

TheWriteQuestion_1008_KevinFedarko_PT02

Lauren Korn 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 and 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 back into it. This is second half of my conversation with author, Kevin Fedarko. I want to go back to the river. You were not a great river pilot yourself. You were not 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 that you didn't or you couldn't comprehend. While you were on the river itself as a river runner. How did the canyon, the rock, reframe your understanding of the river?

Kevin Fedarko I was a terrible river guide. I demonstrated such a titanic level of incompetency during my first season that it was obvious to everybody down there that I had no business holding the lives of commercial passengers in my hands. And so I was permanently relegated to what we call the baggage pool. So these are the rubber rafts that float behind a commercial expedition and you know they they contain all of the stuff that you need to support a two or two and a half week commercial river trip. The, you know, the clothing, the tents, the propane tanks, the kitchen tables, the ice chests that hold the steak dinners and the salmon steaks and the fresh vegetables and most important of all the ice for the gin and tonics the guides drink at the end of the day in their boats. And the people who rode those boats were the trainees. And if you're in the baggage pool, your objective is to claw your way out of the baggage pole and onto a guide boat as quickly as possible. And I was so bad, I never made that transition. We had four of those boats during those years. They were named, to give you an idea of where we fit into the hierarchy, those of us who rode the baggage boats, they were named after barnyard animals. And there were four of them. There was the Ox, the Mule, the Clydesdale, and then there was the boat that would become my boat during my time down there. It was called the Jackass. But despite all of my screw-ups, I was part of a river crew, and I was able to participate in this marvelous and magical experience of living and working on boats across the arc of a, of a rivers season for a couple of seasons down there, You know, following the water as it comes out of the mountains during the snowmelt and riding it through the summer months when the temperature goes up to 120 degrees and the monsoons will create dozens and sometimes hundreds of waterfalls, you know, ricocheting off the walls of the canyon into the river. And then deep into autumn when you can have campfires and the leaves on the aspen trees start to turn gold up on the North Rim. And if you are part of that world, if you were one of those men and women who give their lives over to this thing, you become absolutely infatuated with the riparian paradise at the bottom of the canyon, and you can very easily become convinced for all sorts of compelling reasons that the river is the

essence of the Canyon. I mean, it just makes so much sense, right? It's like, it's the thing that... It's the instrument that created the canyon in the first place. It carved it and polished it and honed its walls. It's, the thing that injects and imbues, uh, greenery and life into what can appear if you're on a boat looking up, like lifeless walls of rock extending up to the sky. I mean, the, the riparian quarter and the canyon, I can't remember the statistics right now, but like the biodiversity of that. One ecological zone is ten times more complicated and prolific than any other eco-zone within the canyon. You become obsessed with the river to the point where, and it's a source of joy and wonder, riding the rapids, floating those tranquil sections where the river turns to glass and the colors play along the surface of it, and having it convey you and carry you all summer long. You become convinced that everything else down there, the texture of the rock, the way the light plays along the walls, the way that darkness falls into the canyon and is pulled out at night and is pull back out by dawn in the morning, the color of the sky, all of it is just context and backdrop for the only thing that matters. You are seeing this space through the prism of water and through the prison of the river. And the other thing that can happen is you can succumb to a bit of a delusion. And I suspect that those of you who are, you know, boatmen and boat women here tonight, you can relate to this. Like when you are in those rapids, particularly if you're in a small, fragile boat, like a Dory, if you are on a rapid, like Sockdolager or Horn Creek or Hans or Lava Falls or Crystal. You can feel as if you are being subjected to raw, untrammled nature, what nature does and is capable of, the power that has, its savagery and its violence when it is not under the control of human beings. You are getting a taste of what wilderness and wildness means inside of the Grand Canyon. And here's the thing, that mindset can kind of either enable you to forget or blind you to the fact that that's not really true. Also, It's not true because no matter how wild those rapids whose names I just invoked are, every drop of water inside of those rapids has been rationed and metered by the men and women, the technicians, the engineers, and the managers who work 15 miles upstream for Lees Ferry at the Glen Canyon Dam. The river runs through the penstocks and the river outlet tubes. The amount of water we send into the canyon itself and therefore the amount of power that conveys. We control it. We're in charge and that structure, that 710 foot tall wall of concrete, that's just one part of a whole system of hydroelectric dams and reservoirs and irrigation districts that have taken what was once the wildest river in the West and turned it into plumbing. It's not wild, it's plumbing. And it is what is responsible for supporting and sustaining. Like I forget the numbers, it's up to this point, it's like 43 million people in seven states, an entire quadrant of the United States and its economic basis, seven major cities. All of it hangs by the thread of this one river that we control. We control it so well that the Bureau of Reclamation has a statistic that every drop of water inside the Colorado River is used and reused up to 17 times as it makes its journey from the Rockies toward the sea and we. Use it so efficiently, we have created such a perfection in engineering, water engineering, that we kill it before it gets to the Sea of Cortez. Not a teaspoon of that water reaches the sea. We use up every drop of it. And so what all that means, Lauren, is that if you want to experience wild nature inside of Grand Canyon, the river's not the place to do it. And the other reason that you can't experience is because there's nothing that can go wrong on the river, no matter how bad it is. There's no piece of equipment you can break. There's nothing you can do to your body that you cannot begin to address and fix in the span of about two hours when somebody shows up at the helm of a 37-foot motor rig with... An awesome set of tools and a bunch of radios and the ability to talk to park dispatch and get a helicopter to your location in about six minutes. If you want to experience wild nature, if you want experience how small and vulnerable human beings are, when we're not in charge, you have to leave the river behind and you have go up into the kingdom of pure rock. You have to venture where people don't go, where there is no path, where there no rescue. And I'm not saying this just to reflect on how cool I think I am. I just, this is what this, in answer to your question, this is

