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Valley of Giants: Stories From Women at the Heart of Yosemite Climbing

By Lauren DeLaunay Miller

VALLEY OF GIANTS: STORIES FROM WOMEN AT THE HEART OF YOSEMITE CLIMBING. By Lauren DeLaunay Miller (Mountaineers, 2022). Paperback, 240 pages, \$21.95.

It's the Center of the Universe, the granite nucleus, the measuring stick by which generations of climbers have gauged their dreams and accomplishments. But throughout Yosemite's history, women have been, as Galen Rowell put it in his 1988 *The Vertical World of Yosemite*, "conspicuously absent" from the annals, a reality Rowell refuses to apologize for, instead positing, "There simply were no major first ascents in Yosemite done by women during the formative years of the sport."

Author Lauren DeLaunay Miller points to a different truth: Women have always been part of Yosemite's lore; they simply have not had the same sovereignty to catalog their efforts as their male counterparts did. Miller's anthology, *Valley of Giants*, is a salve to this repression, a masterfully assembled collection from the many women toiling and chortling in the Big Ditch.

The anthology is a coming-of-age story: of its contributors, of climbing, and of women in America. Spanning the 1930s to the present day, its essays and interviews are equal turns comical and gripping, as any good climbing-obsessed tale of vertical romping should be. From the first all-female ascent of the Nose to the first ascent of Meltdown (5.14c), the stories energize and inspire. Moving through the history of the Valley, the reader bears witness to the evolution of climbing, from early aid ascents predating the invention of the SLCD to later speed ascents of some of the same routes. If the collection were simply meant to serve as an inspiration from our forebearers, it would undeniably fulfill the assignment.

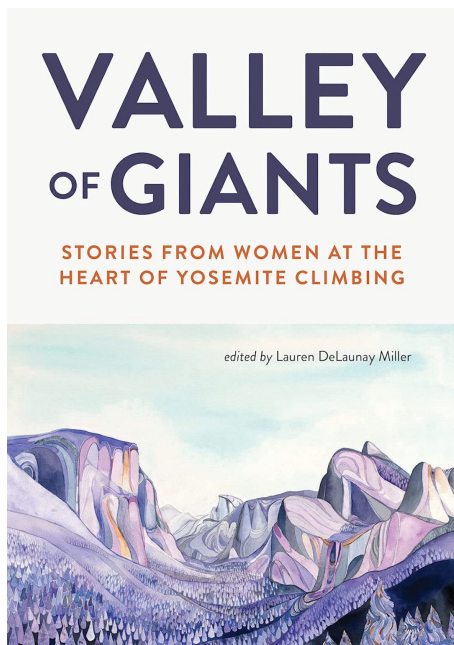
But Miller has gone beyond the archetypal climbing media template that is solely focused on ascents. She deftly and subtly includes historical and personal anecdotes about the time period and authors that point to the evolution of women's rights in America, and therefore women's sport and involvement in climbing. "I'm not a historian by trade, but it doesn't take a genius to see that, oh, in 1972 and 1973, we get *Roe v. Wade*, we get Title IX, and we also get the first all-female ascent of El Cap," Miller explained in an interview with *Climbing*.

Many of the early pioneers came to climbing having first attempted to abide by the constraints of their society as gymnasts and ballerinas, some of the only accepted forms of female athleticism at the time. Once they found climbing, they were met with the consternation of their male counterparts, who claimed their frames couldn't hold a leader fall, as Jan Sacherer points out in her essay "Girls Can Be Dirtbags Too."

But despite first a societal and later a representational encumbrance, the contributors of the collection are inspired and inspiring, enthralled with the wonder of the Valley and the joy of the vertical realm. Their stoke is contagious, as the work encapsulates some of the most inspirational and bold ascents in the Valley, that just so happen to be performed entirely by women. And as the decades unfold, the female contingent of the Valley reaches a critical mass that sees women among the usual suspects rather than anomalies. As Miller points out in her preface, "Representation shapes our reality." No longer are the women at the heart of Yosemite climbing relegated to the shadows. With these stories being added to the record as a springboard, what will the future generations dream of?

— Shey Piper

Images



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