



## AAC Publications

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### David Roberts, 1943 – 2021

**I was ten when I first met the writer and mountaineer David Roberts, who was sitting at my parents' kitchen table with Jon Krakauer and another friend.** Huge wire-rimmed glasses framed David's face, adding intensity to an already owl-like gaze, and the expression "does not suffer fools" would have come to mind if I'd known it. My mom whisked me upstairs and I tried to eavesdrop the adult conversation below—climbers talking about climbing.

Some time later, my dad crept into my room while I was sick with a fever and gave me David's first two books—*The Mountain of My Fear* and *Deborah: A Wilderness Narrative*—and I read both in a single day. Mountains unfolded in my bedroom. From then on, I harbored a secret dream—more than anything, I wanted to do what Roberts did.

Apart from his fellow Harvard alum Bradford Washburn, no one explored more unknown terrain in Alaska than David did. His very first Alaskan expedition, as a 20-year-old in 1964, yielded a new route on Denali, the Wickersham Wall. In a decade of fevered exploring, he completed new routes or first ascents of remote peaks on an annual basis, most of which are still sought after by alpinists. His finest achievement was his last serious climb in the range, the Southeast Pillar of Mt. Dickey, one of the largest and most imposing granite walls on earth, which David ascended over three days in 1974 along with Galen Rowell and Ed Ward. On their third day of climbing, thousands of feet above the Ruth Glacier, a threatening storm settled over the range. Rain turned to snow. With the team's single pair of crampons and an ice axe, Roberts led into the gale over verglassed loose rock. It was a brilliant bit of alpinism.

Memorialized in *The Mountain of My Fear*, Mt. Huntington's Harvard Route is Roberts' best-known Alaskan achievement, but the tragedy that ensued when Ed Bernd fell to his death on the descent haunted David his entire life. Yet the route's modern popularity attests to its elegance, to the line Roberts and his young companions so cannily divined from Bradford Washburn's photographs.

Bernd's accident on Huntington also launched Roberts' writing career; in just nine days, he churned out *The Mountain of My Fear*, a slim volume that, at first, struggled to find a publisher, though the book soon attracted the attention of critics who knew little about climbing but a lot about good writing, notably the British poet W.H. Auden, who told Roberts that "your book is one of the finest of its genre I have ever come across."

David's journalism spanned more than a half-century; his diverse palette led him to write biographies of figures as disparate as the American short story writer Jean Stafford and the Australian explorer Douglas Mawson. As a freelancer, he wrote about Jeff Lowe's solo ascent of the Eiger, the ruins of Ancestral Puebloans, the sordid lives and horrid deaths of polar heroes. Upon retiring from Alaskan alpinism, he turned his obsessive zeal to the desert Southwest, tracking down Puebloan sites and tracing, with admiration, the ways of these ancient climbers. He published more than 30 books and countless articles—a staggering body of work.

To the maddened chagrin of other writers, David wrote clean, clear stories without hesitation; the speed and clarity with which he clacked out copy astounds me still. He laughed imagining his friends laboring over word choice and fretting over sentence structure, the way a boulderer might struggle on a particular sequence of moves.

Despite profiling hundreds of people, David's writing shone most when turned inward, when it examined his own struggles with death, with tragedy, with the lingering questions of why climbers and explorers seek out risk. He was not the first adventure writer to tackle these subjects, but his prose was strong and stark enough to endure, to become part of our collective canon, to tackle his trauma head on. These contributions changed the landscape of adventure literature.

Despite our early meeting, I did not speak to David again until after I graduated college. Before two friends and I attempted Mt. Deborah in Alaska, I reached out for beta with trepidation; he replied the same day, and soon sheafs of archived AAJ articles and photographs pinged into my inbox. The fire always burned bright with David.

When I sent him a story I'd written about our failed expedition, he encouraged me to keep writing. I was not the only person who benefitted from his enthusiasm and shrewd, unyielding insight: far from it. David taught writing at Hampshire College in the 1970s, and there he realized the potential of a young Jon Krakauer. Later, he plucked writers from Banff workshops and helped them secure book deals or introduced them to editors. He loved the craft of writing; if he couldn't write a story, he hoped someone else would, and he'd share it with enthusiasm when it came out.

When David was diagnosed with stage IV throat cancer in 2015, the urgency and pace of this writing increased and he produced some of his finest work. With his wife, Sharon, by his side, he documented the fears and physical ailments of this disease. In this short time, despite endless hospital visits and a plethora of complications, David finished three more books. *Limits of the Known* is my favorite of these, burdened with questions about the deaths we all must face, yet soaring with hope and wonder for what we call adventure.

Even in poor health, David climbed, too, marching to cliffs and rock gyms as best as he was able, never ceasing to quest upward. Partners and confidantes were as important to him as the wild places he'd been, and many of these recent trips were completed with Matt Hale or Ed Ward or Jon Krakauer, climbers from his Alaskan expeditions a half-century ago. He adored holding court at Banff dinner parties or evenings at his house in Watertown.

Most important to David was Sharon, who provided the perfect foil to David's staccato lines of questioning. A professional psychoanalyst, she softened his journalistic edges. Over the last few years of David's illness, Sharon worked tirelessly to care for him while he kept writing. Never once did I see her waver.

David once joked that his obit's lede should read: "He died after a feeble and pathetic battle against cancer." The truth, of course, is that no one peered into that abyss with more courage or grace.

— Michael Wejchert

**Editor's Note:** This tribute is adapted from a longer article published at [adventure-journal.com](http://adventure-journal.com) on August 26, 2021.

## Images



David Roberts.

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