how moving on foot with a 55 pound pack along those cliffs and ledges, day after day, week after week, and staring down at the river and not being able to get to it. This is what it taught me, that the wildness and the wilderness inside of Grand Canyon is to be found up there. I have to say Like for people who love the river, for people who love boats, this is total heresy. This is blasphemy, what I'm saying. And so therefore, I want to say something else, like really briefly, which is also true. I believe this is part of the beauty of a paradox that exists within a space that is wild and as wild and as complex as Grand Canyon. I don't think it takes anything at all away from the river or its magic or its power to recognize what I just said. These two things, the river is no less magic and no less powerful by virtue of the fact that we're in charge of it. It's just that the juxtaposition between the rock, the world of the rock and the world of the water enhances one's understanding of the complexity and the richness of the landscape itself. It makes it so much more than what it seems to be if you're only seeing it through the prism and the lens of the river.

Lauren Korn I will just take a moment to say that at dinner earlier, you said that in another life, you might not have been a written journalist, but maybe a radio journalist. And I'm here to say, that like, you've got a radio voice and you like know how to use it. So, yeah. Yeah.

Speaker 2 That's so nice of you to say, but I'm trying to imagine my poor wife and what it sounds like to listen to me all day long.

Lauren Korn Um, let's talk about paradox and complexity because that is so much what this book is about. Um, We mentioned earlier there are indigenous tribes native to the grand canyon. There's 11 Um, and their stories populate much of this book Um one of these tribes and forgive me if i'm mispronouncing. Is it the Hualapai? It is the Hualapai they've sort of complicated ideas of wilderness or land stewardship in this area. Talk about this tribe's history and their relationship to tourism in the area and why their story might be considered what I'll call like a microcosm of other natural spaces in the US and around the world right now.

Kevin Fedarko Absolutely. And I mean, maybe before, before we like launch into the Hualapai, let me just get a little bit of history if I could. Absolutely. On the tribes themselves. Yeah. And I should begin, I think, with, you know, something that is rather embarrassing for for me to have to confess. You know... So this book that we're talking about tonight was preceded by another book called The Emerald Mile, which is a story about three river guides setting a speed record through the Grand Canyon. And it's a kind of a portrait of the river world at the bottom of the canyon. And I managed to spend 10 years writing that book. And with the exception of I think maybe two and a half paragraphs, I never bothered anywhere in the pages of that book to acknowledge that or confront or grapple with fact that. Um, prior to the rival of people who look and sound like me, you know, the descendant of white Europeans, this landscape was populated by people who had been living there, not just for hundreds, but for thousands of years. And during their time on this landscape, these people had acquired incredibly nuanced and granular. Knowledge and understanding about the land itself, and all of that knowledge was encoded in every aspect of who they are, their language, their traditions, their rituals, their rites of passage, their ethos as a people. And when we, when I say we collectively, when white folks like me arrived in this part of world. Um, when we got together, and decided to enact what the writer Wallace Stegner once identified as America's best idea, which was to identify some of our most gorgeous pieces of landscape and set them aside and protect them, not just for our own enjoyment, but for the enjoyment of future generations of Americans for our children and our children's children. I mean, this is an incredible thing. I think this is one of the most extraordinary things we have ever done as a nation. It's not

