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FIRST ASCENT

The EPIC YOSEMITE ROCK-CLIMBING RIVALRY
of ROYAL ROBBINS and WARREN HARDING

Written by Kate Messner

Illustrated by Stevie Lewis

This guide was written by Kate Messner. “Rock Climbing Q&A,” “Rock Climbing and Yosemite National Park Resources,” and all illustrations excerpted from *First Ascent: The Epic Yosemite Rock-Climbing Rivalry of Royal Robbins and Warren Harding*, written by Kate Messner, illustrated by Stevie Lewis, copyright © 2025. Published by Yosemite Conservancy.

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YOSEMITE
CONSERVANCY

yosemite.org

ABOUT THE BOOK

This is the true story of a daring game of one-up-manship that pushed the sport of rock climbing to new heights during the Golden Age of Yosemite climbing of the 1950s and 1960s. Royal Robbins and Warren Harding were two wildly different men who loved the challenge posed by big walls of granite—some that had never been climbed! They paired up to attempt an epic climb on Half Dome. When they didn’t make it to the top, they went their separate ways and soon became fierce rivals, racking up first ascents around Yosemite Valley.

Readers will join the journey as Royal and Warren chase rock-climbing records, which in turn showed the world the heights that are possible when there is someone pushing you to achieve. This fast-paced adventure set in one of the most thrilling places on Earth is brought to life with plenty of humor by best-selling author Kate Messner and climber-illustrator Stevie Lewis.



About the Author

KATE MESSNER

katemessner.com

New York Times best-selling author Kate Messner is passionately curious and writes books for kids who wonder, too. Her titles include award-winning picture books like *Over and Under the Snow*, *The Next Scientist*, and *The Scariest Kitten in the World*, as well as novels for older readers, including *Breakout* and *The Trouble with Heroes*. Kate also writes the popular History Smashers illustrated nonfiction series and leads the multi-author team behind the chapter book series *The Kids in Mrs. Z's Class*. She lives on Lake Champlain and is a proud Adirondack 46er. Find Kate on social media @katemessner.



About the Illustrator

STEVIE LEWIS

chocosweete.com

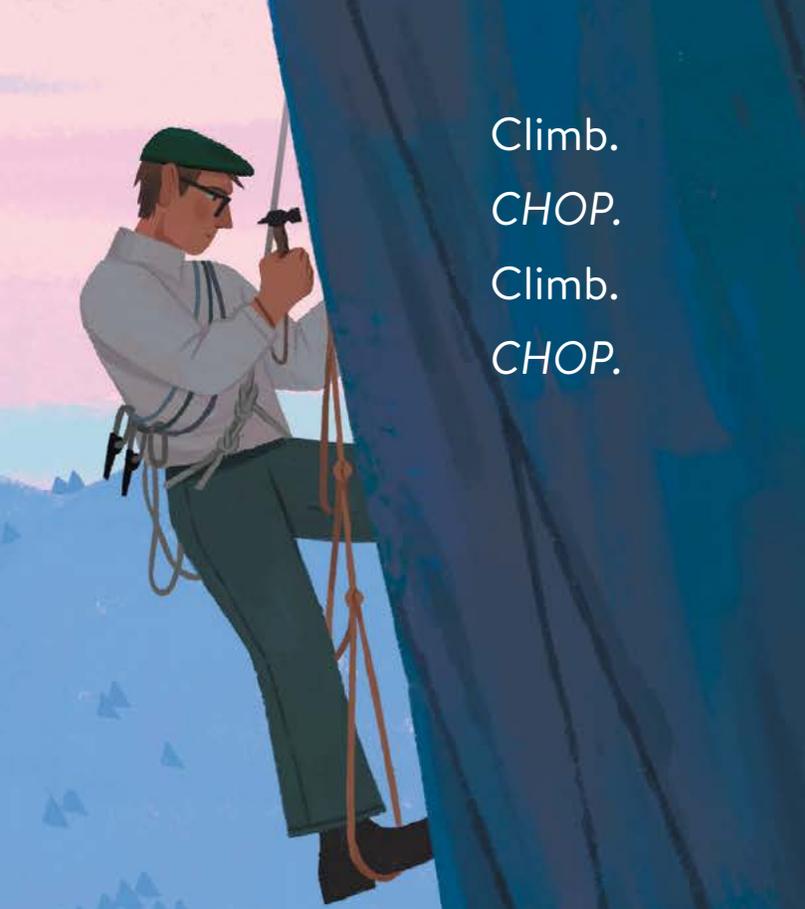
Stevie Lewis is an illustrator of many children's books. After leaving her job in animation, she sold everything she owned, built out a van, and hit the road with rock climbing gear and a sketchbook. Over the next few years, she climbed in some of the most beautiful places in North America. When she's not working on books, she also enjoys painting, hiking, and mountain biking. She lives in western Montana with her husband and baby. Find Stevie on Instagram @chocosweete.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The first line of this book is, “It might seem as if Royal Robbins and Warren Harding had nothing in common.” Do you think that’s true? In what ways are they different? Do they seem to have more in common than a passion for rock climbing?
2. Rock climbing requires a lot of problem solving, and sometimes improvising solutions, such as Royal’s decision to swing himself across a rock wall to reach the next climbing features (pp. 16–17). What challenges have you faced that required you to problem solve or improvise? How did you come up with a solution?
3. How would you have felt if you were Warren Harding and arrived to climb Half Dome, only to find that Royal Robbins was already halfway there? (pp. 21–22) What do you think of the way Warren handled the situation?
4. Why do you think both Royal and Warren became fixated on making first ascents? Is there anyone in your life who pushes you to work harder in the way that Royal and Warren pushed each other?
5. Both Royal and Warren faced some scary situations in their rock-climbing adventures. Why do you think they kept going back? Have you ever tried something that was scary but also fun? How did it make you feel?





