

TheWriteQuestion_1001_KevinFedarko_PartOne

Lauren Korn [00:00:00] Yeah, that's a really powerful question. Beautiful question. That's a good question. That is a great question.

Kevin Fedarko [00:00:10] That's a good question. That is a very wise question, Lauren.

Lauren Korn [00:00:17] Hello and welcome to The Write Question, a radio program and podcast featuring authors from the American West and beyond. The Write Question is supported by members of Montana Public Radio and by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communications on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. This episode was produced in partnership with Chapter One Bookstore in Hamilton, Montana, a literary and community resource for the Bitterroot Valley. Providing space to explore, discover, and share passions since 1974. More information can be found at chapter1bookstore.com. I'm Lauren Korn, speaking with author and journalist Kevin Fedarko about a walk in the park, the true story of a spectacular misadventure in the Grand Canyon. As the description for this book reads, Two friends, zero preparation, one dream. This book is Kevin's account of his trip, an end-to-end lateral traverse of the Grand Canyon alongside his friend, Pete McBride, a photographer for National Geographic. This is the first part of a two-part conversation recorded live at the Ravalli County Museum in Hamilton on June 25th, 2026, in partnership with Chapter One. Let's get to it. This is first part of my conversation with Kevin Fedarko. Okay, so Kevin, let's begin. Oh, you know what? I forgot to greet you. Kevin, welcome to the right question.

Kevin Fedarko [00:01:45] Thank you so much. I'm so thrilled to be here.

Lauren Korn [00:01:49] Let's begin with the premise of the book. You and National Geographic photographer Peter McBride decided to make a lateral traverse of the Grand Canyon. It might be more accurate to say Peter cajoled you, convinced you, made you do this, but you were both wildly unprepared for this trip. What made you, Kevin, believe that even if it wasn't a good idea that you were so unprepared, what made you think that it was something you could achieve?

Kevin Fedarko [00:02:19] Well, that's a great question. And you know, it would like, I would so love to be able to answer it by telling you that, you know the beauty of the canyon just locked onto us and drew us in in a way that made it impossible for us not to do this. And furthermore, that we both, we both kind of possessed this inner grit and nobility that was called forth by that challenge. But the truth of the matter is that The man you just mentioned, Peter McBride. A wildly talented National Geographic photographer and filmmaker, is someone with whom I have a profoundly dysfunctional relationship that goes back almost 25 years at this point. Pete and I started working together as a kind of a two-man writer-photographer team in the early 2000s. And we've undertaken this whole series of assignments that have taken us all over the world to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Horn of Africa and Everest Base Camp and the Caucus Mountains. And because Pete, unlike me, is filled with energy, he's also filled with ideas and each and every one of these assignments was conceived and planned by him and each of every one was a total complete disaster. I'm This was the biggest disaster of all, but the thing that all of these things hold in common is among many other talents, Pete is a practitioner of the dark art of seducing people into doing things they should not be doing and know better than. So that's the answer to your question. It's Pete's fault.

Lauren Korn [00:04:01] It's Pete's fault. Throughout your tour of the hardback and the paperback, does Pete know that you're talking like this behind his back?

Kevin Fedarko [00:04:10] He does, and he's extremely upset by it.

Lauren Korn [00:04:12] Yeah, I'm sure, I am sure. So there are a couple of ways that one can make this lateral hike across the Grand Canyon, right? A through hike, which could take months, a couple months, or a sort of segmented hike where you go in and come out and that would take what you did, right, which was 14, 18 months.

Kevin Fedarko [00:04:33] It was, as I recall, our venture was, it ended up consisting of eight back-to-back expeditions, each lasting somewhere between a week and three weeks, and each beginning at the place where the previous sectional hike had concluded, so that all the sections together were strung, they were strung together kind of like beads on a necklace and led from. The Eastern Gateway to the Grand Canyon at least varied to the Western terminus of the canyon at a place called the Grand Wash Cliffs. And that all occurred across the arc of a 14 month time span. And there were breaks between the segments. So really we ended up spending a total of about, I think it was 72 or 73 days below the rims inside the canyon.

