



Learning to Fly: An Uncommon Memoir of Human Flight, Unexpected Love, and One Amazing Dog

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When professional rock climber Steph Davis started skydiving, she discovered new love, hope, and joy in letting go.

“It’s not so surprising that on the day of my fifth wedding anniversary I would be crouched in the open door of an airplane, thirteen thousand feet above the Colorado plains, about to jump out. That coincidence of timing really wasn’t.”

Steph Davis is a superstar in the climbing community and has ascended some of the world’s most awe-inspiring peaks. But when her husband makes a controversial climb in a national park, the media fallout—and the toll it takes on her marriage—suddenly leaves her without a partner, a career, a source of income...or a purpose.

In the company of only her beloved dog, Fletch, Davis sets off on a search for a new identity and discovers skydiving. Though falling out of an airplane is completely antithetical to the climber’s control she’d practiced for so long, she turns each daring jump into an opportunity to fly, first as a skydiver, then as a base jumper, and finds herself indelibly changed. As she opens herself to falling, she also finds the strength to open herself to love again, even in the wake of heartbreak. And before too long, she fortuitously meets someone who shares her passions.

Learning to Fly is Davis’s fascinating account of her transformation. From her early tentative skydives, to zipping into her first wingsuit, to surviving devastating accidents against the background of breathtaking cliffs, to soaring beyond her past limits, she discovers new hope and joy in letting go. *Learning to Fly* isn’t just an adventure but a woman’s story of risk-taking and self-discovery, with love at its heart.

Learning to Fly: An Uncommon Memoir of Human Flight, Unexpected Love, and One Amazing Dog Details

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Kaci says

I think I actually read a more recent edition of this book titled Learning to Fly: a Memoir of Hanging on and Letting Go. I found myself really drawn to the climbing sections. I found myself speed reading through the sky diving and BASE jumping. Then the end hit with a lot of dying. This is one tough girl who knows herself and her limits. Overall a good read and I'm glad I picked this one up. Plus I love anything set in Utah and western Colorado.

Clara Mazzi says

Quando ho visto il titolo (che non è questo. E': A Memoir of Hanging On and Letting Go) e la copertina ho subito pensato: questo è il libro che fa per me! Sarà una bellissima lezione di vita che mi ispirerà da matti. Errore.

Steph Davis, aka ex Mrs Dean Potter, scrive un libro che è l'esatto opposto dell'"inspirational". Questo genere infatti, presuppone un potente turbinio di emozioni: si parte con una vertiginosa caduta dall'alto, a cui segue una fase stagnante in cui sembra non ci sia nessuna way out che si conclude invece con una riemersione inaspettata che porta sollievo, appagamento e nuove idee.

Steph Davis invece ci tiene a percorrere un percorso ben diverso. Ci spiega che macerare nel dolore non serve a niente (quello che altri chiamano: affrontare i propri demoni....) mentre invece tutto quello che c'è da fare è "agire, agire, agire" praticamente per raggiungere l'estraneazione da sé piuttosto che un livello di produzione di endorfine così forti che (ti sembra) di andare avanti non poi così male, anzi.

Addicted, obsessed, unvbelievable sono le parole che più ricorrono in questa sorta di (noiosissimo) manuale di skydiving (in cui annota meticolosamente il numero dei salti, si addentra nei dettagli delle tutine, ci descrive minuziosamente l'altimetro nonché entra nel dettaglio sulle regolamentazioni svizzere in merito al base jumping) nonché pamphlet autocelebrativo di quanto lei sai una potenza della natura, non solo perché una veramente tosta e brava, ma perché riesce a farlo in condizioni emotive pesanti.

