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### **Alone on the Wall**

By Alex Honnold, with David Roberts

**Alone on the Wall. Alex Honnold with David Roberts. W.W. Norton, 2015. 248 pages. Hardcover, \$26.95.**

Unless you've been living under a rock for the last eight years, you've seen video evidence of Alex Honnold's perhaps otherwise unbelievable free soloing feats. Video is great medium for exhibiting his climbs. The language in a statement like, "Honnold free soloed Sendero Luminoso in two hours," reads like an abstraction, even if you know the route has 11 pitches of 5.12 and four of 5.11. But seeing the six-minute film is a visceral, mind-blowing experience. So if you've seen a Honnold film or two and read the list of his climbs, how much more is there to learn?

Quite a bit, as it turns out, in Honnold's somewhat reluctant autobiography, overseen by the sure eye of David Roberts. The book is constructed so it's always clear who is speaking, with Roberts' sections providing context and fleshing out the details, though Roberts obviously had a strong hand in Honnold's passages as well. Honnold is, as we might expect, as economical and precise in his descriptions of climbing as he is moving over stone.

Interestingly, Honnold has "a hard time remembering the details" of his childhood. It's almost as if he emerged from the shadows of a rock gym, fully formed as the badass who free soloed Moonlight Buttress when he was 22 years old. It takes alpine climbing to put some fear into him. On Mt. Dickey, Honnold, along with Freddie Wilkinson and Renan Ozturk, makes the fourth ascent of the route Roberts himself put up in 1974 with Ed Ward and Galen Rowell. "I guess I was surprised by how much shit—rock and snow and ice—is constantly falling down the faces," Honnold says. "Alpine climbing is dangerous."

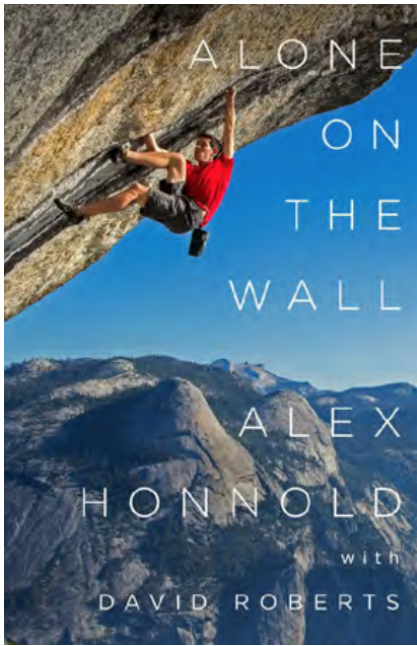
One of the central tensions of Honnold's life is between his apparent contentedness to be alone and what he refers to repeatedly as "the gong show," which essentially means "other people." Participation in the gong show is how he makes a living: endorsements, sponsorships, and the media blitz, none of which appears to come naturally to him. He finds all this generates too much money and so he gives it away through his Honnold Foundation. He continues to live out of his van. I would hesitate to use the term "dirtbag" to describe his lifestyle—he's more of a climbing ascetic.

At some point I lost the sense of reading about someone whose ropelessness may eventually lead to his death and was reading instead about a super-motivated, extremely gifted climber who was doing very interesting things on big walls and in the mountains. I concur with Tommy Caldwell: "I really like Alex. I don't want him to die."

Roberts is the author of 24 books, most on mountaineering and exploration. He also has collaborated with Krakauer, Anker, Viesturs, and now Honnold. If there were a Nobel Prize for American Mountaineering Literature, Roberts would have it. The title of his Brad Washburn biography, *The Last of His Kind*, serves well as a self-descriptor: We're not likely see another writer of Roberts' literary talents and drive. In his collaboration with Honnold, the two writers have hitched their wagons to each other's brilliant stars.

– David Stevenson

## Images



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