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THE SHARP END OF LIFE: A MOTHER'S STORY

BY DIERDRE WOLOWNICK

THE SHARP END OF LIFE: A MOTHER'S STORY. Dierdre Wolownick. Mountaineers Books, 2019. Hardcover, 256 pages, \$24.95.

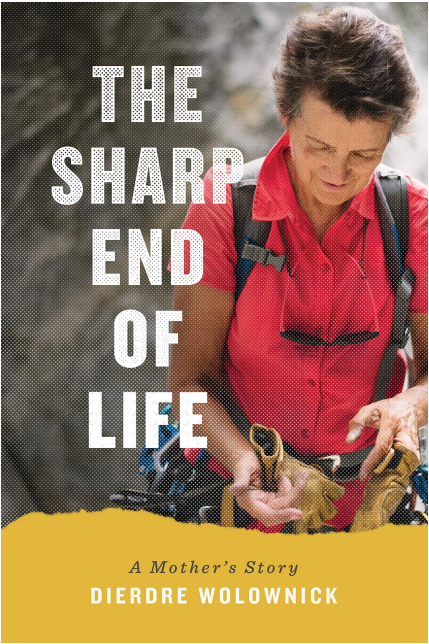
In Dierdre Wolownick's inspirational memoir, the journey from frazzled mother struggling through an emotionally abusive marriage to being the oldest woman to climb El Capitan is motivational without ever feeling overbearing. Wolownick is up-front about her identity: It's right there in the title—she's a mother. She smartly doesn't shy away from what to most readers is her most defining characteristic, being Alex Honnold's mom. Die-hard Honnold followers will be able to glean minute insights into the legendary climber's upbringing and temperament. But, happily, Wolownick has her own story of perseverance that led her to scaling El Cap and other big-wall routes, and it's Dierdre Wolownick's story, not mom-of-Alex-Honnold's, that readers will find most compelling.

Wolownick's early and midlife will feel familiar to many readers. She was raised in a traditional home that taught her girls are supposed to be efficacious homemakers and obedient to their elders and husbands. She married an emotionally neglectful man and stuck out the marriage so her children would have a stable home life. As Alex and his sister Stasia grew up, Wolownick struggled to make the best life possible for her children. Wolownick's spare, direct prose achingly conveys her growing frustration with her husband and her desperation for a different life.

Driven by a desire to understand her children's worlds, Wolownick takes up climbing and running in her 50s, and here her stark prose flourishes, revealing the vulnerability she feels so keenly as an older woman, and also her incredible tenacity. Her physical weaknesses are overcome by the sheer force of her stubbornness and commitment. This section holds the memoir's best writing, as Wolownick wrestles with how to find satisfaction in her climbing achievements when her son is among the world's best climbers. Though the inevitable triumphant conclusion is perhaps too easy to predict, based on Wolownick's inability to accept failure, she includes enough highs and lows throughout her journey to make her account of scaling El Capitan engaging, nevertheless. *The Sharp End of Life* illuminates the incredible within the everyday struggles and successes of one climber and mother.

– REBECCA YOUNG

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Article Details

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|----------------|---------------|
| Author | Rebecca Young |
| Publication | AAJ |
| Volume | 62 |
| Issue | 94 |
| Page | |
| Copyright Date | 2020 |
| Article Type | Book reviews |