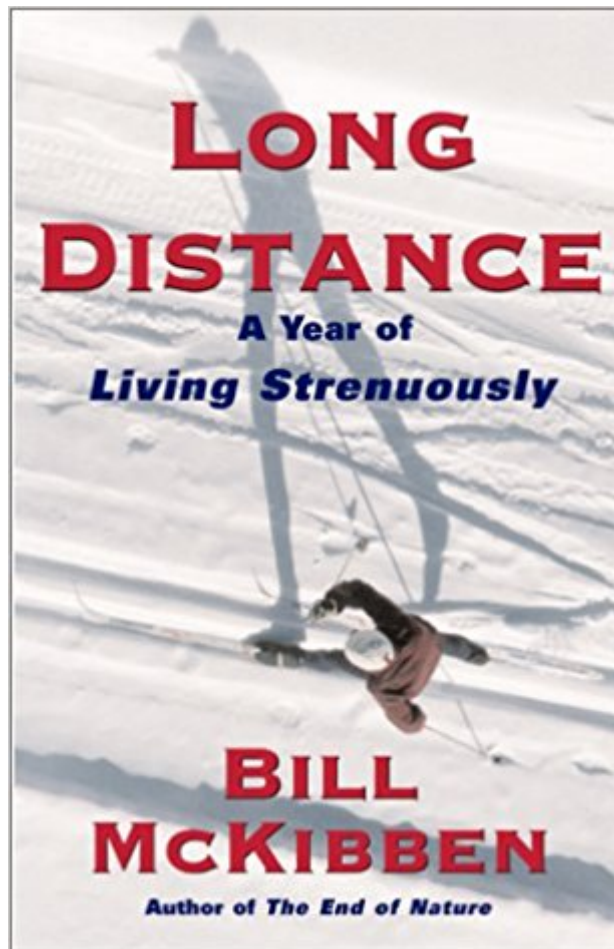




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Long Distance: A Year Of Living Strenuously



Synopsis

This text documents Bill McKibben's year as an imposter of sorts in the demanding world of competitive skiing. In his late 30s McKibben decided to test his body. He decided upon cross-country skiing. He took a year out and trained full-time - with the help of a coach/guru - putting in hours and miles typical of an Olympic athlete. McKibben's year culminated in a series of long-distance cross-country races, where his body experienced rhythms and possibilities like never before. Changing his lifestyle and training full-time test not only your body but also your mind and spirit. Whilst training McKibben's father developed an illness that would eventually cause his death. This forced McKibben to further explore his body and spirit and that of his father's.

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Customer Reviews

At the age of 37, bestselling author and journalist Bill McKibben stepped out of the ordinary routine of his life to spend a year in "real training" as a cross-country skier. With the help of a trainer-slash-guru, McKibben took on a regimen equivalent to that of an Olympic endurance athlete's, running and skiing for hours every day in preparation for a series of grueling long-distance ski races. What prompted this successful writer with an admitted aversion to competitive sports to push himself so hard, for so long? Partly it was pure selfishness; after a decade as an environmental writer and activist, I needed a break from failing to save the world. But mostly it was curiosity that drove me. By year's end I hoped I'd have more sense of what life lived through the body felt like. If *Long Distance* begins as a story about the transformation of the body and what it means to challenge one's physical limits, it evolves into a thoughtful lesson about a wholly different

kind of endurance. Halfway through McKibben's training, his father was diagnosed with the most virulent form of brain cancer. As McKibben was reaching peak condition, his father's life lurched toward an end, forcing McKibben to snap out of his self-inflicted self-absorption. He had tried to think of endurance as "the ability to fight through the drama of pain. But now I understood it, too, as a kind of elegance, a lightness that could only come from such deep comfort with yourself that you began to forget about yourself." And the elegance of *Long Distance* is in its ultimate lesson that each of us has a mind, a body, and a spirit, and we must find our strength in all three realms.

--Svenja Soldovieri

McKibben's description of his decision at age 37 to hire a professional exercise guru and undergo a grueling, year-long regimen of cross-country ski training on a par with that of an Olympian is as well done as his project may seem ambitious. McKibben (*Hundred Dollar Holiday*) admits early on, "I'm not sure where my wimpiness came from." He describes how, through all his torturous physical training, his most rewarding results have been psychological. "I came seeking sweat," he writes, "and found only enlightenment." A balance of humor and healthy cynicism keeps the sentiment from overwhelming the text. McKibben also steers clear of an obsession with chronology or a journal-entry style that often dogs such projects, instead telling his story in anecdotes and asides, which allows for shifts in scene and subject that keep the story fresh. He incorporates an account of his father's battle with brain cancer, which coincides with his training, but he avoids melodrama when ruminating on his father's decline and weakness in light of his own increasing vigor. The result is a short and satisfying read that, like the author's experience, may not completely alter one's life, but certainly supplies plenty to think about. (Jan.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This is a terrific book. The book is very well written, and in fact is so well written that I intentionally slowed down my reading speed so I could savor the writing. From a point of view of an amateur competitive athlete, Bill McKibben's insight, feelings, and emotions are right on the money. Having said that, the book is much more than just a book about physical training, it is also a book about providing care to a loved one that is in the process of dying. Those who have been there from both an athletic training/racing perspective, and as a long term care giver, know that they are both draining yet rewarding life events. Well done Mr. McKibben.

