing in North America*, Scott's *Pushing the Limits*, and the ubiquitous Roper and Steck's *Fifty Classic Climbs in North America* (1979) as the foundation for understanding where we've been, what we value, and what might yet be possible.

DAVID STEVENSON

Between a Rock and a Hard Place. ARON RALSTON. ATRIA BOOKS: NEW YORK, 2004. 354 PAGES, WITH 16 PAGES OF COLOR PHOTOS. \$26.00

This is the book about the guy who cut his arm off, by the guy who cut his arm off. His name is Aron Ralston, and he's alternately gritty and dorky, inspiring and annoying. The fact that you already know the story is the first crux for this narrative: Aron goes canyoneering solo, gets his hand stuck and suffers, cuts off his arm, and walks out. The second crux is for the author to stretch this grisly incident into a book-length tale. How well the writing meets these challenges depends on the reader. If you've picked the book up for alpine adventure, you'll be disappointed, but if it's fortitude and resolution in the wilderness you seek, this is your book.



Ralston's first chapter describes the hike and then the tumble with a chockstone that shackled him to a remote canyon wall. The shock of not getting free is agonizingly well described, and we settle in with Ralston for a long, cold desert night in his "glove of sandstone." But now the writer reaches back into his past, stretching the incident into a full 300-page book, and it's here the reader begins to feel the washboard road rattling the suspension of narrative. He's in his mid-twenties, and while his life has been interesting, he's not exactly Ulysses. Ralston brings us through his youthful exploits in the mountains, including some rookie suffering we all recognize: postholing pointlessly for miles—and some we probably won't—chasing a bear who took his food in the Tetons. We travel with Ralston through various mini-epics, a major life change from an engineering career to living in Aspen, and arrive at his goal of climbing all Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks in winter.

There is much to like in this enthusiasm, and much to admire in his re-invention of himself as an endurance athlete. However, for you climbers there are apt to be some awkward moments, as Ralston stretches chilly days on basic peaks into long drama. He's hiking snowy summits, and rambling along ridgelines with one eye on his website and one eye on his stopwatch. Our narrator becomes that recognizable figure: the frenetic, gear-store geek, fixated on abstractions like "fourteeners," and painfully eager to share the video and the jpegs from his latest escapade. That gets a little old.

Of course, they say character is fate, and it's the very momentum of a young man's hyperenergy, an engineer's attention to detail, a neophyte mountaineer's bad decisions, an egoist's self-regard, and an endurance athlete's appetite for punishment that tumbles him into trouble and then enables him to survive. Ralston, you see, is his own perfect storm. That's what saves him and ultimately saves this book.

What I like about *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* is Ralston's strong writing skills, his