Lauren Korn [00:05:24] What kind of foresight did you have or reasoning did you have for doing that segmented trip rather than a couple months of true hiking?

Kevin Fedarko [00:05:33] There were almost no instances in which we exercised judiciousness and wisdom except perhaps for this. There's a tremendous difference in terms of the difficulty, the level of difficulty that is involved between a continuous through hike where you enter the canyon at one end and you just don't stop until you get to the other end. And as you move through the canyon, you're tapping into... Uh, what we call resupply caches. These are five gallon plastic buckets that have been placed, you know, at various locations prior to the start of an expedition, they're stuffed with extra food and clothing and sometimes a bottle of tequila, perhaps. Um, and, and the level of commitment and physical endurance that is required by that is, is pretty off the charts, um, on a sectional hike. And that's not to say that a sectional hike isn't incredibly difficult in its own right. When Pete and I did this back in, I mean, we embarked in the autumn of 2015. And as I recall, there were fewer than a dozen people who had done a section hike in modern recorded history. That's a super important distinction, Lauren. And fewer than it doesn't who had done it in a section manner. But if you're able to go in and come back out, and take a bath and tend to your wounds and see your therapist and whatever other things need to happen and then revive yourself for the next trip. That is just much, much easier. I should say, however, that one reason that we were doing this was because we were journalists. We were on assignment for National Geographic. National Geographic sent us into the canyon because they were trying to figure out a way to commemorate the centenary. Of the National Park Service. The National Park System came into being in 1916. And in 2016, we all together as Americans we're gonna celebrate the 100th year anniversary of our National Park system. And for reasons that were kind of mysterious at the time and I still find rather confounding, they decided they were gonna celebrate it by sending these two nincompoops into the Grand Canyon on a transect that would enable us to kind of. Ferret out and celebrate some of the hidden wonders that tourists typically don't see. Tourists who experience Grand Canyon in a traditional manner. We can talk more about that if you want to. But that was the impetus behind this trip.

Lauren Korn [00:08:24] And then when did you realize that this trip or the product of this trip was gonna be something entirely, whether it was gonna something personal, those of you in our audience know that your dad is in this book, or cultural, the story of the land's indigenous peoples. Like when did you realize that this was not actually going to be a hidden treasures book so much as, well, something much, much bigger. When did you make that realization?

Kevin Fedarko [00:08:54] In part, it was embedded in the original idea to the extent that this was more than just simply an inventory of the treasures and wonders, the hidden treasures and wonders in the canyon. And by the way, just to give a little bit of context, you know, the way that most of us experienced the Grand Canyon, the typical way to go to the canyon and see this landmark feature in the American West. Almost all of us do pretty much the same thing. About five and a half million of us do it each and every year. We drive up to what's called the South Rim, to the main entrance to the park, and we park our cars and we go past the ice cream stand and the hotels and the restaurants, and we step to the edge of this abyss and we look in, and we gaze down upon it. A far smaller number of us, 26,000 each and every year undertake a river trip, a commercial or self-guided river trip through the bottom of the canyon. And we spent all of our time floating along the Colorado River gazing up at the walls. The river itself is the only highway through the Grand Canyon. This is probably the most fractured and broken and fragmented piece of topography that we have in the United States. And for that reason, the architecture of the place, it feels as if it's almost been designed by God himself to resist the progress of human beings inside of it, laterally on foot with ease. And for reason, there is no trail. Think about that for a moment. Most iconic national park in America. A landscape that each and every person recognizes, even if they've never been there, because we've just seen so many images of it. And there's no path that will carry you from one end to the other. And so, there is this interstitial space inside of the Grand Canyon. Inside of the matrix of cliffs and ledges that stretch between the edges of the river and the rims of the canyon, where almost no one goes. And There are treasures and wonders and marvels inside of that space that almost no one sees. But part of the assignment, Lauren, also was to write about a series of threats, development threats that loom over the landscape. And to that extent, there was a larger dimension embedded within the original vision for the story. But... To sort of address the fullness of your question. I mean, there were all these other dimensions that would have emerged during the course of the journey that neither of us had any idea would be integral and indeed essential to the experience itself and therefore the stories that would come out of it.

