



Q&A with William A. Kerig
Author of *The Edge of Never*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Books

The Edge of Never (Stone Creek Publications, 2008)

Utah Underground (Mountain Sports Press/AOL Time Warner, 2001)

The Snowboarder's Total Guide to Life (Random House/Villard, 1997)

Magazines

Wasatch Journal
Editorial director

Skiing

Contributing editor, 1987–2004

Articles in *Fast Company*, *Men's Health*, *Men's Journal*, *Ski*, *Powder*, *Snow Country*

Films

Steep

Coproducer, second-unit director, and story

Net Worth

Cowriter, coproducer, and second-unit director

Television

Private Lessons Ski Tips,
Weather Channel
Host

Playing in Style, Fox Sports
Writer, producer, and cohost

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In 2005, author and filmmaker William A. Kerig set out to make a documentary film about the "soul of big-mountain skiing." A onetime professional skier himself, Kerig sold the concept to the late TV anchorman Peter Jennings. At the center of the film was the story of Trevor and Kye Petersen. Trevor—one of the most famous big-mountain skiers of the 1980s and early '90s—was killed in an avalanche in Chamonix, France, in 1996. Nine years later, his fifteen-year-old son Kye—a rising star in his own right—traveled to Chamonix to ski the route that killed his father.

Early in the book you recount a dinner you had with Peter Jennings during which he grilled you about your reasons for wanting to make a ski film. Let's start with one of the questions he asked you. Why do you feel this story needs to be told?

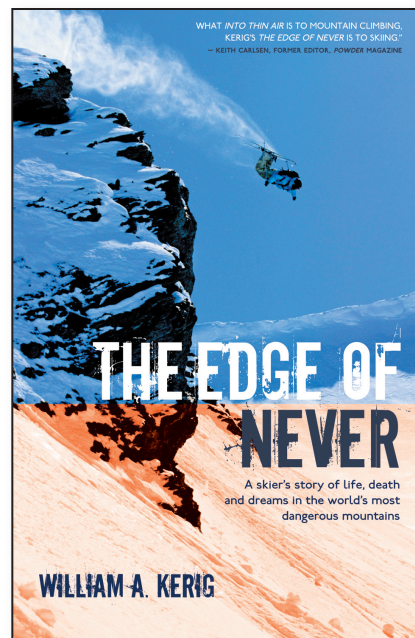
To start with, it has all the elements of a classic adventure story—a small band of ski mountaineers venture into deadly terrain and either survive and learn from the experience or die trying. But it's also a story that transcends skiing and speaks to the issue of family and the uniquely human impulse to help one another even when it risks the thing that we hold most dear, our own lives. One of the greatest parts of the skiing life—and this is especially true at the highest levels of skiing—is that it gives you entrée into an extended family of skiers. You become part of a family, a tribe. This story offered the possibility to explore that idea—that family is where you find it—in a very dramatic way.

And it's about family in a literal sense, too—a coming of age tale about a boy dealing with his late father's legacy. And your own son was born shortly before the Chamonix trip.

Yes. My son was born 24 hours before I left for Chamonix (and yes, I do have an amazingly understanding wife). But this is a mythic story of a boy becoming a man by saying goodbye to his father and, in a sense, redeeming and surpassing his father, which is something that every child tries to do in his own way. Also, at a personal level, I was struggling with—and still struggle with—how to balance my own adventurous personality with the needs of my family. So it's also a story about a new father's struggle to redefine the responsibilities he has to himself and the people he loves.

You mention responsibility, but a lot of people see extreme skiers soaring off cliffs and think they're just a bunch of adrenaline junkies who don't care about consequences. How do you respond to that criticism?

