



*Sharon Wood on the summit of Mount Everest.*

Photo by: Dwayne Congdon

# Believe and Begin

MT. EVEREST HAS FOLLOWED SHARON WOOD WHEREVER SHE GOES SINCE HER HISTORIC ASCENT OF THE PEAK IN 1986. OVER THREE DECADES LATER, HER MEMOIR *RISING* NOT ONLY CHRONICLES THAT ACHIEVEMENT, BUT ALSO CULMINATES A WRITING PROCESS AS CHALLENGING AS THE CLIMB ITSELF.

By Joanna Croston

**I**'M SITTING IN A SMALL café in Canmore, Alberta, and people are starting to trickle in. The vibe in the room is warm, and as the venue fills, folks are smiling and laughing. It's a small-town, comforting kind of energy where everyone knows each other, and people certainly know the main attraction. We've gathered to see Sharon Wood, the first North American woman to summit Mt. Everest, and celebrate the launch of her new book. *Rising* has been a 30-year labour of love – or perhaps more correctly, a 30-year itch that was never quite scratched. And now, here it finally is, written, bound and published.

Several team members from the 1986 Everest Light expedition have reunited for the event. Barry Blanchard, Laurie Skreslet and Kevin Doyle are right up front. A few couches have been pulled forward to the makeshift stage where Wood will stand to read, and this is where they sit, ready to heckle. Others, like Albi Sole, Jim Elzinga, James Blench and Jane Fearing, are on the perimeter or in the shadows waiting for the reading to begin.

As the show begins, Wood describes how she thought and hoped that some day her achievement on Everest might “go away” and how, eventually, she might be free of it. Since 1986 she's made a living giving inspirational speeches about her Everest climb, but she explains how she's never quite been comfortable with it. She admits that she never expected it to take up so much of her identity, yet here she is still talking about Everest. Deciding to write a book about it now, decades later, seems an odd way to be rid of something.

“Everest has opened doors for me and expanded my world. But at times, Everest has felt like an overbearing friend,” she reads from the pages of *Rising*. “It has often preceded me, elbowed its way into rooms, sashayed across floors, cut swaths through conversations and embarrassed me.”

“Outside of my work as an inspirational speaker, I have been quiet about this particular mountain,” she continues. “Some friends have accused me of being coy when I do not let Everest speak for me, but this is how it is: complicated.”



(TOP) The day after the summit, Laurie Skreslet helps Wood and Congdon recharge on their descent at 7,600 metres. Photo: Dan Griffith

(MIDDLE) Kevin Doyle near 7,100 metres on Mount Everest. Photo: Jim Elzinga

(BOTTOM) The Canadian Everest Light Team: Standing, left to right: Laurie Skreslet and Kevin Doyle. Back row, left to right: Barry Blanchard, Dan Griffith, Dwayne Congdon, James Blench and Dave McNab. Front row, left to right: Jim Elzinga, Sharon Wood, Chris Shank, Albi Sole and Dr. Bob Lee. Additional member Jane Fearing is missing from the photo. Photo courtesy of the Continental Bank

**SO, DID WRITING A BOOK** about Everest finally enable Wood to put the mountain behind her? That's what she told me she hoped it might do. But she also admits that her plan backfired and that she resigned herself to the fact that it wasn't going away. It was best to embrace both the mountain and her personal experience with it by writing down her story.

"I wrote this book to explore the underside of adventure and my motives, what I sought, what I feared and what fulfilled," she explained. "Although I have to admit I was pretty unconscious through most of the writing process, I responded to a blind trust that I was writing into those questions. The hardest part of writing is when I lose that faith, stop believing in the purpose for writing for any amount of time. I know this might sound strange, but I was so engaged in the writing process that I had not considered the outcome."

Much like her writing, Wood's climbing career had a slow, steady and determined approach. Her first climbs were in her teens; she made an ascent of Mount Unwin in Jasper – her first glaciated peak – at the age of 16. Two years later she climbed the Kain Face to the summit of Mount Robson. When I asked her which peak set her on her path, she confided that it was an accumulation of all her early climbs that made her decide on a life devoted to climbing. "Most every new climb was a bigger deal than the last, and each one reinforced the notion of it being the life for me and feeling more and more like home," she said.

Along with these early mountaineering ascents, she also signed up for an Outward Bound course, which Wood says she needed to control her delinquency when she was young. But as fate would have it, that was where she first met Laurie Skreslet, the first Canadian to summit Everest. Skreslet became her mentor and eventually a co-team member on the Everest Light expedition in 1986.

In 1977, Wood participated in a women's expedition to Mt. Logan. While she got along with all the women on the team, she felt more comfortable with men on big climbing trips, who she felt offered more candour. In *Rising* she writes, "I'd rather be with these men than a gaggle of women who dance around to bolster or avoid hurting one another's feelings. Terrible thing to say, I know, but I feel even more like a stranger then. Men just come straight out and say what they want to say. At least you know where you stand with these guys."