Lauren Korn [00:11:45] I love to ask a writing process question. I don't know how much people love to listen to it, but.

Kevin Fedarko [00:11:50] Well, people find it so fascinating. I'm sure.

Lauren Korn [00:11:53] But what does it look, I'm gonna ask it anyway. What does it like or what did it look like for you Kevin on the ground? Were you, obviously there's so little margin for error during this hike, it's not like you have a notebook on you and you're reaching into your pockets or anything, you're really just looking at the ground in front of you to make sure that you are as safe as possible. How were you taking notes and how were you remembering? I mean, this book took seven years to write. How did you keep track of everything that was happening?

Kevin Fedarko [00:12:27] Yeah, that's a great question. And I mean, I really screwed it up initially. You know, I'm a bit of an old school reporter. And so I tend to record most of my

observations and thoughts and my notes in a reporter's notebook. I carry a notebook and a pen around with me. And this is something that a lot of writers of my age do. And if you're really good at it, if you really dedicated to it, if you are somebody like my great friend, Craig Childs, for example. Craig has the energy to, you know, he can spend all day in the wilderness on the move. And yet when he gets to camp, he will spend two or three hours sitting in his tent by himself, assiduously writing down everything that he can remember. And then first thing the next morning, he'll be up before dawn. Putting in another hour or two. And what I discovered during the first phase of our journey was that the canyon is just so brutal. It's not just that the landscape is perilous, it's also that it's just incredibly hard to move through and the demands that it makes on the body, it just made it impossible for me to do my work in that manner. I mean, the moment we got into camp, it was a struggle for me to fall asleep, to not fall asleep like right into my dinner. And I didn't have any energy left to write down. I'm not even sure that I could have remembered I was in so much pain and distress, physical, emotional, psychological. That just wasn't possible. And similarly, I used every moment of sleep that I can possibly grab. And so when When it was time to get on the move, there was no time to make notes. What I learned from that was that for our, after our aborted first section, which concluded far sooner than we had anticipated, we had envisioned that the first of those beads on the necklace that I spoke about a moment ago, that it was gonna take like 21 days. And we were spanked so hard by the Grand Canyon that like it takes the, it took the Colorado geologists believe about six million years to carve out the Grand canyon. It took the Grand Canyon. Five and a half days to break Pete McBride and I in half, forcing us to give up and claw our way out of the canyon and hitch a ride back to Flagstaff, bickering with one another about which of us was gonna call up our editors at National Geographic and tell them that we could not complete this assignment. And so the lesson I learned from that was that there's a whole series of events that led to us going back into the canyon and when that did happen, I had purchased a small pouch that I fixed onto the left shoulder strap of my backpack and that contained a digital tape recorder and it was zippered. And I found that I could just pull that out and dictate into it all day long. And I tried to record everything. What did that sound like? It was terrible. Like, oh, there's a rock? There's a Rock. A brown rock, pretty much as brown as the last brown rock. And it was a lot of that. I mean, it took hundreds of hours to transcribe those tapes after the conclusion of the journey. And most of it was just useless material, but there were flecks of gold embedded among the detritus of nonsense that I was recording. And You know, what you do if you're a journalist or you're writer and you create a kind of a comprehensive record like that is you turn yourself into a little gold miner. You pan out, you sift out everything that glitters and then you kind of combine, you throw the rest of it away and you combine the stuff that has light and you begin to work with it. And I should add also to answer your question, Lauren, as I was doing this. So You know, I regard it when I'm speaking about this experience in public as a kind of professional duty to make as much fun of Pete as possible. However, he is an extraordinary journalist, photo journalist and filmmaker. And so as I was recording into my, speaking to my tape recorder, Pete was walking with a two and a half pound Sony digital camera capable of not only taking still shots, but also recording film, often holding it out at arm's length. As he walked, often holding it with one arm and climbing with the other hand and recording himself and me and creating this incredibly rich, not just visual, but also auditory record because he's recording all the conversations that are happening between the two of us. All this is what he's doing in order to create what will become a feature length documentary film called Into the Wild.

