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THE IMPOSSIBLE CLIMB: ALEX HONNOLD, EL CAPITAN, AND THE CLIMBING LIFE

BY MARK SYNNOTT

THE IMPOSSIBLE CLIMB: ALEX HONNOLD, EL CAPITAN, AND THE CLIMBING LIFE. Mark Synnott. Dutton, 2019. 416 pages, hardcover \$28, paperback \$18.

If the quality of Mark Synnott's book, *The Impossible Climb*, were on trial, I would be struck from the jury. I have too much prior knowledge, too many opinions and prejudices. Like most climbers, I've been so inundated over the past year with media about Alex Honnold's Freerider solo that I was already sick of it by the time I picked up Synnott's book. Kind of like how you feel after an underground band you have loved forever releases a single that goes big, the posers and wannabes catch on, and you can't stop rolling your eyes and saying, "Dude, that's not even their best song."

The Impossible Climb, as I assume most people reading this will know, recounts Honnold's free solo of El Capitan on June 3, 2017. But it's also equal parts coming of age story for the sport itself and memoir of the author. It was my interest in Synnott's story that most drew me to this book, along with John Long's quote on the dust jacket comparing it to surf journalist William Finnegan's *Barbarian Days*, which I devoured a few years ago. In fact, ever since I finished *Barbarian Days*, I've been wondering who would write the climbing version and when.

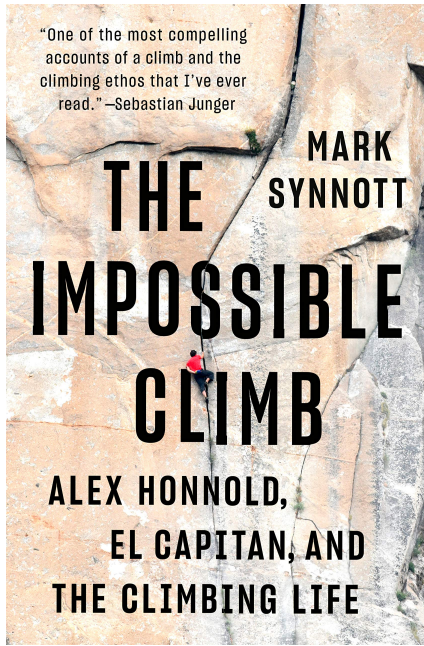
Unfortunately, I don't think the comparison holds water, mostly because there's no singular event in Finnegan's book—one big, crazy wave, for example—which all the drama leads up to. If Honnold's climb were a footnote instead of the main event, the analogy would be more apt. But that's not the book Synnott wrote, and, as it stands, the parts of the narrative that do read like *Barbarian Days* sometimes feel cobbled—even shoehorned—in there. There were moments when I felt like I was watching a mashup of all the popular climbing films of late: *Valley Uprising*, *The Dawn Wall*, and of course, *Free Solo*. I thought the book would have been better without some of those diversions, but I doubt Synnott is to blame for them. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that a non-climbing editor thought it imperative to cover all the times in recent memory that climbing made a blip in the mainstream media.

That said, the deeper I got into *The Impossible Climb* the more engrossed I became. Synnott's storytelling was compelling, his pacing was perfect, and his ability to walk the fine line between explaining too much and too little was uncanny. I'd as readily gift the book to a climbing devotee of 20 years or that veteran's "climbing curious" relative. After the first 70 pages, I stopped making silly notes about how Synnott might have done things differently, and just started enjoying what he did. I read the last few chapters in bed in one long headlamp-lit vigil during which I could not put the book down, surprisingly rapt by a story whose ending I already knew.

There's a moment where Synnott describes Honnold looking stiff and awkward at the start of his historic climb, but eventually finding his rhythm. That's how I felt about Synnott's writing. *The Impossible Climb* seemed to me to start off a bit shaky, but by the end it was tight, composed, and deeply impressive. It isn't *Barbarian Days*. But maybe it's not meant to be. Maybe that's Synnott's next book. I sure hope so. If it is, I'll be first in line to buy it.

– CHRIS KALMAN

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