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Valley Walls: A Memoir of Climbing and Living in Yosemite

By Glen Denny

Valley Walls: A Memoir of Climbing and Living in Yosemite. Glen Denny. Yosemite Conservancy, 2016. Paperback, 240 pages, \$18.95.

Every once in a while, a book poetically depicting the core essence of the climbing experience comes along—books carrying the reader to the grip of the moment, on a crux move on a demanding climb, say, while also painting an expansive awareness of the experience. Glen Denny's *Valley Walls* rings to the heart, offering a sharp and insightful translation of the oft-ephemeral big-wall experience to the written page. The book is a collection of snapshots, moments in time revealed in colorful light with words, and contrastingly complemented by Denny's soulful black and white images of the era.

The memoir begins with a sweet flashback from the eminent climbing historian Steve Roper, whose rich style situates the place. Then Denny launches into his stories with a wholly different tone, soft and candid, describing his upbringing among the Valley masters during the later-coined "Golden Age" of Yosemite big-wall climbing. He relates the means by which he integrated himself into the hierarchy of Valley denizens while absorbing the latest techniques of moving on the vertical, then, in ringing detail, describes the fear and challenges of a brazen ascent of the Royal Arches, now a modest classic but then a fearsome long adventure.

Throughout the book, one gains a glimpse of traditional skills that a rock climber had to first master back in the day, before moving onto more difficult climbs. Joining Denny on his exploration of Mt. Whitney, one gets a sense of his natural abilities in finding the best line through a sea of likely paths, a long-lost art in modern climbing. His tales of discovering winter challenges with the gear of the era on the steep, icy slabs of Glacier Point Apron boggle the mind.

One of my favorite vignettes is the short chapter "The Endless Night," about Denny's first night on a big wall, supporting Warren Harding and Chuck Pratt's first ascent of the east face of Washington's Column (now Astroman). He recollects his upward journey on prusiks in the darkness: "Our voices sounded too loud in the still night air, like they might shake something loose."

The book also offers new glimpses into the well-known legends of the era: fresh insight on Harding's early climbing personality, for example, and firsthand insight on the enigmatic characters of the day, such as Denny's description of the contented smile on Chuck Pratt's sleeping face after a full day on the big stone ("The demon had been exorcised"). Dozens of climbers whose names hitherto might be only nebulously associated with a Valley climb or two are brought to light.

The book ends with Denny's tale of the third ascent of the Nose with Roper and Layton Kor, at a time when the climb was still assumed untouchable by mere mortals. Denny's hard work at perfecting his skills and his climbing as an equal at last becomes clear, despite his modest rendition. The lifestyle, the ceaseless struggle between confidence and doubt, and the richness of experience of a pioneering Valley climber reward the reader of *Valley Walls*. Highly recommended.

– John Middendorf

Images



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