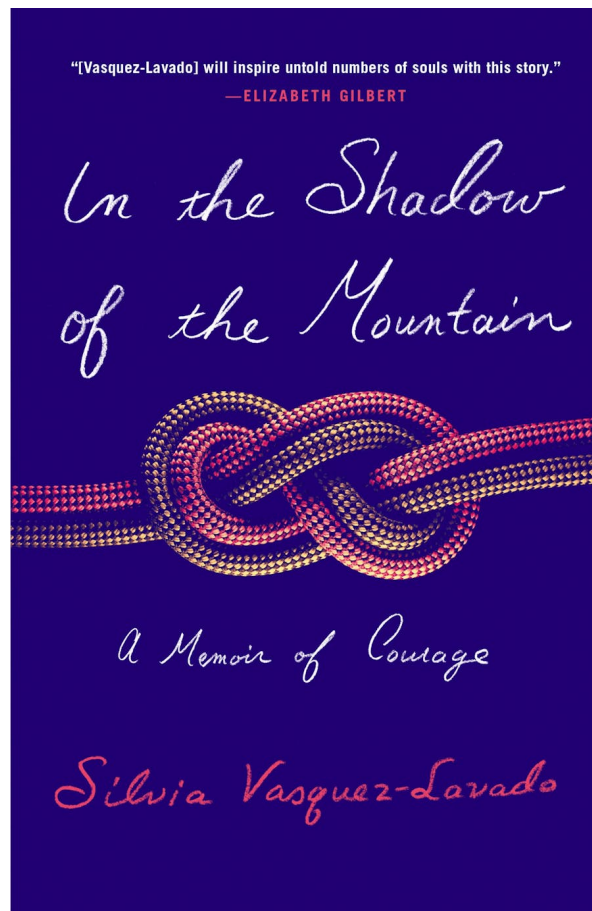


REVIEW

The Empowering Nature: A Review of Silvia Vasquez-Lavado's "In the Shadow of the Mountain"

by Joyce Bou Charaa



Silvia Vasquez-Lavado, a mountaineer and a humanitarian, is the first Peruvian woman — and one of few women overall — to complete the Seven Summits, which are the seven highest peaks on each continent. In her memoir *In the Shadow of the Mountain* (2022), Silvia takes us behind the scenes of her success story and of how she became the woman she is now. It's a memoir of courage, bravery, and success but also of the misery and pain Silvia has overcome, while taking a fearless step to write about her own experience and share it with the world.

Before reading this book I did not know much about Silvia Vasquez-Lavado, yet her global achievements caught my attention and gave me the desire to read and explore the story behind such a brave and successful woman. So, I researched the author to get an idea about her passion for exploring and climbing mountains. In a recent interview, on *Kron 4 News TV*, Silvia revealed that she was trying to run away from her problems by returning to nature, hiking in the hills, and climbing the mountains. That's when I became so interested in reading her memoir and in understanding more about her way of thinking.

Most of the book is about Silvia's childhood. She tells about her working class parents in Peru, a country with a host of political and social issues, such as poverty and violence, which were widely spread back then, and struggling with car bombs and kidnappings during political clashes, as she mentions later in the book. Silvia was raised in a Catholic school and grew up a devout and disciplined young girl. However, Silvia's childhood was marred by a traumatic incident that she cannot forget: sexual abuse. In the book, she calls the abuser "J" and she describes how he used to abuse her when she was at a young age. This incident left her with a heavy depression, though Silvia with the help of her parents would find the right path of recovery by returning to nature and finding salvation in the long valleys.



Silvia Vasquez-Lavado © Emily Assiran

Getting a scholarship in the United States of America was a whole new beginning for Silvia. Now, she had the chance to go to a place far away from her traumatic childhood in Lima. During that time and throughout all her journey, Silvia's mother was always a reliable presence by her side, defending and protecting her from anything bad happening, or from anyone who might hurt her in some way. Her mother's death was therefore of a great pain for Silvia, as she wrote: "I was lost. I was now a motherless daughter."

Moving to San Francisco, USA, Silvia decided to finally follow her dreams and start a new chapter in her life, away from all the misfortunes of the past. She started discovering a new country, a new culture, and meeting with new people who, with time, had a great influence on her. Also, in her book, she talks plainly about her sexual identity as well as her love relationships.

The author's journey of climbing mountains began with hiking trips with groups from different backgrounds and different perspectives. In one of those trips, Silvia mentions a small gathering with a group of girls, when each one of them decided to share her own story. In this meeting, Silvia felt a kind of relief by listening to other people's experiences and wrote: "All I know is how to push. It's how I survived... if I survive, then I've conquered my past."

For Silvia, healing trauma is achieved through reconnecting with nature. Her journeys to the high mountains were her only cure to all the problems she had faced before. And, coming back to nature, getting new, fresh air was the needed recovery for her own peace of mind. This kind of escapism is her way of surviving the past, and moving on towards a better future and a better way of living.

Silvia narrates her adventures of hiking and climbing mountains in many chapters in the book. Her journeys to the Seven Summits, from Mount Everest to Kilimanjaro, were of great relief for her soul. She talks further about ascending the mountains of Nepal with some groups of mountaineers, stopping at small villages to get some rest, and then having conversations during camping. In her description, Silvia shares with us her feelings of courage and fear while arriving at the summit, along with the physical obstacles that she faced with her teammates while they were climbing Mount Everest. "The mountains may be my lineage," she wrote, and then added: "Mountains were my escape. My sacred places — places of healing — natural places that accept all without judgment."



"In the Shadow of the Mountain" by Silvia Vasquez-Lavado

In each chapter, Silvia shares several personal experiences, both good ones and bad ones, which made in her the person she is now: a strong woman and a courageous mountaineer who takes risks and goes through many hard challenges believing that, after all, the world will embrace her inner pain. This beautiful quote from the book says it all: "Even in the shadows, we are climbing. Even in the dark, we are getting somewhere."

Reading memoirs means delving deep into someone's else life story and learning from their experiences. This is what I like the most about these books. Here, Silvia Vasquez-Lavado becomes a model to many young girls who have faced and continue to face traumatic incidents, which still cannot kept them from chasing their dreams and achieving their lifetime goals. Silvia herself, as a survivor of sexual abuse, is a clear example of someone who found the power to move on, reconnect with nature, and face these dangerous trips, which became crucial turning points in her life.

In the Shadow of the Mountain constitutes a fundamental message to every woman struggling with a traumatic incident, as it shows the possibility to let go of it, move on, and take the lead in one's life to become successful and strong. It's all about healing and moving forward despite the winds of pain and the powers of evil. Overall, this memoir is a highly recommended read and a chance to take a lesson on how to survive the traumas of life and how to always look for the light at the end of the tunnel.