Lauren Korn [00:17:48] Listeners, I'm going to break in here really quick and just say that the name of this documentary is not Into the Wild, but Into the Canyon. Okay, back to the conversation.

Kevin Fedarko [00:17:58] Which would be released on Disney Plus. And so, you know, we emerged from the canyon with this remarkably rich, detailed, nuanced, granular multimedia chronicle of what had happened. And the challenge wasn't like to invent material that we hadn't bothered to record, it was to sift through it and isolate the stuff that mattered.

Lauren Korn [00:18:27] So Pete had this documentary and then he also published a book of photographs as well. When you were in the process of writing your book and he was in the processes of editing his projects, was it a large collaboration? Were you in conversation a lot, verifying details, all of that, were you using his photos to kind of spark your memories and your, that's a rock for him too? Um, well...

Kevin Fedarko [00:18:55] Yes to all of that, however, and by the way, so Pete created not just one, but ultimately three coffee table photo books, you know, one of which was about the journey itself. It's called Between the River and the Rims. Another is a kind of comprehensive presentation of the entire Colorado River, all the way from the Rockies to the sea. And then there's another book, which kind of explores, oddly enough through the visual art, something that was very important to the two of us and we can return to Lauren if you would like to talk about it more, which was the subject of silence. That's called seeing silence. So he created all three of these. But the fact is that like, I'm a really slow writer and you know, you can make film and you can make photo coffee table photo books much quicker than you can generate a you know, a 520 page long form, non-fiction, narrative of an experience like this. And so Pete completed all of his projects long before my book came out. Pete probably completed everything within the first three to three and a half years. And I was involved in the process, but I was also making an effort to allow Pete complete artistic freedom. I didn't want to try and interfere or manage or backseat drive his, his sense of what the story was that he wanted to tell. And I felt that that was important. It's part of the kind of respect that we have for one another. And also it recognizes something that many of you may have found to be true, which is that you can go into a place, particularly a beautiful challenging place like a national park with somebody else and both people can emerge with very different memories and sensibilities of what that experience actually involved. And so. Pete completed all of that And an ideal world, I guess we would have we would've just Caught with everything together, but we didn't it was more like a train and You know Pete's Pete's projects where this was the the coal car right behind the engine and and the passenger cars And because it's Pete the saloon car and then my book was the caboose at the very end of the train And when it come time to put my book together and put the finishing touches on it, he gave me full access to all of his photographs. And so the two of us each being able to draw upon the other was really marvelous.

Lauren Korn [00:21:37] I wanna talk about another, I'll call him a collaborator on this project or this trip because I think he ultimately was, introduce our audience and especially our listeners who might be listening to this later to Rich Rudeau. He was probably the single most important person on this trip to make sure that you and Pete had any chance of making it out of the canyon alive.