just an act of protecting landscape, it's an act generosity in giving it to people who haven't even arrived yet, in committing ourselves to that protection and thereby being part of a covenant, right? It's handed to us and there with that handoff comes the obligation, the duty, the responsibility to do the same. All of that is incredibly beautiful and all of that tends to obscure something else that happened along with this whole process because when we created this park and when we create it all of our parks we also participated in a crime. When we created the parks, we took the people that I spoke about a moment ago who were indigenous to the land and we evicted them from their homes. We kicked them out of the landscape, physically removed them, and then we did something that I think arguably is just as bad, if not worse. We wrote them out of the story that we tell ourselves about what these places are and why they matter and how they came to be. And all of that is reflected in the fact that I managed to write this like 430 page book about the river and barely even acknowledged these people. And when I say these people, as Lauren just alluded to a moment ago, like it's not just one tribe or two or three or half a dozen, there are 11 Native American tribes whose ancestral lands abut or lie directly inside of what is now Grand Canyon National Park. And To me, the most extraordinary thing about these people is not simply the knowledge and the sensibility and the connection that they had to the landscape that was encoded in who they are as a people, and that therefore they're an incredibly important part of the past. It's the fact that they survived and they are still there. All of their reservations are on the periphery of the park. They still live in and are part of the landscape itself. They still go into the park? In all kinds of ways, rites of passage for their young, rituals for all kinds of things including rituals for what their soldiers need to do when they come home from war, for purification and re-entering society. They position themselves at the heads of some of the trails like the Bright Angel Trail so that they can be in a position to meet and greet and explain to visitors from all over the world who they are, why they're there, what their story is, what their connection is to the landscape. And explain that you are moving through their home. They're not just part of the past, they're part of present. And by virtue of that, they are part of future. And so all of that is something that I had to learn. As part of this journey, which I didn't even realize there's gonna be an element in it. And thanks to my ignorance, thanks to the fact that I had never taken the time to make the effort to learn about who they are, to listen to what they might have to say. But Pete and I had a series of encounters. They wanted to meet us when they heard that we were making this journey for National Geographic and we agreed and we had a series of encounters and conversations that resulted in some case in relationships. And among many other things, we learned that the landscape has a series of threats that loom over it, and every single one of those threats has a Native American component to it. And that is my incredibly long-winded preamble to your question. So we don't have to talk about the wallopi, or we could talk about wallopai now, if you would like.

Lauren Korn I think we should. I think this book is so much about time and their story, their relationship to the land is this weird, I think you used in the book this term palimpsest, right? Like it's confusion, it's complex. I think should. I think it's an important story. Okay. Do you remember the question?

Speaker 2 I do. I usually don't, but I do in this.

Kevin Fedarko Case. So you asked about one of these 11 tribes, the Wallopi, who happen to live, they're the furthest west of any of the other tribes. And their reservation, which is massive, the northern border of the reservation, is the southern rim of the canyon, all the way on the western end. And as I said a moment ago, like all of these, there's a bunch of development projects that the integrity of this park. Everything from uranium mines to a proposal several years ago from a group of developers in Phoenix to build a

