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A LIGHT THROUGH THE CRACKS: A CLIMBER'S STORY

By Beth Rodden

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Beth Rodden's memoir recounts her harrowing kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, in 2000, and the famous climber's long struggle with recovery and search for identity within the sexist, uber-competitive world of professional rock climbing.

Readers may start this book looking for a page-turner about a dramatic kidnapping, and Rodden delivers with a detailed account of her ordeal, but she also guides her readers through a much quieter yet more universal experience—that of living with and healing from trauma. To this reader, at least, it did not feel coincidental that the language of Rodden's captivity closely mirrors the feelings she describes later in the memoir about her tenacious drive for recognition and respect in a male-dominated climbing culture. The parallel between the two threads is ultimately the book's power: For female athletes, captivity takes many forms; battles are fought not just against gravity but against identities assigned to Rodden without her consent or prompting.

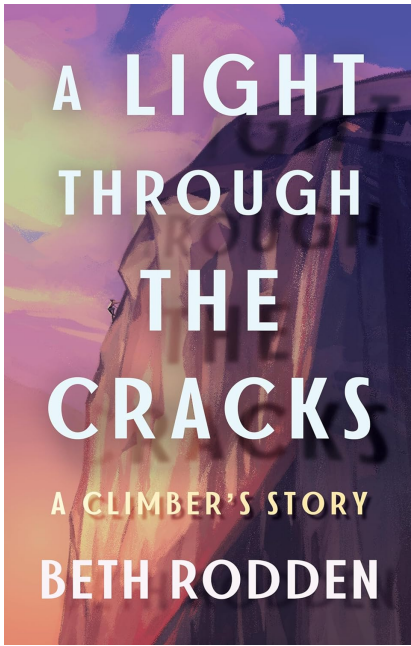
To write a compelling memoir, one needs more than just a good story; the author also needs the literary skill to tell it well. Rodden's prose is detail-driven, almost diary-like, but never feels indulgent or overdramatic. Though she is generous and vulnerable in sharing her experiences, the memoir doesn't feel like a sordid tell-all; Rodden handles her words with care. Her descriptions root the reader in a fully embodied experience; we feel as if we are there with Rodden, experiencing events and emotions alongside her. Rodden is a flawed protagonist who makes mistakes, but she offers us such an intimate window in that it's easy to stay with her, to root for her even when—especially when—she is most hard on herself. Readers looking for a more highbrow, literary prose style may not be fully satisfied with *A Light through the Cracks*, but this memoir never billed itself that way, and in the publishing world of athlete-turned-author, Rodden holds her own space.

A Light through the Cracks is organized into three chronological sections exploring Rodden's formative years with partner and eventual husband Tommy Caldwell and their kidnapping, then their notable climbs together, and finally their divorce and Rodden's remarriage, the birth of her child, and her reconciliation with her climbing career. As is true with the lived experience of trauma, the kidnapping foregrounds the memoir, shaping—and, for a time, controlling—Rodden's emotions and perspectives of the world. This narrative structure also has the effect of making the later descriptions of difficult climbs hit harder; the reader distinctly feels that gravity has become stronger for Rodden, and she fights toward literal and figurative ascent from very real demons, some from the kidnapping and some set loose from a climbing culture beyond her control.

In the final section, there is a sense of reconciliation without concession with this sport that has given Rodden so much but also tried, unsuccessfully, to tear away her self-worth. Rodden becomes “just Beth,” not a kidnap victim or the former wife of a famous climber, but someone strong and assured enough to walk alongside their ghosts and keep climbing, in every sense.

—Rebecca Young

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