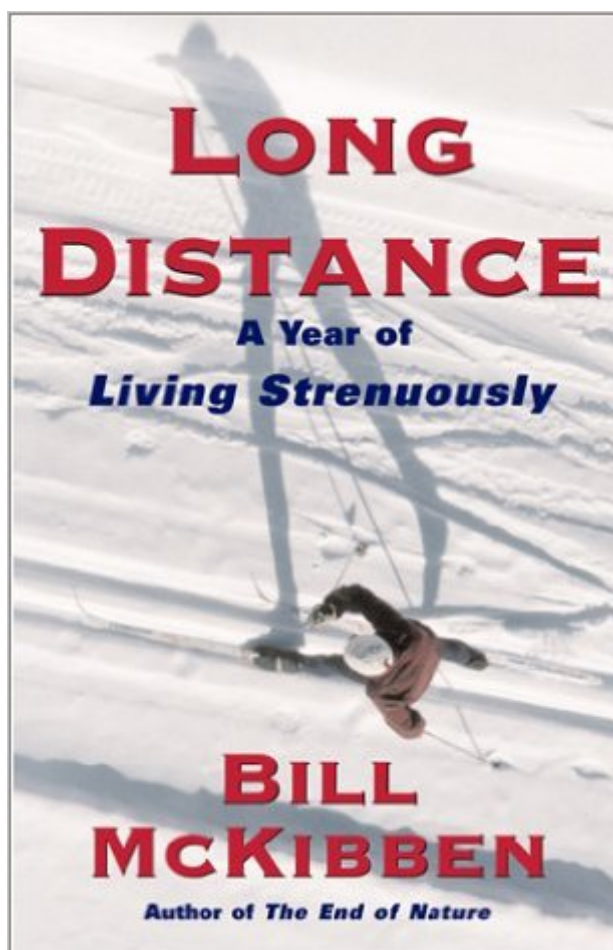


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# Long Distance: A Year Of Living Strenuously



## Synopsis

This text documents Bill McKribbens year as an imposter of sorts in the demanding world of competitive skiing. In his late 30s McKribben 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. McKribben'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 McKribbens father developed an illness that would eventually cause his death. This forced McKribben to futher explore his body and spirit and that of his father's.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I guess they say real men don't cry, but this book really tests you. It's written from the first-person perspective about a guy's yearlong effort to get in shape through cross-country skiing, and also to enjoy his relationship with his father during the latter's long bout with terminal cancer. Because I enjoy all kinds of outdoor activity (I cycle toured around Australia not too long ago!), I was initially attracted to the book by the sports angle. From that perspective, the book was great. Having down-hill skied since the age of 5 I'm not overly versed about the world of cross-country skiing, but the author delves into different kinds of techniques, skis, waxes, and other equipment, as well as the underlying physiology in a detailed way that shed some light on the sport that I never got riding the lifts. Additionally, I definitely enjoyed gaining greater insight into the subculture (Did you know that the major event in the sport is called the "Birkebeiner"?) What I didn't expect at first was such an

emotionally gripping book about family relations during serious illnesses. The author describes the gradual decline of his father's health, and the toll that takes on the whole family. There are some really nice passages where you recognize the moments that all of us enjoy with our families, but the not-so-fun moments are part of the reality portrayed, too. By the end, I was glad for having read this book, because it was a lot more than just a journal of a year spent skiing.

This slim volume actually deals with 2 subjects: 1) endurance conditioning with its emotional, psychological and physical components 2) the demise of the author's father. The training portion with all its equipment and conditioning minutia is better suited to a magazine article. The reader gains an insight into the heroic efforts that world class endurance athletes must generate to be competitive. On one hand their fortitude and courage demand our admiration, on the other hand one may suspect a certain compulsive obsessiveness that borders on the fanatical. Let the reader judge. The more compelling portion of the book describes the months in which the author's much loved father engages the process of physical degeneration leading to death. This becomes a profound meditation on mortality and the spiritual implications of life's last opportunity for self education. Moving and thoughtful, it is the soul of the book.

In turns, this account of his incredibly strenuous year is funny, heartbreaking, introspective and irreverent. I'm surprised how modest the author is about his ability to even perform some of the workouts -- a 3 hour and 55 minute run or ski! I'm an exercise fanatic myself, but I don't see any 4 hour workouts on my horizon. The chapters on the origin and development of cross country skiing are fascinating -- I used to hear about Koch and Caldwell when I taught at the Putney school. Our Olympic program hasn't really done much to produce skiers since that time. You'll also gain a tremendous respect for the Norwegians, Swedes and Finns whose reverence for this grueling sport makes them the finest in the world. This book went well beyond just sports -- although his father's illness was introduced abruptly, it does serve as an anchor for much of the second half of the book. His dignity to the end made it inspiring rather than depressing. My only small criticism is that since the book is so personal I would have liked to hear more from his wife and daughter's reactions to his training. He alludes to them, but it sounds like they lived on another planet for that year which I'm sure was not the case! Very rewarding and inspiring read, well written.

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.

As a skiing enthusiast, I found that Bill McKibben's Long Distance revealed the world of physical and mental training that i never fully grasped existed. Even with all his training it was amazing to see that so much rested squarely on genetics, to see that after his many hours of training he could only become so much. The mental aspect was a plus to the book, as a past ski racer it was nice to see someone put into words how it feels out on the course:"Except that the minute a race is done, you start trying to make it all add up, turn the thousand things that happen even in a three hour ski race in to some kind of coherent storay with a morale at the end: 'I couldn't focus,' or 'I bonked,' or 'Everything came together.'" -Bill McKibben.To sum it all up, Mr. McKibben has written up an endurance trainer's dream and how he copes with the mental and physical pressures are fascinating to read. I would recommend this book to anyone that is remotely interested in cross-country skiing or how the elite athletes train.

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