motorized tramway and a hotel complex on the east rim of the canyon, which is Navajo land, all the way down to the bottom of the Canyon to deliver 10,000 visitors per day to a raised metal walkway and an amphitheater and a restaurant. These projects, they're always there. And one thing that they all share in common is that they're all driven by folks who are trying to find a way to make to turn natural beauty into cash. Like that's something they all share. So, one of the threats is out in the western end of Grand Canyon where the Hualapai live. And this involves a massive invasion of helicopter air tours that come into the canyon each and every day. Helicopters cannot do this in any other part of the canyon. They not only fly over the canyon, they fly below the rim, They fly along the river. They land at the bottom of the canyon. And they bring thousands of visitors each and every week, primarily from Las Vegas, in order to have a kind of experience that you would not, most people don't get to have if they're not willing to walk in or float in or ride a mule. But you can be picked up in a shuttle at your hotel in Las Vegas and you can flown down eating a hoagie and drinking a Pepsi. At the bottom of the Grand Canyon by one o'clock that afternoon and you can be back in Vegas that night to catch a show. And the reason that all of this is able to happen is because the Wall of Pi have sanctioned it. They have allowed these helicopters, they're a sovereign nation and they have allowed these helicopters to enter their airspace. And It has put me in a terrible position because I just gave a little speech about how important these people are, how ignorant I was in having failed to learn about them, how much injustice has been committed against them. And yet I found myself and Pete did too profoundly offended by what is happening out there because we came to the conclusion during the course of our journey that one of the most precious treasures inside the Grand Canyon is something you can't even see. You can only detect it with the ear. It's the silence, the stillness, the tranquility. That drapes over the landscape and that enters inside of you when you've been out there long enough. It is extraordinary. And it is, we came to the conclusion that it was the single, perhaps the single most precious, least understood, and most fragile, thanks to what the Hualapai are doing, treasure inside of the canyon. But here's the thing. When some dude like me, a 61-year-old white guy, on a stage with a microphone in front of a group of people and complains about how his Grand Canyon vacation was ruined by a bunch of Indians who make too much noise. That guy is ignoring a whole bunch of stuff. When I say that, when I make that objection, I'm ignoring the fact that, or I'm sidestepping the fact that the revenue generated by those helicopter air tours is directly responsible for financing Things that we, in our communities, have available to us who live beyond the borders of a Native American reservation. That money is providing funding for programs for the elderly, medical services, funding for the first and second generations of Hualapai students, not just to go to high school beyond the border of their reservation, but college and graduate school to acquire skills that they will need in order to lead their tribe through the 21st century. Another way of putting it is that like these people, what they are doing when they sanction these helicopters is they are pursuing the same dream that we all get to pursue without people attacking us. And the dream is to provide a stable economic foundation for the future of themselves and their kids. And I have to say like, if any of you are planning to purchase a copy of this book this evening under the delusion that you're gonna find some kind of clean answer to this incredibly complex question in the pages of this you will not. What I confronted out there with those helicopters as a result of having made the effort to try and listen to what the tribes have to say left me in a state of deep confusion, Um, an awareness that breaking these issues down into black and white. Is utterly inadequate to the complexity of the issue itself. And if the issue, its complexity, it's almost like the walls of the canyon itself. I mean, it's just so complex, so multi-layered, so convoluted, and so filled with mystery. The question that I'm left with at the end is, I don't know what to say about the wallopi, except that I cannot condemn them without recognizing my own hypocrisy in so doing. And also perhaps acknowledging that maybe there is something that we have to

learn from these people and I haven't figured out what it is yet. Perhaps one of the things that I have learned that we had to learn is that they're offering up a reflection of who we are and what we have done to the land. I mean, they're taking lessons about development and capitalism that have been taught to them by us. And they're doing an incredibly good job of putting those lessons to work in their own interest. And in doing all of that, they are holding up a mirror that reflects back what we have done to the land and offering an opportunity for us to ask ourselves whether that's a good thing. And then there may be other lessons that I just haven't figured out yet. I'll conclude by saying that is just like a testament to why we go out into these spaces and why we preserve these spaces, because they're so powerful, because there's so calm. They're not escapes. It's a mistake to think of a place like the Grand Canyon or our national parks as places we go into for vacation so we can escape the complexity of the world. No, these are places that we can go into in order to confront the complexity of the world from a new angle. One that might afford us with new ideas and new ways of understanding so that when we emerge from these landscapes we might be equipped in a new way. That's another reason to preserve them. Thank you.

Lauren Korn I want to thank you, Kevin, for being on the other side of the stage with me tonight. Thank you to Chapter One Bookstore and thank you to the Ravalli County Museum. Thank you, Chris Moyles, my engineer. He's my co-producer on The Write Question and he followed me here. This was part two of a two-part conversation with journalist Kevin Fedarko, 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 or to listen to the first half of this conversation, go to mtptr.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 Right Question was designed by Molly Russell.

Kevin Fedarko When this book was finished, I promised my wife I was not gonna write another book. And I'm ashamed to say that a couple of months later, I found myself thinking about and drawn into an idea that's sort of been in the back of my mind for a long time, but never became real until this, my second book on the Grand Canyon came out. And I wouldn't say I would consider myself an expert, Certainly not an expert like this. The scientists and the park personnel that I know who've devoted their lives to the canyon. But I know a few things about the river, the world of the water at the bottom, and I know a few about the world the rock between the edges of the river and the rims. But what I don't know very much of because I've never taken the time to really know is the world of the sky.

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