In some cases, they're right. But often what they're talking about isn't really extreme skiing. It's stunt skiing. It's the sort of thing you see in ski movies—skiers call it "ski porn"—which is about doing something really dangerous that looks exciting on camera. But true extreme skiing—a better term for it is big-mountain skiing or ski mountaineering—has everything to do with responsibility. You're skiing extreme slopes in extreme locations where the consequences of a mistake are often serious injury or death. But you're not out there trying to create adrenaline. You're trying to put yourself in a place where you have a single-minded purpose and everything else falls away. You are completely focused on the "now." You're not thinking about the 200 e-mails in your inbox, or the fight you had with your wife last night, or



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the bills you have to pay. You're right there in the moment, and oddly it's the most responsible you can ever be to yourself. You're not postponing your life. You're not waiting until later, or when you get rich, or when the kids grow up. You're right there, and that's the ultimate responsibility to the self, to put yourself in those places where you are completely living your life at the moment.

But doesn't the presence of the camera encourage risky behavior?

Absolutely, the camera supercharges the atmosphere, and it places a greater responsibility on the filmmaker. Where and when you turn on the camera changes what's happening. Even if you're shooting a fly-on-the-wall documentary, the presence of the cameras essentially demands some sort of performance. So the filmmakers have to be realistic about their responsibility over how they're affecting their subjects and the choices other people are making.

As a filmmaker did you feel you met that responsibility? I don't want to give away the ending, but I think it's safe to say that the adventure results in both triumph and tragedy.

Yes, I think I met that responsibility. I did everything I could to keep the skiers and crew safe, and ultimately we were lucky. But that's not to say that people weren't hurt. There was a very serious accident while we were filming in Chamonix.

At one point you think about apologizing for the accident, but you don't. Why not?

One of the things that makes skiing so attractive and pure is that you go to the mountains with questions and the mountains give you honest answers, although sometimes they're not the answers you want to hear. It's about taking responsibility for your own actions. You're completely responsible for the consequences of every decision you make. I didn't feel that I was responsible for the accident, and to apologize would take something away from the person who was involved. He made a mistake, and he paid for it. And that's the way it should be. That's the honesty of the mountains right there. For me to step in and apologize for putting him in that place ... Well, that's not the way I felt and that would have let him off the hook. Ultimately every skier is responsible for him or herself. Period. And that's something we've gotten away from as a society.

Accidents are nothing new in Chamonix. It's known as the "Death Sport Capital of the World," and you write that on average more than 60 skiers and climbers are killed there each year, far more than at places like Mount Everest or K2, which are thought to be much more dangerous. And yet, skiers seem to find the place irresistible. Tell me about the importance of Chamonix in skiing history.

Chamonix is the spiritual heart of big-mountain skiing. It's the birthplace of the winter Olympics, the birthplace of extreme skiing, the birthplace of alpinism.

What makes it so dangerous?

Access. In most other places, you have to hike for days and have excellent ice climbing and mountaineering skills in order to get into the backcountry. But in Chamonix a cable car will take you to a place where you can go from sipping cappuccino to risking your life in about seven minutes. The terrain is incredibly steep and rugged, but it's the way you can get there so quickly and easily that makes it particularly dangerous.

You surrounded Kye with some of the world's best skiers. Tell me a little bit about them.

Glen Plake is skiing's greatest rebel and outlaw. He was a good friend of Trevor's, and he and Trevor were skiing partners during Trevor's first trip to Chamonix. Plake was also one of the main characters in *The Blizzard of Aahhhs*, which was a groundbreaking ski film in the 1980s. Over the years, he's gone from being the punk-rock savior of the sport to one of skiing's elder statesman.

How about Mike Hattrup?

Mike Hattrup was also in *The Blizzard of Aahhhs*. He's a full-blown mountain guide and a really safe skier. He's the sort of guy you want to have on your side if things go wrong.

And two French skiers, Stefan Dan and Anselme Baud?

Initially, Stefan Dan comes off as a playboy, but he's an extraordinary mountain guide. Three of his friends were killed in Chamonix earlier that year, and he was determined not to lose anyone else. Anselme Baud is the ultimate mentor. He was born and raised in Chamonix and has been a pioneering skier and teacher for decades. In fact, he wrote the book that inspired Trevor and Plake. Sadly, his own son was killed in Chamonix less than a year before we arrived, which gave a special poignancy to his relationship with Kye.

If there is one message you would like readers to take away from this book, what is it?

Security is an illusion and a trap. Live your life now. Don't wait.