E su queste condizioni emotive forti, proprio quando verremmo al dunque, lei invece svicola, togliendoci ogni com-passione. Solo un paio di righe sulla fine del suo matrimonio con Dean Potter, dopo 12 anni insieme ed aver condiviso passioni e lavoro, un altro paio di righe su come tutti gli sponsor l'avessero lasciata per strada dopo una controversa scalata del suo ex marito; non un accenno, dico uno!, sui due salti andati male, con fratture e ricovero in ospedale e su com'è stato riprovare a saltare dopo questi incidenti. La Davis non ha particolari emozioni – per scelta. Giusto l'amato cane, in cui ci narra con pena (sincera) della sua morte e poi della tragica fine del suo secondo marito, morto anche lui durante un salto. Ma per Steph, l'abbiamo capito, indugiare sulle grandi domande della vita è solo una perdita di tempo. Lei, nel corso degli anni, ha imparato così bene a tenere la sua vita sotto controllo, a gestirla appieno che quando qualcosa non va, basta sostituirlo, da un pavimento che va rifatto (e ovviamente lo fa lei, non un operaio specializzato) a un cane morto (ma, guarda un po': un gattino entra in casa proprio il giorno dopo aver cremato l'adorata Fletcher e voilà, il dolore per Fletcher svanisce con una mossa sinuosa del gattino), da un ex marito ad un altro uomo nel giro di poco tempo; dal secondo marito spiacciato ad un altro grande amore che gravitava nei paraggi (al qualc io suggerirei di farsi un paio di pensieri, visto che ogni amore della Davis finisce morto schiantato. E poi, già che ci sono gli chiederei anche: che effetto ti fa leggere nel libro che tutti hanno in mano, che Steph, si ti ama ogni giorno di più, ma che Mario è stato il suo unico, vero grande amore? No, così, giusto per...).

Non mi è piaciuto per niente questo libro, quindi, che tradisce il genere letterario, le aspettative de lettore e non impartisce alcuna lezione di vita; non mi piace per niente lei che ha la filosofia di vita di un bambino della materna (voglio fare solo quello che piace a me/esisto solo io e devo occuparmi solo di me) priva di spessore umano, maturità, saggezza né progetti veri e propri per il futuro, progetti che al di là del sé coinvolgano anche altre persone di questo pianeta (come contribuisce lei, al mondo?) così come non apprezzo minimamente il suo salire in cattedra e impartirci convinta lezioni di vita di grande egoismo ed egocentrismo convinta invece di svelare a tutti la chiave del mistero di una vita felice.

Non è un caso che non abbia figli: avrei voluta vederla, vedova, alle prese con dei pargoli a portare avanti la sua filosofia “devo vivere solo secondo le mie passioni”. Non credo a questo punto che sia un caso che lei figli non ne abbia.

Insomma, lungi dall’essere coraggiosa (sebbene lei non faccia altro che presentarci un suo successo dietro l’altro, sempre più pericoloso..), la Davis dovrebbe capire è ben lungi dall’esserlo: tutto quello che fa è solo un esercizio tecnico. Il vero coraggio è affrontare i propri demoni e, con la propria vicenda, aiutare gli altri a farsi venire delle idee su come combattere i propri. Ma a Steph, troppo arida interiormente, troppo immatura, questo non piace.

Gleicienne Fernandes says

Davis definitely has a very interesting life story. Like everyone else, it is full of ups and dows with nice surprises and empowerment. She is rad as a climber and then she learned about another sport that changed her career path. It is a very nice biography.

Drew Holmes says

brought back so many memories of my life on a drop zone....My brother taught claimbing with her so many years ago in Colorado.

quick fun read

sendann says

A huge leap from her last athletic memoir, I found this book engaging and inspiring beginning to end. For climbers familiar with the author and her career arc, this fills out the picture of a very weird public story from a few years ago. As much as I relate to and feel thankful for getting to hear such an intense and personal story, there were a few too many distracting elements going on in the text. The extrapolation to narration ratio was too high for me, and although I loved the messages about fear and risk and balancing independence with vulnerability, they were reiterated to the point of distraction. I had other struggles, but it came down, i think, to a notable lack of the self effacement and good humor that make memoirs shine. It doesn't feel like the author is talking to her best friend. It feels like a slide show being given to an audience of strangers. I wish that a strong ghost writer had been there, to suss out the voice and sculpt the narrative. That said, the temporal transitions are quite graceful and cinematic.

Liz Parissenti says

Steph Davis's accomplishments in climbing and base jumping are extraordinary, and this book felt both understated and compelling because of how she describes feats of incredible human performance as just another day in the life. She starts off her story as a professional climber in love and ends as a professional base jumper with two marriages under her belt, and all the changes that happened along the way. I also loved her passion for her dog, Fletcher, and how it tied so many things in her life together. Great read, incredible story, and a reminder that BASE jumping is for people who view death very differently than I do.

