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The Life: Rock Climbing Adventures In The Gunks And Beyond

By Russ Clune

THE LIFER: ROCK CLIMBING ADVENTURES IN THE GUNKS AND BEYOND By Russ Clune (Di Angelo Publications, 2023). Paperback, 274 pages, \$25.

Many of us dream of dropping everything and heading to the crags to climb full-time. Few of us ultimately do. Russ Clune's 2023 memoir *The Lifer* is a purist's take on that dream and follows one man's dedication as he becomes deeply entwined with the history and evolution of the sport. In vivid accounts and often harrowing scenes, Clune brings the reader on adrenaline-pumped adventures across the globe, where he pushes himself and the boundaries of climbing itself.

In 2019, a short film by the same name preceded the book. At 13 minutes, it's a welcoming primer for the book. The film captures Clune's personality and voice, and gives a broader picture of just how long Clune has been climbing in New York's Shawangunks. In the film, his friend and climbing partner Lynn Hill says, "He had a real foothold in the Gunks, and I think still today. He knows more about the Gunks and has probably done more routes than anyone."

The book covers a period starting with Clune's introduction to rock climbing in college in 1977 and ending when he got married in 1991. His obsession with climbing is mirrored by his prose, as he focuses much of the story on the technical features of routes, their difficulty, and the popular climbing style of the day, along with the roster of people he climbed alongside. In that regard, the book resembles a guidebook merged with historical text.

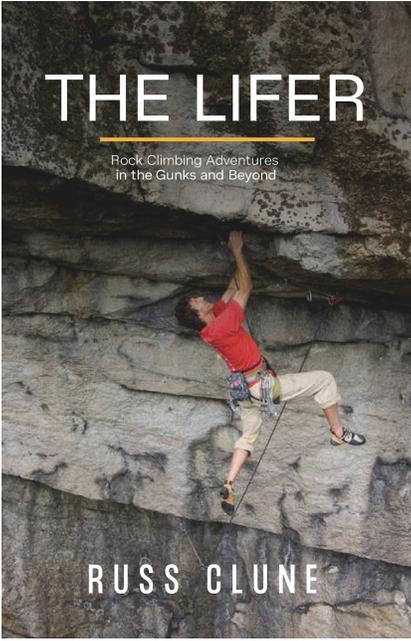
The book comes alive when the scenes turn more personal: when Clune and his partner were harassed by swarms of wasps as they hung precariously from a multi-pitch climb, or when a new partner came to stay at his mom's house, with no apparent social graces, comedically expecting a free ride. There is the infamous tale of climbers eating ten-cent cat food to survive. In one episode while climbing in the United Kingdom, Clune traveled impulsively to Czechoslovakia to meet friends, only to be stood up. Exhibiting his adventuresome spirit, he turned the whole trip around by making friends with East German climbers who didn't speak English.

As Clune traveled across the globe—climbing in far-flung locales from Europe to Asia, and on road trips across the United States—he linked up with the best climbers of his generation and built friendships that became more meaningful than the sport itself. In a climactic scene where he tests his grit and dedication to the climbing life, Clune attempts to free solo Supercrack, a 5.12+ up a 60-foot pinnacle of orange quartz conglomerate in his beloved Gunks. The solo "marked the hardest climb I would ever do without a rope and...a retirement of sorts, at least from full-time climbing."

Wrapping up the book with a cursory tour through his professional life after grad school, Clune details the bankruptcy and sale of his employer, Chouinard Equipment, to an employee-led coalition that became Black Diamond, where he worked for the next 25 years. An ethos emerges from the story: "Climbing is not so much about the routes we climb but instead about the kinships and love created by sharing a rope with friends." His words are a fitting summation of his memoir, and a metaphor for what his life has come to stand for. *The Lifer* is not only a chronicle of Clune's own story, it's also a treatise on why we climb, told by one of the sport's ever-present yet often unsung heroes.

—Lance Garland

Images



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