I enjoyed reading this book. It was helpful to read about another's voyage into serious endurance Cross Country Skiing and how much genetics as well as SERIOUS (see *Serious Training* for

Endurance Athletes), systematic training do play in one's athleticism. If you buy this book, I suggest that you also buy *Serious Training for Endurance Athletes*, which was co-authored by Rob Sleamaker, McKibben's trainer in *Long Distance*. The only drawback of this book, which is why I only gave it five stars, is its diversion into McKibben's father's illness and passing, which I thought diverted from its original premise of, "TESTING THE LIMITS of BODY and SPIRIT in a YEAR of LIVING STRENOUSLY," which is why I purchased this book to read. One point McKibben made that really resonated with me is the vanity of endurance training. I cycle and I really enjoy getting away for those 2-3 hour rides plus the occasional 4-5 hour ride, but at the cost of spending quality time with my wife. It was a point well taken. I do wish that McKibben's editors had suggested that he write a *Tuesday's with Morrie* type of book about his relationship with his father, what it meant to him and what life lessons he learned from it. That would be a book which I think would be very worthwhile and important to read. I liked the respect and love McKibben and his family exhibited towards his father's illness and passage, but I felt he didn't do it the justice it deserves, so that story could and should be told in another, more important, book. The three stars, therefore, was for the brevity of his narrative about his father's illness and passage. Otherwise, the training information and cross country skiing narrative and information I gave a rating of about four and a half stars.

A pretty quick read and not a terribly long book, but well written and interesting. I have no experience with cross country skiing, but I have spent some time as an amateur pursuing endurance sports, like the author, and like many other people. Perhaps this similarity is what made it such an easy read. The book wasn't perfect (in fact, it had around 10 obvious misspellings, which is surprising for a reprint, though these didn't detract from the tale, but were curious nonetheless). But it was a strong read. I love to read autobiographical or biographical works about endurance athletics (running, cycling, apparently skiing, too) and this is a worthy spot in my library. There was a strong slant toward the sickness and trials of the author's father and this made a somewhat strange dichotomy, but he drew everything together pretty well. Also went into greater depth than most books--but a depth deserved, I can say from personal experience--about just why the heck was he doing it? He was never going to medal, never be in the paper, so why was he spending two hours/day training for a race only with himself? The author even references one of my favorites: *Muscle: Confessions of an unlikely bodybuilder*.

McKibben is one of those rare authors whose ideas touch both the heart and mind. There are really 2 subjects that McKibben writes about here--his experiment to train with the same intensity as an

Olympic athlete, and the death of his father. Throughout this incredible book, McKibben questions his life, his motivation for conducting this fitness experiment, and his relationship with his father. There plenty of times when McKibben could have allowed this book to become a preachy, self-indulgent sermon on the emotional pain of watching his father die. Instead, McKibben keeps his story personal and in so doing, the lessons he learns become more meaningful. Just a warning though--this is a big time tear-jerker at places.

I love this book. It is an engaging read for an armchair athlete like myself but it so much more. I love the story of his dad. I love the lines he drew between endurance race training and life. Bill is a terrific writer and I absolutely loved this book. Buy it!

I'm no winter warrior. Three times a week in the gym is my idea of a challenge. But you don't have to care about sports or conditioning to cherish this book. Simple reason: It's not really about skiing. It's a manual for life, an attempt to work out a philosophy that can be tested and applied. What makes it work: McKibben is Everyman. Or that's his skill as a writer: He knows what's happening in his head, and, not surprisingly, a lot of what he's thinking is in your head too (mine, anyway). I plan to give this book to any friend who's having trouble understanding that life is precious and effort matters.

Many athletic memoirs leave out the self doubt and the grit needed to truly excel. McKibben calls himself a wimp and acknowledges how much of the athletic game is mental. He follows all his coaches directives for training and "bonks" in races. The story of his fathers failing health is poignant especially when he wishes for an end and his father seems to want to carry on and finish. An average joe's view of what it takes to be an endurance athlete.

Love this book! You can do anything you set your mind too.

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