



### **One Wrong Step**

By Jennifer A. Nielsen

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# ONE WRONG STEP

BY JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

## The Story

For a climber, letting go means certain death. For Atlas, it means something even worse. But he'll have to learn how to let go and look up if he ever wants to see the top . . .

Twelve-year-old Atlas Wade has been trying to forget the memory of his mother by climbing mountains ever since she died when he was nine years old. When his father signs them up for an expedition group hoping to be the first to summit the unconquerable Mount Everest, Atlas can't wait for the chance to prove himself to his father, and maybe finally he can leave the difficult memories of his mother behind him on the mountain.

But this time, Atlas is the one left behind, as well as a young American girl named Maddie and their sturdy yet injured Sherpa, Chodak. When news breaks out that war has returned to Europe, and that Nazis are attempting their own summit dangerously nearby, Atlas and Maddie plead with the expedition to come back down.

Their warnings come too late. When they receive no word from the group following a massive avalanche on the slopes, Maddie and Chodak join Atlas as he begins a dangerous journey up the mountain in the hopes of finding survivors.

Atlas, Maddie, and Chodak will have to rely not just on their own wits for survival, but on each other as well, especially as sickness, bad weather, and their fears of a Nazi spy watching them puts their mission—and lives—at risk in the brutal terrain. And Atlas will have to learn how to let go if he wants any chance of finding his father and fixing the rift between them caused by his mother's death, before it's too late.

## Reading Group Questions

1. Mount Everest is perhaps the world's most famous mountain. Why do you think it's still such a popular location for professional climbers, even though it's been summited many times now?
2. Atlas learns a lot in this book, not just about climbing, but about himself as well. Can you name one thing that climbing teaches Atlas about himself, or life, throughout the book?
3. Prospective climbers face many hurdles in the path up Mount Everest, and in 1939, without many of the technological advances we have today, it was incredibly challenging. Can you name two things that endanger Atlas and his companions' lives on Everest? Why are these so dangerous?
4. When Chodak is injured, the party is dismayed. Why is it so dangerous for them to continue without him? What did you learn about the role of Sherpas in navigating Everest?

## About the Author



Photo © Jeff Nielsen

**Jennifer A. Nielsen** is the acclaimed author of the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling Ascendance Series: *The False Prince*, *The Runaway King*, *The Shadow Throne*, *The Captive Kingdom*, and *The Shattered Castle*. She also wrote the *New York Times* bestseller *The Traitor's Game* and its sequels, *The Deceiver's Heart*, and *The Warrior's Curse*; the *New York Times* bestselling *Mark of the Thief* trilogy *Mark of the Thief*, *Rise of the Wolf*, and *Wrath of the Storm*; the standalone fantasy *The Scourge*; and the critically acclaimed historical thrillers *A Night Divided*, *Resistance*, *Words on Fire*, *Rescue*, *Lines of Courage*, *Iceberg*, and *Uprising*. Jennifer

collects old books, loves good theater, and thinks that a quiet afternoon in the mountains makes for a nearly perfect moment. She lives in northern Utah with her family and is probably sneaking in a bite of dark chocolate right now. You can visit her online at [jennielson.com](http://jennielson.com) or follow her on Twitter and Instagram @nielsenwriter.

## Author Q&A

### What are some things you learned about mountaineering and Mount Everest while writing this book?

I've been fascinated with Mount Everest for years, but there's a difference between knowing about something, and knowing it well enough to bring that world to life for readers. Which is the short way of saying I had to learn nearly everything that went into *One Wrong Step*.

For example, I was fascinated by the time period itself. Everest is almost always written about in a modern context, but its earlier history is filled with stories of unparalleled courage in the face of the unknown. I chose to set this book in 1939 because it's also a time when the future itself was unknown. The pending war also reached into the Himalayas. While the British were in a race to summit Everest, the Nazis were racing to summit their own high-altitude mountain.

I loved learning about the various camps and the challenges faced in reaching them. But most exciting to me were the smaller details: the way yak dung was used in Tibet, the fact that telephones were available in the lower camps, and some of the equipment that was used, which was incredibly advanced for its time. It is remarkable how much was accomplished in those early years with so few advantages.

### What was the hardest part of the book to write? What was the most fun part?

The hardest part of the book was what might seem the most simple: the names and elevations of the various camps. I had expected to determine that from a basic keyword search, but instead, getting final numbers and names required extensive research. Some of the camp names and numbers are the same as what we use today, and some are different. Elevations may vary by different groups, or in different climbing eras. Further complicating measurements is that Everest grows about 2.5 inches each year. In the past century of climbing attempts, the mountain itself has changed the elevations of its camps.

Although there are challenges in writing any book, that never matters, because in the end, writing is, and always should be, a form of play. For me, the fun part of writing *One Wrong Step* was putting Atlas and Maddie through some incredibly difficult challenges and then figuring out how they might get through whatever obstacle I'd placed in their way. Even though I knew what would happen next, I still raced through those scenes because I was so eager to see them get through it!

### Which part of the story came first for you: the character, the setting, or the plot?

I knew that I wanted to write an Everest rescue story, and that it would be set in 1939, but none of that is a story, only ideas. A story only exists after the characters are brought in, so I needed Atlas. As soon as I had his name, I began to get a sense for who he was, and after that, I just had to let him tell me his story.

## Author Q&A (Continued)

**How do you see this book as different from the previous historical novels you wrote? Were there any particular challenges you were excited about this time?**

To me, *One Wrong Step* is consistent with the tone of other historical novels I've written. It has suspense and danger and, I hope, will open a world of understanding about a place we think we already know. But I think this novel stands apart as well. Ultimately, this is the story of a father and son who are trying to stay connected following a shared tragedy. I feel for Atlas on such a deep level because as much as he pushes his father away, he also recognizes that there is no one he loves more in the world. It just happens to be that Atlas is working through these emotions on the most famous mountain in the world, and during a time when the world is falling deeper into the shadows of war.

Every time I start a new book, it's important to me to find some new way to challenge myself. With *One Wrong Step*, I wanted to explore the interplay between emotional and physical conflicts, because to Atlas, the two are intimately connected. So, the reader will often see those two aspects of his life woven together throughout the story. I enjoyed the work of bringing them together.

**When you write, do you plot out the story ahead of time or do you discover the story as you're writing it? Was there anything in this book that really surprised you?**

I do plan my stories ahead of time. For me, to think of discovering a story as I write is similar to figuring out where you're vacationing after you're already on the road. However, even with an outline, there are always surprises along the way, so I try to remain open to those discoveries, especially after the characters begin to reveal themselves.

One of the biggest surprises to me was watching how Maddie grows in the story. The first time she faces the North Col, nothing in the world could get her to climb. Then a situation arises that makes her choose that climb. I felt so much of her struggle in those early chapters, her wishing that there was a way to turn back. Then slowly, she gains confidence and becomes someone that Atlas desperately needs if he'll have any chance of surviving. It was a wonderful thing to continue to write her character as she begins to understand that too, and willingly takes on that role.