



## AAC Publications

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### Rock Queen

By Catherine Destivelle

**Rock Queen. Catherine Destivelle. Hayloft Publishing, 2015. Paperback, 228 pages, £12.**

Catherine Destivelle's memoir *Rock Queen* spins the yarns of her most famous ascents—pioneering a solo new route on the Dru and soloing the north face of the Eiger in 17 hours, to name a couple—in palm-sweating detail. But just as fascinating are her vulnerable vignettes of life as one of the world's first female sponsored climbers. In a moment when female confidence is a hot topic in the media, Destivelle's raw combination of boldness and insecurities feels surprisingly fresh and timely.

Raised in Paris, Destivelle's first forays into climbing became a form of teenage rebellion. While her parents thought she was bouldering with the Alpine Club at Forêt de Fontainebleau, she was often sneaking off for weekends to race up classic routes in the Alps with an older (male) partner, feeding a growing addiction to pushing her limits. Her independence and audacity as a young person foreshadow her accomplishments as an adult—but the road to professional climbing wasn't a straight shot. Questions of motivation and ethics—and a gambling addiction—complicate the story.

Destivelle's anxiety and mixed feelings about competing in the first-ever international climbing competition in Italy—which she won—will resonate with any climber who's second-guessed his or her own motivations. And her open account of climbing in front of filmmaker Robert Nicod's camera, as well as the media and sponsorship flurry that followed, shed light on the complicated reality of climbing for money.

Progressing from rock climbing into alpinism and expeditions, Destivelle's appetite for the mountains is just as voracious. The detailed telling of her 11-day solo quest up a new route on the west face of the Dru is at once riveting, humble, and accessible. After losing myself in the desperate and emotional moments of the climb, beginning to understand her deep personal need to climb, and empathizing with her embarrassment at receiving a helicopter ride down from the top (her hands were swollen with extremely painful, seeping wounds), I found myself amazed at the criticism she received regarding her motivations. In our current climate and economy, we're used to seeing sponsors' logos and funded expeditions. But in 1991, Destivelle wasn't just pushing the limits of climbing, she was breaking new ground by cobbling together a living—having given up a career as a physiotherapist.

"As far as the ascent was concerned, I had done it for myself and no one else," she writes. "As I am a professional mountaineer, I had turned it to my advantage by organizing photos and the film."

Destivelle comes across as a strong character, but she's not unaware of her faults, and one feels her mature throughout the book. I'm sure some subtleties in the writing are lost in translation from the French, but there are still notes of humor, and the reader is left with the sense of having met a woman who, despite insecurities, dreamed greatly of mountains and was unafraid to reach and risk for what she wanted.

– Hilary Oliver

## Images



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