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## Warnings Against Myself: Meditations on a Life in Climbing

By David Stevenson

**Warnings Against Myself: Meditations on a Life in Climbing. David Stevenson. University of Washington Press, 2016. Hardcover, 248 pages, \$29.95.**

We're all well-accustomed to trip reports and lyrical, upbeat "finding myself" stories, among other variants, but in *Warnings Against Myself*, David Stevenson—purposefully or not—taps into a sort of Jungian collective unconscious of the mountaineering community and draws, from the smoldering embers of his yesterdays, a kind of mountaineer's dream. Thoughts about a climb, a person, a situation, a sunset are blended together—oftentimes with memories inserting themselves into other memories—at seemingly random times (the way in which real dreams happen), but with an acknowledgment that the dreams and memories relate to the event at hand.

A simple outing with Steve Roper and Al Steck, for example, becomes the odd but fitting bookmarks of a memory about a car accident. Stories overlap too, just as in the subconscious. Stevenson's memory of getting a phone call about the death of Willi Unsoeld is presented twice, chapters apart, but in the author's layered style it fits, just as dreams and memories fold together into a greater understanding of existence.

The book is a retooled collection of literary pieces that Stevenson authored over several decades, all of which have appeared in journals and magazines. The title story, "Warnings Against Myself," is something of a sampler of the entire work, in which Stevenson learns about other climbers named Stevenson gaining attention for less-than-heroic acts, all the while lamenting the death of a friend—the pieces falling into place just as in a reverie. And it's in these ethereal interstices of the stories that Stevenson explores the heady themes we all experience, both in the mountains and back in our thinking chairs: isolation, solitude, joy, danger, pain, death. These lofty thoughts are peppered with reflections on the more base aspects of life—getting old and fat, having to pay bills, working too much, *familying* too little, commitments and constraints. He ties together these two worlds of the average Joe effortlessly.

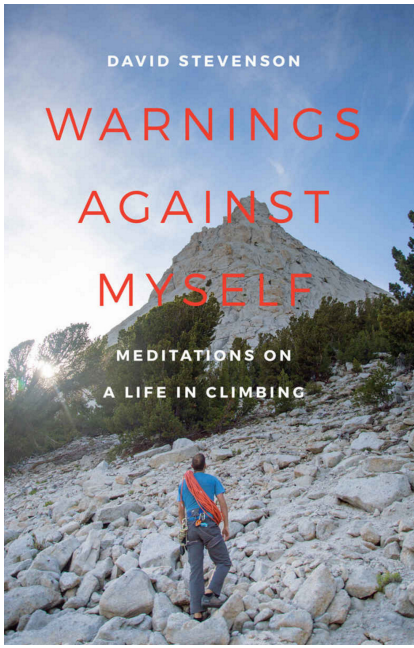
Stevenson, a genuine man of letters (he's a literature professor), circles back on great literary achievements in the climbing world, reflecting on books like Roper's *Camp 4* and Dave Roberts' *Mountain of My Fear*, but also draws in mainstream notions from F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thoreau, and others, making us feel how those ideas fit with his stories rather than telling us that they do.

Stevenson is gentle on the reader. There are few superlatives in his vocabulary, no shock attacks, and almost no foul language. He doesn't pull the reader into desperate and scary situations, for the most part; rather, he puts himself there for the reader to consider. And his storytelling style is free of discursion and aggrandizement—even the most popular kind in today's climbing literature, in which writers state how low-key and badass (and therefore cool) they or their partners are. Stevenson doesn't need to do that.

Stevenson is a thinking man's writer. In *Warnings* he nibbles at the edge of consciousness and gently, but completely, pulls the reader into a place we all know—whether we want to or not.

– Cameron M. Burns

## Images



## Article Details

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