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Learning to Fly: An Uncommon Memoir of Human Flight, Unexpected Love, and One Amazing Dog

By Steph Davis

Learning to Fly: An Uncommon Memoir of Human Flight, Unexpected Love, and One Amazing Dog. Steph Davis. Simon & Schuster, 2013. 304 pages. Hardcover. \$24.99

Steph Davis' second book picks up shortly after the release of her first, *High Infatuation: A Climber's Guide to Love and Gravity*, in which readers move through her childhood, her introduction to adventure sports, and some of her more notable climbing feats (a one-day ascent of Torre Egger and free-climbing Salathé Wall, among others).

In *Learning To Fly*, we meet Davis as she leaves for a countrywide tour to promote her first book. She is managing the fallout from what she refers to as "the incident": her then-husband Dean Potter's controversial 2006 ascent of Delicate Arch in the Utah desert, which

led to a media uproar, a heated community-wide discussion, and both Potter and Davis being dropped by their primary sponsors. By page 13, she writes that she "was without a marriage, without a paycheck, and pretty much without a career. In a life defined by risk and uncertainty, almost all of my anchors were gone."

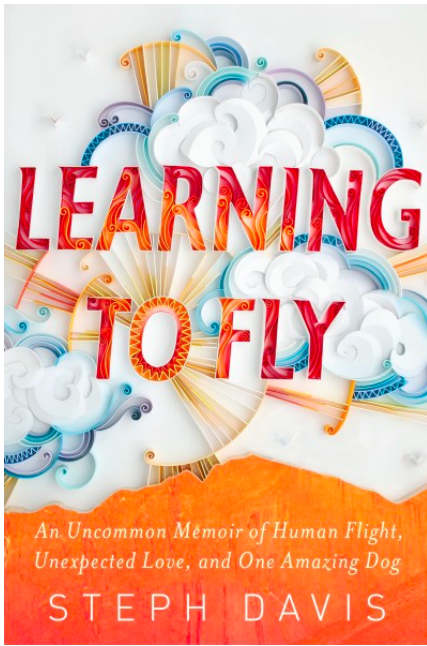
So Davis did what the rest of us wish we could do when we get fed up with climbing: She took her dog, Fletch, and her pickup truck to Colorado and spent a summer learning to skydive. Living on savings, she couch-surfs near the drop zone, jumps out of airplanes as often as possible, and finds a new life philosophy: "When death holds no more fear and when you've lost the things most precious to you, there's nothing more to be afraid of." By the end of summer she has grown to love the feeling of falling, come to terms with her failed marriage, and found her way back to climbing with a free-solo of the Diamond on Longs Peak.

By the time Davis and Fletch make their way home to Moab, Davis is at peace. There are setbacks, of course—a broken pelvis, challenging interactions with her ex-husband, the painful aging of her sweet pooch—but her story perks up when she meets Mario Richard, a local pilot and experienced BASE jumper. It's no surprise to readers when she writes, "I've never questioned emotion. I've lived my life for it. It wasn't hard to see that over the last several months, I'd been falling in love as much as I'd been falling into air." Davis and Richard marry in Castle Valley, Utah, and celebrate their union with a wedding-day BASE jump.

Davis' account is honest and vulnerable, and it hints at both the boldness and the single-minded self-assurance that is required from any professional athlete. I was consistently inspired by Davis' focus on reaching her dreams, and loved reading about the inner workings of a badass female athlete. However, my favorite pages were the ones in which Davis let down her guard. Case in point: Despite being a little over-saturated with dog references, I cried like a baby when Fletch died.

In August 2013, shortly after the release of *Learning To Fly*, Mario Richard died while BASE jumping in Italy with Davis. He was 47. Davis had successfully made the same jump just a few minutes before. I was dumbstruck when I heard the news; Davis and Richard seemed so careful, so full of life. After reading *Learning To Fly*, the parts of their story that I will remember most are Davis' closing words, which describe the feeling of a jump: "The world spread around in all directions, vast with possibility. I stretched my wings, floating up slightly, trading speed for buoyancy as I savored the sensations of flight, seeing, hearing, feeling.... I watched it dispassionately, eaglelike, free now of questions. High up in the sky, it was so easy to see. The green meadow lay out ahead, far beyond the cold mountain. I plunged down, tucked my wings, and flew."

Images



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