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### **Echoes: One Climber's Hard Road to Freedom**

By Nick Bullock

Echoes: One Climber's Hard Road to Freedom. Nick Bullock. Vertebrate Publishing (U.K.), 2013. 256 pages. Hardcover. £20.

Nick Bullock's new book *Echoes* opens with a violent revenge attack in a prison training facility, in which one prisoner beats another's head open with a steel weight. The scene is written in a high adrenaline flashing lights sirens blood everywhere style that gets your attention and leaves you freaked out.

During his prison career Nick Bullock figures out that what he really wants to do is to climb. The story that evolves is the trajectory of a very keen climber who is perpetually torn by dual voices, one telling him to follow his passions (be a climbing bum), the other telling him to play it safe (keep your job).

Nick's insights into criminals and the system that locks them up are his strong suit. We get the feeling that prison is defining the author a bit too much, as well. When he is on the Grandes Jorasses in winter he describes ice climbing like this: "Crash, another placement. Crash. I saw my stave breaking bone. Crash. One hit is self-defense, the second is assault."

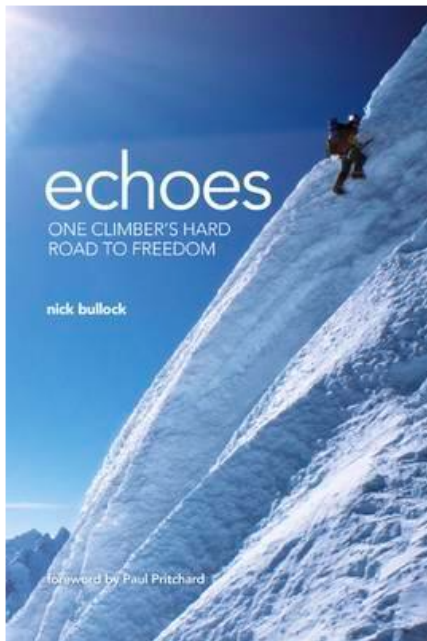
Nick is a fitness fanatic, and he becomes a trainer inside the walls of the prison, helping the incarcerated blow off steam rather than one another's heads. As he tries harder climbs—rock, ice, alpine—he falls. A lot. In fact, as I read this book it struck me that the only climbing writer I know who has written as much about falling off things is me. Like the prison violence, the parts about falling are vivid. I don't want to be a spoiler, but when I read the part about him trying the necky sea-cliff classic The Bells!, my palms sweated as I thought, "Oh, no, please no, please don't..." Other journeys get him to the Himalaya, where he has epics good enough that they don't need summits. A big climb on Jirishanca in the Andes demands frightening commitment.

The writing isn't cute or funny. He's sometimes sweepingly opinionated. But there is drollery, understatement, and naughtiness. Like when he overtakes, solo, two climbers on an ice route in Scotland: Nick seems to be off-route, and the pair are not at all happy when Nick's crampons cut out from the ice above their heads, or at the bombardment he gives them as he smashes with his picks. The punch line comes at chapter end, when Nick is home and he gets a phone call. The ensuing conversation is a near-perfect mime of the irascible Ken Wilson spitting out to Nick, and then hanging up, that he's just (unwittingly) stolen a new route out from under those same two lads.

Only after I read the last chapter did I see the author's overall design. This is a story about getting trapped and breaking free. In between, there is climbing. It works, and it invites more from Nick Bullock.

Greg Child

## Images



Article Details

Author	Greg Child
Publication	AAJ
Volume	56
Issue	88
Page	374
Copyright Date	2014
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions