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All and Nothing: Inside Free Soloing

By Jeff Smoot

ALL AND NOTHING: INSIDE FREE SOLOING. By Jeff Smoot (Mountaineers Books, 2022). Paperback, 320 pages, \$22.95.

One of the curiosities of climbing is that for such a literary sport, there hasn't been a close study of the practice of free soloing. There are expedition narratives for days, autobiographies by the cartload, and guidebooks and manuals strain bookshelves around the world. Yet nobody has, until the publication of *All and Nothing*, written a serious book-length examination of the phenomenon. For that, at the very least, the climbing world owes Jeff Smoot a debt of gratitude. This is a good and necessary book.

Why the dearth of literature on the topic? The conflicted attitude toward climbing demonstrated by climbers is probably at the heart of this. The famous title *Conquistadors of the Useless*, written by Lionel Terray, sums up the problem. Climbing is a pointless activity in which the risk of sudden violent death is ever-present. We remain in denial of this, even as most long-term climbers can run out of fingers counting those with whom they had at least an acquaintance who were killed climbing. Soloing seems, justifiably enough, to be a particularly dangerous version of an already dangerous game. Why go there?

Yet free soloists have long been admired in climbing. As Smoot points out, humans climbing in very exposed places has an ancient history. More recently, even mainstream media started to cover soloists such as John Bachar, though the climbing media had long been fascinated by them. By the early 1980s, virtually every serious climber at least experimented with soloing. Having lived through that period, I can personally testify to this phase, as does Smoot himself. Everyone knew when a big-deal solo had happened locally, and a whispered awe was the appropriate tone when discussing it, but few took any time to think more deeply about the meaning and implications of the practice.

Considering the phenomenon in historical, social, and psychological terms is this book's most significant contribution to the conversation regarding why climbers solo and what the rest of us should think about it. At least part of the impetus for the book was the Oscar-winning film *Free Solo*, the documentary about Alex Honnold's solo of El Capitan via Freerider. Suddenly the subject was everywhere. People knew about climbing via *Free Solo*—many even assumed that's what climbing actually was. Climbers knew otherwise, but mediagenic images and video proliferated more than ever as climbers vied for likes and views on the new social media platforms that emerged at the same time.

The climbing world is still grappling with the legacy of *Free Solo* and the meaning of risk in the sport as it expands to broader populations. Smoot discusses any number of psychological theories and interviews figures in the field of psychoanalysis, but ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, he fails to find any clear explanation from outside the sport. Climbers themselves have no end of theories, but in the end they seem to boil down to the physical effects of adrenaline and endorphins. Sadly, a few soloists end up in a crumpled, bloody heap at the base of a rock. Rescue personnel know first-hand what happens when soloing goes wrong. Most climbers look the other way.

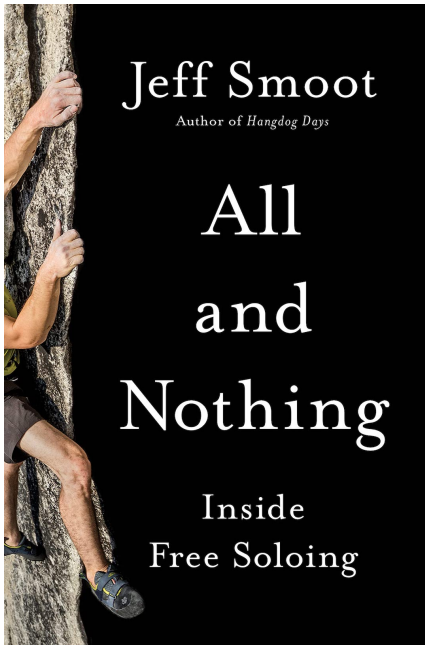
Does this book interrogate the romantic and high-minded ideals espoused by more than a few

climbers, not to mention the competitive bravado of Bachar and others? That depends on the reader's perspective. The allure of soloing is understandable, as it offers a brief experience of control and immunity from danger in the most dangerous of places. The deeper meanings ascribed to it are as much the imaginings of young men on the verge of maturity and responsibility as anything else. What they know of death in its actuality and finality is limited, and the possibility of physical frailty or the cruel randomness of a broken hold is the farthest thing from their minds.

The classic and much-revisited essay "The Only Blasphemy" is John Long's exploration of the conflicted mental states that soloing embodies and is always worth reading again. Near the end, he suddenly finds himself crossing the line between fantasy and reality, looking into the void as it looks into him, to paraphrase Nietzsche. While *All and Nothing* lacks that essay's personal and vivid evocation of willfully putting one's life on the line, it deftly and widely explores the culture and mindset that Long described and that, in part, brought us the world of *Free Solo*.

— Peter Beal

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