Climb.
CHOP.
Climb.
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ROCK CLIMBING AND YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK RESOURCES

BOOKS

- ***How to Solve a Problem: The Rise (and Falls) of a Rock-Climbing Champion***, by Ashima Shiraishi, illustrated by Yao Xiao (Make Me a World, 2020).
- ***Rock Stars!: True Stories of Extreme Climbing Adventures***, by Steve Bramucci (National Geographic Kids, 2018).

WEBSITES

- **The National Park Service’s “Climbing” page** has information about types of climbing, safety, and the history of the sport. [nps.gov/subjects/climbing/index.htm](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/climbing/index.htm)
- **Yosemite Climbing Association** works to raise awareness of Yosemite climbing and preserve the history of the sport. yosemiteclimbing.org
- If you’re visiting Yosemite and want to try rock climbing, **Yosemite Mountaineering School and Guide Service** offers classes and outings. yosemite.com/things-to-do/adventure-activities/yosemite-mountaineering-school-guide-service
- Or, if you’re more of a curious observer, the **Ask a Climber station near El Capitan Meadow** has you covered. yosemite.org/projects/ask-a-climber-program

6. Royal Robbins and Warren Harding had different philosophies when it came to rock climbing. Warren was happy to drill in as many bolts as needed to get up a wall, while Royal believed in “clean climbing,” leaving as few traces of the climber’s presence on the rock as possible. How much do you think this difference of opinion affected their rivalry?
7. What do you think Royal was thinking as he made the second ascent of the Dawn Wall (El Capitan)? (p. 40) Why do you think he started the climb by chopping off all of the bolts Warren had placed, but then stopped?
8. Sometimes when people complete a hike or climb, they talk about “conquering the mountain.” Do you think this is a good description of the accomplishment? Why or why not?



ROCK CLIMBING Q&A

When rock climbers spend days (or even weeks!) up on a wall, what do they eat and drink?

Rock climbers need to carry everything they'll eat and drink while they're on a big wall. That includes a gallon of water per day for each climber and high-energy foods that won't spoil. Meat jerky, fruit, bagels, nut butters, and trail mix are favorites!

Okay. But how do they go to the bathroom?

Depends. Are you asking about #1 or #2? Climbers often pee in empty water bottles and then dump them at the end of the climb. Pooping on a big wall is trickier. There are no bathrooms, so climbers don't have much privacy. When nature calls, they squat and relieve themselves into a plastic bag (often called a wag bag), which they seal and carry with them until they're off the wall and it can be thrown away.

Where do they sleep?

Climbers sleep on ledges when they're available. When they're not, climbers use a portaledge, a collapsible platform that hangs down from anchors placed in the wall.

Is rock climbing a dangerous sport?

You might see rock climbers scaling cliffs and imagine it's a lot more dangerous than other sports. However, the rate of injury for rock climbing is actually lower than it is for cycling, hockey, football, and soccer. When safety equipment such as ropes and harnesses are used properly, they go a long way in keeping climbers safe. Still, accidents happen, and on big walls they can be fatal. Yosemite National Park sees an average of 2.5 deaths per year out of the tens of thousands who rock climb there.

Did Royal Robbins and Warren Harding die in climbing accidents?

No. Rock climbing didn't kill Warren Harding; alcohol did. Warren loved the music and crowd of a party, but he also struggled with addiction and wasn't able to stop drinking, even when his health suffered. He died of liver failure at age seventy-seven. Royal Robbins died of an incurable brain disease when he was eighty-two.