

How to Solve a Problem: The Rise (and Falls) of a Rock-Climbing Champion

*By Ashima Shiraishi (author) and
Yao Xiao (illustrator)*

*Make Me a World / Penguin Random House,
2020, 40 pages.*

ISBN: 978-1-5247-7327-4.

Price \$17.99 (hardcover).

THE BOOK STARTS WITH A YOUNG WOMAN, IN polka-dotted capris and a purple T-shirt, finger-crimping off a trailer-sized boulder in Central Park, in the shadow of Manhattan’s skyscrapers. She is the teenage phenom Ashima Shiraishi, one of the best climbers in the world and unquestionably the best to emerge from a city where “climbing” is traditionally in reference to a corporate ladder.

A product of Central Park’s famous bouldering scene at Rat Rock as well as of New York City’s modern wave of big climbing gyms, Shiraishi is expected to be the top-ranked U.S. female competitor in the rescheduled Tokyo Summer Olympics in 2021, where climbing will make its debut as a medal event. She will be only 20 years old. Given her superhuman climbing ability, it is befitting that *How to Solve a Problem: The Rise (and Falls) of a Rock-Climbing Champion* is illustrated in an anime style that portrays Shiraishi as an unlikely superhero.

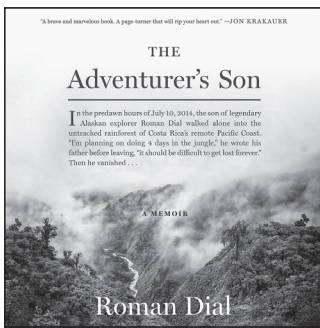
Geared toward young readers, the book offers a glimpse into how a high-caliber climber such as Shiraishi deconstructs a seemingly unscalable rock wall into a series of body movements that look like an exquisitely choreographed dance routine. Shiraishi specializes in bouldering, a type of climbing that focuses on scrambling up, around, and underneath boulders and low rock cliffs. A boulderer does not use a harness or ropes, only crash pads, because there’s a lot of crashing. “Each fall is a message, a hint, an idea,” she writes. “A new way to move from over there to over here.”

I’ve been following Shiraishi’s career since 2013, when I started climbing at her gym. She was then 11, a pixieish girl with long black hair, blunt bangs, and colorful elastic pants I later heard her mother sewed. (Her father cuts her hair.) “There’s Ashima,” a friend whispered as we passed her at Brooklyn Boulders. She was already climbing at an elite level. In a 2016 profile, the *New Yorker* called her “perhaps the first female climber whose accomplishments

may transcend gender, and the first rock climber who could become a household name.”

How to Solve a Problem centers on Shiraishi’s feat, in 2014 at age 13, of climbing the V14 boulder problem Golden Shadow in Rocklands, South Africa. (She was the second woman to ever climb V14.) “And so I started. And so I fell. And so I climbed again, listening to what the fall had told me.” That’s a good lesson for climbers and non-climbers alike, and one reason why I’ll be giving this book to my niece this holiday season.

—Stephen Kurczy



The Adventurer's Son

By Roman Dial

William Morrow, 2020. 368 pages.

ISBN: 978-0-06-287660-7.

Price: \$28.99 (hardcover).

AT ITS BEST, *THE ADVENTURER'S SON* LOOKS inward with a deep lens that reveals wisdom born from tragedy.

“Parents aren’t supposed to pass out pills, smoke dope, or drink booze with their kids, and we never did,” Roman Dial writes in a more reflective moment. “Instead, we bought them airplane tickets to exotic lands. Travel itself can be an addiction. Adventure is. Here I was, searching for [my son] missing on a trip that traced directly back to me.”

This memoir centers on Dial’s search for his son, Cody Roman Dial, who went missing in 2014 in the Costa Rican jungle. It would be a nightmarish tragedy for any parent, and it’s a story worth hearing, falling in the vein of Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*.

Part of my difficulty with this book, however, was how Dial seemed to search for his son with the sense of adventure he might devote to climbing a mountain or kayaking a rapid. Unraveling the mystery came across, too often, as a way to talk about himself and remark on his own skills as an outdoorsman and biologist.

Dial is well known in the outdoors community, perhaps most of all for founding the Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic, a multiday race described by *Outside* as the “toughest wilderness challenge in the world.” For that and other escapades, Dial literally claims a chapter in the world of extreme

backcountry adventure. In his 1997 book *Escape Routes*, David Roberts profiles Dial as a “pivotal figure” for combining mountaineering, backcountry navigation, and mountain biking to “blitz” his way across glaciers and tundra, sometimes in defiance of federal regulations and park rangers. In a more egregious example of such an “adventure,” Dial biked illegally into the Grand Canyon and rafted without a permit down the Colorado River. His renegade attitude would inspire his son to take similar risks.

In 2014, Dial’s son embarked on an illegal solo jungle trek through Costa Rica’s Corcovado National Park. Cody, then 27, had no permit, partly because he did not want to hire a guide as the park required. Before setting off, he emailed his parents a basic itinerary. Dial initially drafted a cautionary response that said, “I don’t think you should go the way you’ve planned. It seems too dangerous.” Rethinking his message as too negative and parental, Dial deleted the draft and instead wrote a lighter message that concluded, “Off-trail jungle walking can get pretty disorienting.” The nonchalance of those words may have egged Cody to live up to his father’s expectations of what it meant to be an adventurer.

When Cody failed to emerge from the jungle after several weeks, Dial and his wife started a multiyear search that involved the Costa Rican government, the U.S. Defense Department, and several psychics. It sparked a *National Geographic* whodunnit series called *Missing Dial*. I watched the first of four episodes, finding it overwrought and silly, begging the question of why Dial okayed its production. He was setting himself up to relive the tragedy in real time.

The book’s closing chapters deal with *National Geographic*’s hasty conclusion that Cody was murdered. Just as that TV series aired, park authorities found Cody’s remains—nearly two years after he went missing—ruling that he was killed by a falling tree, not foul play.

At its heart, this is a story about a father’s reckoning with the idea that cultivating a sense of adventure in his son could be as deadly as teaching a child to drink or do drugs. As a new father, I was challenged to think about how parents might responsibly nurture a child’s appreciation for the outdoors in a way that doesn’t lead to a premature end.

In a review for *The New York Times*, Blair Braverman—a contributor to *Appalachia*—suggested a more appropriate title for this book could have been *The Adventurer’s Father*: “This is what it means to raise a child, to introduce that child to the world, and to bet his life—and his joy—on the odds.”

—Stephen Kurczy