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Closer To The Edge: Climbing To The Ends Of The Earth

By Leo Houlding

CLOSER TO THE EDGE: CLIMBING TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH By Leo Houlding (Headline Press, U.K., 2023). Paperback, 368 pages, £12.99.

A friend and frequent climbing partner has complained to me about the narrowness of climbing literature: "I tried to climb it, almost died, didn't die, and summited." I think what my friend is reacting to is an essential lack of real introspection in much of the narrative, which is another way of saying that most climbers are not really writers.

This is all preamble to a review of Leo Houlding's *Closer to the Edge* that I do not much relish writing. Houlding might be best known to many Americans as Sandy Irvine to Conrad Anker's Mallory during their filmed re-creation of the 1924 Everest expedition. His first ascents include bold routes on Baffin Island and Antarctica, but even more striking is Houlding's personality, which is on bright display in films like *The Asgard Project*. Houlding likes to party, likes to laugh, likes to take risks. He is likable. I like him. You probably like him, too. He's out on the town, partying away, and then is somehow ready for an alpine start.

Closer to the Edge is Houlding's memoir of climbing, but one is reminded that even memoirs—perhaps especially memoirs—need a purpose. Houlding follows the progression of his climbs, but there's little to suggest there's anything happening behind those moments on the rock. What is Houlding's driving force? What is the mania? One would hope for a book that incorporates some of Houlding's intensity and exuberance, but alas, in print, his story is of climbs completed or left incomplete with his actual living self left between the lines.

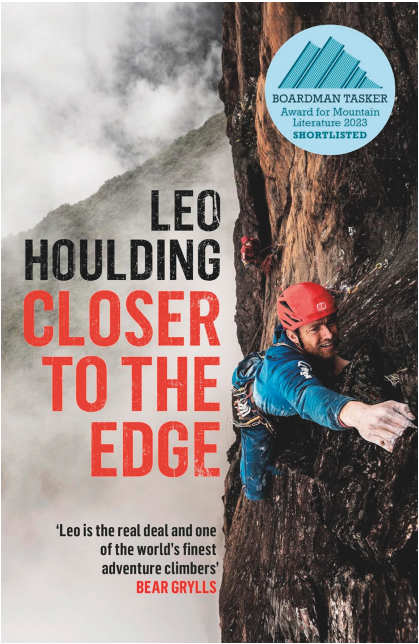
At one point he relates the story of a fall in Patagonia. Houlding and his partners are attempting Cerro Torre when Houlding's foot blows while negotiating a rock-over. His talus is shattered so completely that doctors will discuss amputation as a possibility. Against the odds, Houlding recovers, and one hopes for some introspection in the aftermath, but he mostly narrates his boredom, filling the time with the decision to buy a house and to begin dating the woman who would become his wife. (They now have two children.) The next chapter has him BASE jumping with Dean Potter, as if the accident had never happened, as if nothing was learned.

It is, of course, a fallacy to review a book for what it is not rather than what it is, but I can't help but imagine what Houlding might have done with an insistent and talented (and funny) co-author, and here I'm not thinking of fellow climbers but of actual writers. What might have become of his narrative with someone to coax his exuberance onto the page? What might this book have been with someone like Jonathan Ames in the co-pilot's seat?

One can hardly fault Houlding, for we are enmeshed in a sport where every climber of great note is pushed to write a book. The drama of what we do is the draw, of course, but as a reader (and a writer), I'm still searching for some compelling reason for the narrative. In other words, why does this book need to be written? Does Houlding have something unique to add to climbing? He probably does, but it's not particularly apparent in his memoir. Compared with other climbers, and indeed other climbing memoirs, one has to ask: closer to the edge of what?

—Christian Kiefer

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