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The Push: A Climber's Journey of Endurance, Risk, and Going Beyond Limits

By Tommy Caldwell

THE PUSH: A CLIMBER'S JOURNEY OF ENDURANCE, RISK, AND GOING BEYOND LIMITS. Tommy Caldwell. Viking, 2017. Hardcover, 352 pages, \$27.

How to explain boundary-defining climbing to non-climbers? And how to encapsulate the motivation required by top athletes who push these boundaries to their extreme? Future biographers would do well to take note of the breadth of narrative in *The Push* by Tommy Caldwell, along with the techniques of co-writer Kelly Cordes (not credited on the cover but generously thanked inside).

The reach of the story is exemplified by the title. *The Push* most obviously refers to Caldwell's successful ascent of the Dawn Wall, an epoch-defining effort that received unprecedented media coverage. The last quarter of the book describes in satisfying detail the Dawn Wall push, the presumed culmination of his career. If this were the entirety of the book it would resemble other recent climbing autobiographies, focusing solely on the athletic achievements of the climber. But Caldwell also infamously pushed his captor off a cliff in a youthful misadventure in Kyrgyzstan, an event the reader comes to view as pivotal in his emotional development. Just as Caldwell's first marriage, based primarily on climbing, was not successful, so too fail climbing narratives that are narrowly confined to recording ascents.

Halfway through the book we learn that Caldwell's future wife, Becca, "seemed more excited about cracking open my heart" than interested in him as a climber. The reader can be thankful that he was also open with Cordes, his longtime friend. As Cordes told me in an email, "Our relationship allowed Tommy to be fully vulnerable.... So often it seems high-end athletes don't reveal themselves. Maybe they can't, in a way, because it is too difficult, even too scary, to separate themselves from the shield of invincibility that many carry, which enables them to perform at such mind-blowing levels." Caldwell worded it differently to Becca during one of the six years of efforts on the Dawn Wall, eventually climbed with partner Kevin Jorgenson: "With Kevin I have to show optimism and toughness. With you I can be vulnerable." Many climbing biographies are inferior stand-ins for YouTube compilations of the star in action. Film is incontestably a better medium for showing the sport of climbing, but as *The Push* demonstrates, a book is unrivaled in delving deeply into the psychological state that makes such feats possible.

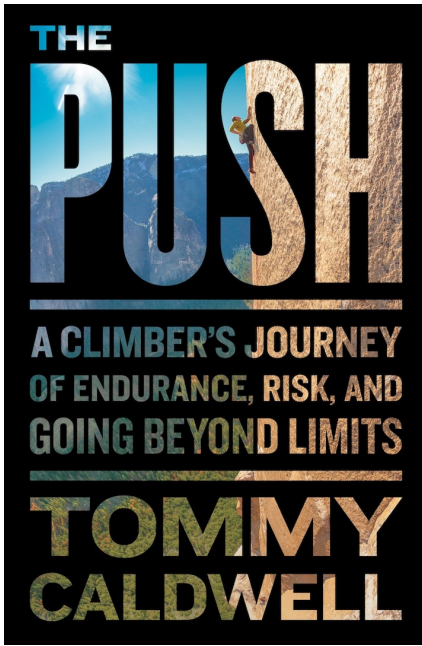
There is enough detail about the Dawn Wall project to appeal to the climber who wants insight into tactics, training, and mental state. More noteworthy are the techniques used to appeal to the non-climber, so often left in the dark by the intricacies of our sport. Free climbing is simply "using one's body (primarily fingers and toes) for upward progress, truly climbing without relying on direct aid from the equipment to hoist oneself up." Why have so many commentators had so much trouble explaining the aid/free dichotomy when it can be done as succinctly as this? Descriptions of a hold as "similar in shape and color to Madonna's mole" or writing that one can count to ten before toothpaste spat from a portaledge hits the ground demonstrate the polished tool kit of an accomplished writer explaining our increasingly popular sport to the uninitiated in ways satisfying to longtime climbers.

In accepting a jury special mention at the Banff Mountain Book Festival, Caldwell revealed that on publication day he suddenly questioned what he had done in baring his soul to all who chose to read *The Push*. The answer, in part, is that providing such insight into his personality has gone a long way

to demystifying the source of his greatness.

– Ian Welsted

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