Gregory Crouch says

Americans love to rave about their individual freedoms. Ironically, most shackle their lives to desires and expectations other than their own and grind out their days without ever bothering to discover their genuine loves and passions. Even more tragic, many of those who do know their hearts can't summon the courage to take the action true love requires.

Steph Davis is not one of those people. She has no place among Teddy Roosevelt's "cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." Steph Davis is one of the rarest American breed—a free individual, one of the freest in the land, and she's cut the whole cloth of her life from her hearts' desire.

Freedom isn't easy, however, as any person who has tried to live it knows, and Learning to Fly begins with Davis thrown low by twinned disasters—the disintegration of her marriage and the collapse of her professional relationship with the clothing company for whom she'd been a "climbing ambassador" for most of a decade. Unmoored and depressed, Davis drifts into Boulder, Colorado with little besides her truck, her climbing gear, her beloved dog, Fletch, and a wild, inexplicable urge to skydive.

Inexplicable because intentionally taking a fall is anathema to a world-class climber like Steph Davis who does a fair bit of solo climbing (climbing without a rope). For nearly two decades, she'd kept herself alive by not falling, but Davis senses crucial life lessons waiting through the doors of skydiving, of voluntarily jumping, and in typical fashion, she throws herself whole hog into the parachuting world, learning in quick succession to skydive, BASE jump (parachuting from earthbound objects like buildings, antennas bridges (spans), and cliffs (earth)), and fly wingsuits.

Davis is, of course, Learning to Fly, it's a fascinating process, and through her new passion, she returns to her old one, climbing. As she falls in love with BASE jumping, the extreme becomes routine, and before we've blinked twice, she's jumping Moab's 450-foot tall Tombstone before breakfast every windless morning. It's a wild ride: Davis fights through two accidents, both of which could have been a whole lot worse than they were, falls in love, emotionally nurses beloved Fletch through her final days, and takes us climbing and jumping in Yosemite, Colorado, the Grand Canyon, Utah, Idaho, Switzerland, and Italy. Particularly excellent are her descriptions of soloing the Casual Route and Pervertical Sanctuary on the Long's Peak Diamond, Colorado's premier alpine crag; totally mind-blowing is her story of free-solo rock climbing the North Face of Utah's Castleton Tower—and BASE jumping from the summit.

Davis brings it all off with just the right touches of humility, too, because really, she's phenomenally good at what she does. She barely has a foot in the same universe as the rest of us. Books are hard to end well, and Steph leaves us with a gorgeous fly-off, wrapping her story of loss and redemption, freedom, love, action, passion, and responsibility into a spectacular leap into a world "vast with possibility" from near the top of the Eiger.

With Learning to Fly, Steph has written a wonderful and inspiring book, a shining example of what soulful courage makes possible. I couldn't put the damn thing down.

Edith says

This is an unlikely book for me to read except that my rock-climbing daughter enthusiastically pressed it on me after she finished it and said "you need to read this book next." She was insistent enough that I did!

Although I am not a rock-climber or a base jumper and never will be (!), Steph Davis's story kept me interested. She is a world-renowned climber, skydiver, and base jumper and her rebound from a failed marriage and a crashing career comprises this story. She goes from climbing up vertical cliffs with no ropes or backup to jumping off them in flight back to ground. Quite a story from an intelligent writer who dropped out of law school to embrace a career of climbing and jumping.

Katherine Jones says

After being hit by a series of crises, Steph Davis knew she had to take a giant step back and retool. And though her particular situation might not be one everyone can identify with, her general quandary is: "Whatever might happen in life," Steph Davis writes, "whether I liked it or didn't like it, I could know one thing for sure: it would change. There was absolute certainty in uncertainty."

Davis writes in a spare style, which you might expect from a woman who quit law school to pursue the ascetic, living-out-of-a-trunk lifestyle of a climber. She also writes with a refreshingly clean voice. Unlike many contemporary memoirs, you'll find nothing off-color within these pages. It's not a tell-all. She doesn't even mention her ex-husband's first name into well into her story. On the contrary, Davis is unfailingly modest about herself and kind about others.

She includes more detail about climbing, wingsuits, skydiving and base jumping that most of us will ever need to know. But she also writes so poignantly about her beloved pooch, Fletcher, that it made me teary at times. "Fletch had a spirit so strong it put me to shame. I watched her closely...because she was showing me yet again the right way to live—never giving up, doing the best she could, with a smile on her face....She loved the moments of her life."

