

End of the Rope: Mountains, Marriage, and Motherhood

By Jan Redford

Counterpoint, 2018. 344 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-64009-030-9. Price: \$26.00 (hardcover).

The Sharp End of Life: A Mother's Story

By Dierdre Wolownick

Mountaineers Books, 2019. 256 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-68051-242-7. Price: \$24.95 (hardcover).

ALEX HONNOLD COULD STAND UP WHEN HE WAS 12 HOURS OLD. AT 10 MONTHS, he could walk, open a heavy patio door, and climb a 6-foot-high slide.

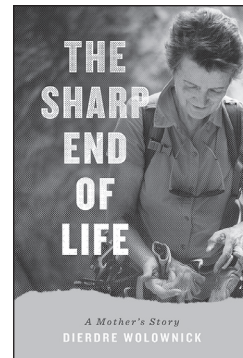
I am the father of a 3-month-old boy who can hardly hold his head up. The idea of a *half-day-old baby* grabbing onto my pinkie fingers and standing for several seconds seems like the kind of tall tale reserved for Paul Bunyan or John Henry.

Honnold's mother Dierdre Wolownick swears by these stories in her memoir about raising a world-renowned rock climber, the first person to free solo the 3,000-foot-wall of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park alone and without a rope. *The Sharp End of Life: A Mother's Story* is an important, insightful addition to the canon of rock climbing literature.

Wolownick writes a fast-paced, entertaining memoir about surviving a stifling marriage and finding herself through outdoors adventures late in life. Once she dispatches with her surly husband and starts following her indefatigable son up Yosemite's peaks, *The Sharp End of Life* becomes fun and joyous, culminating with Wolownick entering the record books as the oldest woman to climb El Capitan, at age 66 (with ropes).

Wolownick is a mother who turned into a rock climber. Jan Redford's *End of the Rope: Mountains, Marriage, and Motherhood* is the story of a rock climber becoming a mother. Read together, the books offer a nuanced, messy portrait of what it means to be an outdoorsy woman trying to juggle family, work, and personal fulfillment.

While Wolownick was born to a conservative Polish family in Queens, New York, and became a well-educated polyglot and community college



professor, Redford was born in the Yukon, barely graduated high school, and had a reputation as a tobacco-chewing, beer-guzzling, school-eschewing, free-loving nomad—traits more typically embraced by “bros” in the macho climbing community. However different their personalities, both women battle their way through unhappy marriages. Wolownick turns away from her classroom and looks toward the mountains for emotional fulfillment. Redford turns away from climbing and returns to education to find personal freedom.

End of the Rope is heavy on angst and heartache as Redford watches people around her die in the mountains (and in one case from free soloing). At one point, she tells the climbing legend Jim Bridwell, who has left his wife and young son home while he travels around the world, “What gives you the right to go off and die?” She gives a stinging critique of lopsided expectations on women to give up their careers and their adventures.

Redford has said she wrote her memoir so her kids won’t repeat her mistakes. Both books offer a small trove of advice on parenting, relationships, and living. Do allow your child to climb on the house roof (so long as he agrees to also clean the gutters). Do your taxes on time (or risk having the IRS put a lien on your house). Don’t say “I love you” after only three weeks of dating (no matter how strong the urge). Don’t rush into a new relationship after your lover dies in an avalanche. Don’t sacrifice your passions for your spouse. Don’t waffle at the crux.

The Sharp End of Life hit a more personal note for me, as it focuses on a mother’s relationship with her son, which is a subject I’ve written about for *Appalachia* (“Care for the Caregiver,” Summer/Fall 2018). Wolownick writes with a power to inspire those feeling too old to rethink their physical limits. Her humorous tales of climbing with her son might also inspire children to take their parents into the mountains more. If Honnold could make time to guide his mother up El Cap, then I should be able to bring my mother for a winter hike in the White Mountains (she’s been asking me).

I also recently became a father, which gave me a more intimate appreciation for that bit about Honnold being able to stand up at 12 hours old. Did Honnold become a great climber because he was born great, or did these stories about his innate abilities push him to live up to a higher potential? *The Sharp End of Life* is an insight into letting your children pursue their passions and the seemingly impossible.

—Stephen Kurczy