Kevin Fedarko [00:21:59] No, absolutely. So Rich Rudeau is probably the foremost modern day explorer of the terrain inside of Grand Canyon National Park. He's based in Phoenix, Arizona. He became obsessed with the canyon, I think, during the 1990s when he was still working on a series of companies. That he started as an entrepreneur. He's an electrical engineer. And his obsession with the canyon led him to explore every trail inside of the canyon and then begin venturing into the back country. And then he got fixated on a

feature inside of certain canyons that you find in the Southwest, including Grand Canyon. These are called slot canyones. These are very, very narrow and extraordinarily deep. Fissures in certain layers of rock, particularly limestone. They also can occur, especially if you're up in southeastern Utah, in sandstone. And they've been carved out through exceptionally violent weather events known as debris flows or flash floods. The walls of these slot canyons, sometimes they're so narrow that you can actually touch either wall with your fingertips. You can span the gap inside of the slot canyon. With your arms, and yet they will go down thousands of feet. And because of that, and because these walls are polished to a high degree of smoothness by the floods that have created them, they require a level of technology, particularly ropes to negotiate repels involving three, four, five, sometimes 600 feet that. To the best of our knowledge, the ancestral Puebloans, the people indigenous to the canyon itself, were not able to penetrate these spaces. And so Rich, during the early 2000s, began a series of what we believe are first descents of terrain inside of, again, think about this, the most iconic national park, the most recognized national park in America, and went into a series somewhere between 200 and 300 slot canyons. And together with his partner was the first person, the first human being, we believe, ever to move into these environments and explore them and complete first a sense of them. And having done all of this by 2015 when our project was starting, Rich was about to embark on yet another big ambitious thing, which was he wanted to complete, together with two other friends, a continuous through hike of the Grand Canyon. They would be within the first 10 people in modern recorded history to do that.

Lauren Korn [00:24:51] Can I interrupt you really quick to ask, you are talking about the first recorded human in these slot canyons. You're talking about these very short lists of people who are doing these really incredibly, very difficult things in a very difficult place. How much do you think, and this can be a personal question towards you, or maybe you can speculate on Rich or Pete or these other hikers, How much of the endeavor is? I wanna make it onto that list. I want to be one of the few people who have done this or the only such person to have done this and how much of it is like something else and what is that something else?

Kevin Fedarko [00:25:35] Well, I think that's such a great question. I think the answer to it kind of hinges on, in some ways, the type of person that you are. And this is something that intersects with the culture, the modern culture, of moving through the Grand Canyon. I mean, there's a list of river runners. Some of the people in this room tonight may be on it, who are ranked according to where they stand in terms of the, you know, the first modern recorded journey by boat through the Grand Canyon, which occurred in the summer of 1869. John Wesley Powell, one-armed Civil War major veteran, led an expedition, 10 men including himself, four wooden boats, you, know, first recorded venture that we have of somebody traversing Grand Canyon by boat. And everybody after... Powells, the names of Powells and his crew is ranked according to sequentially on that list. And for some people That could be a pretty significant motivation. There is something, I suppose, thrilling and perhaps self-affirming about a senior name, you know, etched on a list like that. For a certain type of person, it may imbue that person with a sense of stature. That was not the case for me. And I'm not sure that it was the case for Rich. But the part of our culture that is obsessed with list making and ranking and stature makes it almost impossible not to be aware of that when you're doing something like this. Yeah.

Lauren Korn [00:27:26] And I wanna go back to the river. You were not a great river pilot yourself. You were good at it, but it was how you were introduced to the Grand Canyon. It's how you got to know it. In the book, Rich says that you're never moving toward water. You're always moving away from it. I'm wondering what you came to realize, Kevin, about

the river through the canyon on foot, moving through the Canyon on foot. This was part one of a two-part conversation with journalist Kevin Fadarco, author of *A Walk in the Park*, the true story of a spectacular misadventure in the Grand Canyon, published by Scribner. To listen to this conversation again, to share it with friends, or to learn more about Kevin, head to mtpur.org. You've been listening to *The Write Question*. This double episode was produced in partnership with Chapter One Bookstore in Hamilton, Montana. It was produced by Chris Moyles and me. I'm your host, Lauren Korn. Chris also engineered this episode. The artwork for *The Write Question* was designed by Molly Russell. Funding for *The Write Question* is provided by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. Many thanks to Humanities Montana for supporting this program since 2008. And thank you for listening. *The Write Question* is a production of Montana Public Radio.