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## **END OF THE ROPE: MOUNTAINS, MARRIAGE, AND MOTHERHOOD**

BY JAN REDFORD

**END OF THE ROPE: MOUNTAINS, MARRIAGE, AND MOTHERHOOD.** Jan Redford. Random House (Canada), 2018. Hardcover, 302 pages, \$26; paperback, \$16.95.

My two longstanding criteria for measuring a written work's effectiveness are: When I get to the end of the book, can I say, "Wow, I never read anything like that before," and, after I'm finished reading, how long does the work linger in my imagination? Jan Redford's memoir easily clears these bars. It's also utterly compelling. Its title speaks to a sense of desperation the author feels for much of the story, trapped in a co-dependent marriage. Its subtitle, *Mountains, Marriage, and Motherhood*, lays out the book's themes. It's true that "mountains" probably only take up about a third of the pages here, but make no mistake, this is a climber's memoir.

The book starts off typically enough: a longing for the mountains after the family moves across Canada to Ontario, an unhappy home life, a first rock climb—"a five-foot-nothing, 110-pound, flat-chested Anglophone tomboy from Munster Hamlet," unroped and alone in the Laurentians on a family vacation. From the first chapter she is particularly good at describing the inner fears and exhilaration climbing affords us. Rarely does she describe the degree of difficulty of a particular route; instead we're right there in her head.

We follow her into the mountain life, working in the male-dominated world of 1980s North American climbing culture as a diminutive, tobacco-chewing young woman with a terrific knack for cursing. After a series of unsatisfying trysts, she finds love, real love, with Dan Guthrie and then loses him to an avalanche on Mt. Foraker. She describes this loss and its attendant grief and anger with a clarity perhaps afforded her by the passage of time. Unfortunately, it won't be the only occasion of deadly climbing accidents among her circle of friends. Reading these felt achingly familiar and gave me pause to consider how much we have normalized (for lack of a better word) loss in our community.

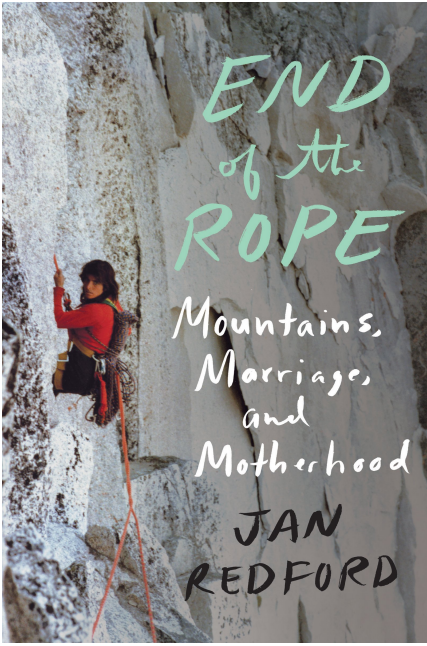
Much of the book reports on what happened next: Reeling from the loss of Dan, she takes up with one of their circle, on the rebound; he is also an elite alpinist. They endure what appears a pretty typical co-dependent relationship, during which he suffers from a kind of split personality: "happy climber/unhappy logger." He wants a traditional homemaker for a spouse; she wants to go to school. It takes her a long time to disentangle and follow her dream of a college education. I read their relationship as a kind of climbing story, too, showing the particular difficulties of balancing the climbing/career/family needs of both partners.

Most climbers' memoirs, unsurprisingly, stick strictly to the climbing, as if their days away from the heights don't exist. Here, Redford tells the story of a whole life, one that's interchangeable with no other. You won't find these lines in another climber's memoir: "Jenna (her infant daughter, born days after her husband returns from a nearly disastrous attempt on Nanga Parbat) started to mewl like a kitten. My nipples were cracked, so nursing was like clamping them in a vise."

We still need more women's voices in our community, and what we really need are the stories we haven't heard before. Redford has delivered both here, served with an unflinching eye, a big heart, and an enormous rucksack of perseverance.

– DAVID STEVENSON

## Images



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