Among her most memorable climbs was an ascent of the Cassin Ridge on Denali where she and her climbing partner were stranded in a terrible three-day storm high on the mountain. They eventually summited and when they descended to the nearest camp at 14,000 feet, climbers there were amazed to discover that they were still alive, as most of the upper camps had been blown away. Wood made astounding solo missions in Peru as well. These were difficult, self-affirming climbs on the West Face of Tocllaraju and the North Face of Ranrapalca. It was after these climbs, and a first ascent on the Northeast Face of Huascaran Sur, that she finally told herself she was ready to climb Everest.

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**-COLLEEN CAMPBELL**

**BACK AT THE CAFÉ**, just before Wood begins her reading, 1986 Everest Light team member James Blench tells me the story of the night he moved to Canmore from the United States. He recalls a late-night pickup by fellow expedition member and friend, Dwayne Congdon (later Wood's summit partner on Everest), and how he was shuttled over to the notoriously rundown Canmore Hotel, where drunken shenanigans were already afoot. Wood had been cheating at pool, and her opponent was demanding an explanation, when James and Dwayne arrived. Upon seeing them, Wood pointed to James and shouted, “Talk to that guy over there! He’s my boyfriend!” James chuckles at the memory: he wasn’t actually her boyfriend, of course, and all he could think of at the time was “Welcome to Canada.”

Wood told me later that she has a different recollection of the story. But then she finally fessed up, “But I wouldn’t put it past me. I was pretty feisty back then.”

Her feistiness would serve her well in the years to come, helping her to cope with the unforeseen consequences of success. Her ascent of Everest,

from the climbing community’s standpoint, was an outstanding achievement – a new route on the north side of the mountain without Sherpa support. It did not follow the modern trend of commercial mountaineering tourism, where there is very little creative climbing involved, where people pay huge amounts of money to jug up fixed ropes and wait in line for a two-minute selfie on the summit. The budget for Wood’s expedition was one-tenth of that provided to the highly publicized 1982 Canadian Mount Everest Expedition. The 1986 expedition was relatively lean and the climbers were all well experienced and handpicked for their talent and ability to work as team members. But as soon as she summited, Wood’s world changed. Everyone wanted a piece of her fame and she wasn’t used to all the attention.

Her longtime friend Colleen Campbell recalled the days following the successful summit: “I am not sure anyone could have prepared her for the hunger of the press. Sharon was under siege. She deserved the accolades but I also know that she was craving a bit of personal space, time to think, time to contemplate her own path.”

**...EARLY IN HER CLIMBING CAREER A FRIEND HAD OFFERED HER SOME ADVICE: “BELIEVE AND BEGIN.” IT WAS EASY TO APPLY THIS PHILOSOPHY TO HER WRITING, SO LIKE A SLOW AND STEADY UPHILL CLIMB, SHE STUCK WITH IT.**

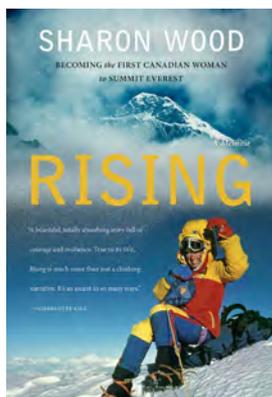
**IN SOME WAYS**, the writing of *Rising* parallels Wood’s climbing journey to Everest. She admits that initially she wasn’t a very good writer. It was a real risk to put herself out there in print for the world to see. At first she was intimidated and felt shut down and discouraged at every turn by editors and other writers around her. But early in her climbing career a friend had offered her some advice: “believe and begin.” It was easy to apply this philosophy to her writing, so like a slow and steady uphill climb, she stuck with it. “Believe and begin” became her mantra and eventually she had an unpolished, but full, manuscript in her hands.

She enrolled in four different writing courses over several years and almost all her writing mentors told her that her manuscript was too rough and that she had to begin again. When she finally found someone to provide

good editorial support, someone who “got it” and knew what style of encouragement she needed, Wood was more hell-bent than ever on pulling it off.

“She’s so incredibly tough – physically and mentally. Her athleticism translates to her writing discipline, and this made editing her pages such a rewarding experience,” said Wood’s editor Charlotte Gill, whom Wood aptly called “Coach.” “There was no amount of feedback that was too much. When she goes at her practice, she’s completely egoless.”

In the end, *Rising* not only tells a great story, but also reveals untold truths of the mountaineering world. “What makes the book special,” said Gill, “is its sense of continuous self-discovery, its willingness to embrace and explore human vulnerability.” ▲



***RISING: BECOMING THE FIRST CANADIAN WOMAN TO SUMMIT EVEREST, A MEMOIR***

**BY SHARON WOOD**

**Published by Douglas & McIntyre, 2019**

“As she tells her story today, her perspective is steeped in six decades of life experience rich with adrenalin, change, reflection and humility. It is a tale that still feels poignantly relevant—a testament to the strength of the human spirit to overcome all obstacles, whether mountain peaks, social expectations or self-imposed barriers.”

Learn more at [douglas-mcintyre.com/book/rising](http://douglas-mcintyre.com/book/rising).



*Left to Right: Kevin Doyle, Jim Elzinga, James Blench and Barry Blanchard  
responding to news of Wood and Congdon reaching the summit.*

Photo: Chris Shank