



## AAC Publications

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### Limits of the Known

By David Roberts

**LIMITS OF THE KNOWN. David Roberts. Norton, 2018. Hardcover, 336 pages, \$26.95.**

If I could choose a title for this book, I might change it to "No Limits of the Known,": such is the wide-ranging scope of David Roberts' reflections.

Roberts, who was an outstanding climber in his younger years, is now widely acknowledged as the leading chronicler of mountaineering, adventure, and exploration. His books are classics: *The Mountain of My Fear*, *Escape from Lucania*, and *Moments of Doubt* among them. I've read most of them, always impressed with his command of the English language and his innate understanding of the inner workings of those individuals obsessed with the unknown, with risk.

Now in his 70s, Roberts would, with his typically prolific, overachieving schedule, be writing at least one impressive volume per year. But things change, and for Roberts, that change has been wrought by a devastating illness. The big C has ripped his world apart, at least on a physical level. Thankfully, that brilliant mind remains, even if his energy levels have waned. One result is this book, a mélange of reflections on the adventures of those he most admires, interspersed with morsels of a deeply personal memoir. His contemplations of Fridtjof Nansen's epic North Pole expedition, Eric Shipton's Karakoram explorations, and Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's first ascent of Everest are recounted with authority and acumen. He provides astute perspective to these achievements, which took place before satellite phones, on-demand weather forecasts, and the ever-increasing demands of social media. His tone is nostalgic as he ruminates about a time when there was silence in the hills and there were blanks on the map.

A masterful storyteller, Roberts weaves each historical account into a personal episode that connects him to the protagonists, all the while contemplating the meaning of adventure and asking the big questions: why and for what purpose and for whom. These chapters alone would be worth the price of admission, but it's the personal, self-reflecting elements of the book that distinguish it from much of his other work.

From the start, we have a hint. "For Sharon – Then, now, and forever," he writes of his wife. I know Sharon is his kind, intelligent, and long-suffering (sorry, David) wife, but I can't recall seeing her name appear in one of his books. This is clearly a work that might reveal a more vulnerable, more approachable, tenderer David Roberts. He quickly shoves tenderness aside with some youthful bravado describing his Huntington climb, with its "daunting challenges" and their "seizing" and "blitzing" their way to the top. Aha! This is the David Roberts that we all know and love. But then he pulls us forward to his current situation. Diagnosed with and suffering from an aggressive cancer, he telescopes the narrative: from years to months to days. "I no longer worried about what I might be doing a year from now: what I might be doing in three months seemed a more urgent concern...the question of whether I should ever again hike a favorite canyon in Utah loomed uncertain."

Those canyons mean a lot to Roberts, maybe more than all of those youthful summits. Starting in the 1980s, he began exploring the landscape of the Ancestral Puebloans in the American Southwest, and there he found a kind of reality that challenged his fascination with the some-times self-indulgent nature of adventure: "However thrilling my canyon play...the game was not about me. It was about them."

His writing career has been astonishing. Apart from his nearly 30 published volumes, Roberts has written for National Geographic, Outside, Men's Journal, Smithsonian, Alpinist, Atlantic Monthly, Life, and more. His assignments have taken him around the world—to lofty peaks and to the deepest caves, all of which have brought richness to his life. In the prologue of *Limits of the Known*, he asks, "Why have I spent my life trying to find the lost and unknown places of this world? And what have the passions of explorers across human history delivered to our understanding of life? The purpose of this book is to grope toward an answer."

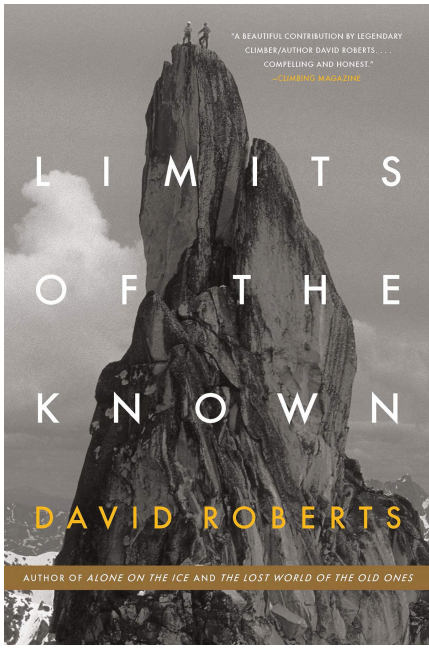
I'm not sure he ever fully answers those questions, but his probing eventually brings him much closer to home and the reader closer to the gentler qualities of David Roberts. We learn more about his ongoing medical treatment and the deep friendships that sustain him. He writes, "The forging of friendships too deep for words is almost never the reason we set off into the wilderness to probe the unknown. But in the end, it is what glows in memory."

We also discover much about Sharon, the rock in his life, the manager of his base camp, the one who cares the most, and the one who has traditionally been in the background. He writes honestly about the toll that his life of adventuring has had on her, something that is rarely admitted by those whose high-octane lives inspire and entertain us. And perhaps more fundamentally, he recognizes the dynamic that has shifted between them as Sharon assumes the leadership role in their marriage with firmness and compassion.

He takes the reader through every emotion: the exhilaration of discovery, pride in a summit, anger and frustration at a disease, and tenderness toward those closest to him. *Limits of the Known* proves once again what a consummate storyteller David Roberts is.

– Bernadette McDonald

# Images



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