All in all, Learning to Fly is a provocative, thoughtful memoir about finding the courage to name our fears, to face them down, and to always, always be willing to try something new.

Thanks to Touchstone/Simon & Schuster for providing me a copy to review. All opinions are mine.

Erika says

The book was really good for showing the world of skydiving and BASE jumping. There is an entire culture built up around these sports, and it was a fascinating inside look into it. I didn't like the philosophical musings as much, maybe because I'm much older than she is so I didn't learn much about myself through them.

I felt like Davis sees things through her eyes but not always through others'. She complained about rules surrounding BASE jumping in Yosemite and talked about how great Switzerland was for allowing jumpers on their cliffs. I kept wanting to hear the other side. Maybe BASE jumping is banned in Yosemite just to spite jumpers, but I would be interested in hearing their reasons. I would also like to know if Switzerland has had problems with jumpers that weren't talked about in Davis's book. But a good read for learning about the sport.

William Graney says

I was very impressed with the author's humility and her willingness to credit those who helped and mentored her during her very impressive accomplishments. I've found that to be a somewhat rare trait in the Adventure genre as there is often a "Wow-look at me-I'm so amazing" component to the writing. It's so refreshing to read incredible life tales by the likes of Steph David or Bernard Moitessier, who share their lives with the reader in a way that inspires admiration and respect, not just for their incredible achievements but also for who they are as people. The last two chapters of this book were perhaps the most heart breaking narratives I've ever read.

This book is going on my Hall of Fame bookshelf.

Cheryl says

I have not heard of Steph Davis nor am I familiar with the controversy that her then husband made in the media. Steph's husband climbed the "Arches" in the Utah National Park. Although, climbing is allowed in the park it is frowned upon to climb such a famous landmark. It got so bad that it was almost like Steph's husband was on trial in a Salem witch hunt. Of course coupled with the media and the loss of some big sponsors, the marriage crumbled. However if it was not for this, Steph may not have discovered her other new passion besides climbing...sky diving and base jumping.

I have wanted to try sky diving. So this was part of the reason for me wanting to check this book out. The other reasons are what Steph has done is amazing and the other reason being that she spent so much time in Colorado. I have a place in my reading world for authors who live in Colorado.

I felt like I got a good raw look into Steph's life. It was nice to read how Steph coped by learning how to let go and be free like a bird in the sky. Steph is awe-inspiring. After reading this book I am more interested to try sky diving, however I will leave the base jumping and climbing to Steph. Well maybe I might try base jumping after I get in all of the required sky diving jumps. Learning to Fly is an wonderful book that will have you reaching for the sky and your own dreams!

Cristina says

Learning to fly is for me that type of book read at the right time. More than being just a book about the colorful world of base jumpers, it is a book about each and everyone of us. Normal people whose lives have a lot of ups and downs and ugly moments. It is a book about the hope that in the end the things will turn well, about learning to live and enjoy every day. Even the dark ones. About learning to let things go and enjoy those 10 seconds of fly. As 10 seconds of pure happiness.

Rion Shupe says

Poignant. This was the most emotionally difficult read I've ever completed.

Xzs says

Fabulous. Inspiring. I bought an armload of rock climbing books after I visited a climbing gym for the first time. My fear of heights prevented me from getting more than 6 or 7 feet of the ground. Although my climbing feats may have been less than impressive, I haven't stopped thinking about climbing since that visit. This book was the first of that armload that I took to reading, and it did not disappoint. Steph Davis has lived a life jam packed with adventure. She has charted out a lifestyle the vast majority of us can only dream about...or perhaps shake our heads and wonder why. I was gripped by her honesty. Her lifestyle kinds of lends itself to loss (in multiple facets). A lesson she has repeatedly lived through is that death comes to those of all abilities in the extreme sports world. Through it all she perseveres, climbs and flies. She's undoubtedly one cool cat. Both climbing and wingsuit jumping are particular armchair interests of mine. Most likely because I have a gripping fear of heights that prevents me from undertaking even moderate hikes, so I live vicariously through books, articles and YouTube videos. I have no intention of ever jumping off a cliff in a wingsuit. But you know what, I just may take up climbing, at my own pace! Thank you for your inspiration Steph! Keep climbing those cracks and jump off if you must?
