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### **Unraveled: A Climber's Journey Through Darkness and Back**

By Katie Brown

**UNRAVELED: A CLIMBER'S JOURNEY THROUGH DARKNESS AND BACK. By Katie Brown (Mountaineers Books, 2022). Paperback, 256 pages, \$19.95.**

Once named by *Climbing* magazine as the “Best Female Climber of the Millennium,” Katie Brown began climbing at the age of 12. Two years later, she won the Junior World Championships. At 15, she won two adult international contests: Rock Master and X-Games. Subsequently, she won every single U.S. National Championship she entered. At 18, Brown onsighted a 5.13d, the first woman to achieve this feat, followed by winning a World Cup. Then, at 19, she told her sponsors that she was quitting to go to college full-time.

In her memoir *Unraveled*, Brown attempts to answer the question that pops up most frequently when you Google her name: What happened to Katie Brown? Her voice is honest and raw as she tells readers in a mostly chronological narrative about her life from the years she started climbing up to an epilogue where she speaks from her point of view after nine years as a mother. The narrative present is often interrupted by reflection upon the emotional abuse she suffered from her parents and an eating disorder that no one who cared about her ever treated seriously. “These tiny acts of teenage rebellion were strange and often hurt me more than anyone else, but at 15 I didn’t have the self-awareness to understand my motivations,” she writes.

Brown unflinchingly examines why everyone was more concerned about her athletic performance than what was going on psychologically. “Couldn’t they see that I had no idea what I was doing? That I didn’t really care about the other competitors, or even winning? That I wasn’t even sure why I was doing this? That I just wanted someone to see me? Consequently, whenever I did speak, my answers came out snappy and irritable.”

What makes her reflections more poignant are the excerpts from her journal or her mother’s letters, where she gives readers a glimpse of what it was like to live in her household: “I feel pretty uncomfortable writing about this time in my life. The story sounds like one long complaining tirade about my poor relationship with my mom, but if I am going to write an honest account of my life, this is the truth. It was climbing, yes, but behind closed doors, my mom and I argued almost every day, about eating, climbing, my desire to do things alone, sponsors, whether I said the right things— when I said anything at all—or any number of other things. There is no ‘I’ in my life at that point. There was only ‘we.’”

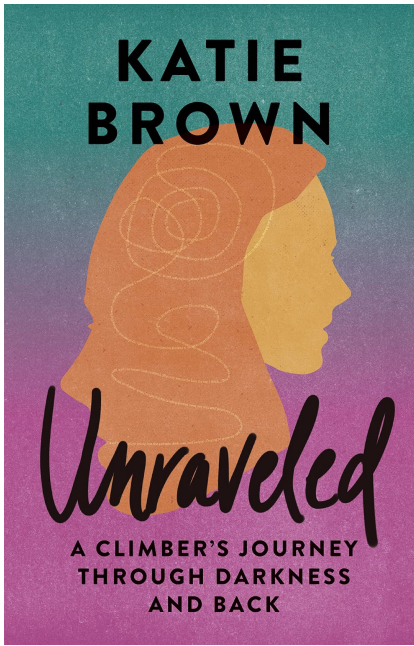
At the heart of this story is the disturbing fact that many climbers, especially women, struggle with eating disorders, but few talk about it or help each other out. Every 62 minutes, someone dies as a result of an eating disorder. One in five with an eating disorder will commit suicide. This is why Brown includes an afterword where she directly addresses the prevalence of eating disorders in the climbing world. She spells out the risks: “The most common cause of death among people living with restrictive anorexia nervosa is the heart stopping due to low blood sugar.” She punctuates the point with a statement from Dr. Jennifer Gaudiani, an expert on eating disorders, that these behaviors are like “Russian roulette in which 90 percent of the chambers had a bullet in them. All the time.” Gaudiani also offers an explanation of why doctors never diagnosed Brown with an eating disorder: “I suspect that when doctors saw a very thin—frankly, profoundly emaciated—but young, successful athlete, their brains shut off. They didn’t have the capacity (to see

anything else) because of their own biases and the problems in our society around what women's bodies should be."

At the end of her book, Brown directly addresses climbers who are restricting or dieting in order to climb harder or perform better in competitions: "It will never be worth the shit that you will go through. And if it already feels like something in your life that you are quickly losing control of, please ask for help."

— **Leslie Hsu Oh**

## Images



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