

Reprinted with permission of The Vancouver Sun, June 10, 2006
(Vancouver, B.C., Canada)

ONE XTREME TO ANOTHER

Interview: Pam Withers kept writing her series of adventure books for boys even when she was laid low with a back injury

by Katharine Hamer

Jake Evans and Peter Montpetit are only 15 years old, but already they've survived whitewater rapids, an avalanche, perilous mountain climbs, getting lost in the woods and marooned on an isolated Pacific island, and a run-in with the police. You might say they're overachievers.

The boys – the main characters in Whitecap Books' Take it to the Xtreme adventure series for teens – sprang fully formed from the imagination of Vancouver writer Pam Withers.

Getting into the mindset of teenage boys wasn't much of a problem for her, since she has a teenage son.

"I guess I'm thinking of writing it more from a hard-core outdoors-person voice," she mused recently over tea at a west-side café. "I didn't really think about the male/female thing. I guess I was more of a tomboy than most girls."

What was a challenge, when she decided to write the first book in the series, *Raging River*, was that she had never turned her hand to fiction before and had no idea how to go about writing a novel.

She had strong writing and research skills, having written dozens of business articles and co-authored with consultant John Izzo the human-resources book *Values Shift*. The question was how to spin them into tales of a completely different kind.

Some years ago, Withers was living in Oxford, England, where her husband Steve, a chemistry professor, was on sabbatical.

"I went to the library," she recalled, "and checked out five books on how to write a novel and five teen adventure novels. I read them all back-to-back, and then sat down and wrote the whitewater adventure novel, *Raging River*."

"There was no outline and I had no clue where it was going to go, except that there was going to be a waterfall in the middle and they'd all wash out at the end."

"I have since learned to outline my books."

It's something she was forced to do after the tenth publisher she approached – Whitecap Books in North Vancouver – accepted her manuscript. On one condition.

She had proposed a series of adventure books, "and they called my bluff and said yes, and actually made me outline six before they would accept *Raging River*, which was very intimidating at the time."

Withers had done competitive kayaking since her late teens, so she had the knowledge base for *Raging River*, which was published in 2003.

For the other books in the series, though, she has sought advice from athletes and other experts. She often consults as many as a dozen people for each book, including her son, Jeremy.

"He does read all my books before they go to my editor," she confessed.

"He finds dialogue that he thinks isn't right. He will suggest expressions. He will tell me if something's 'lame' and if something sounds girly.

"At one point, he told me a paragraph in *Adrenalin Ride* (the third book in the series) read like Jake and Peter had turned into chicks because it was too emotional.

"We had our differences – he's had to learn diplomacy and I've had to learn to take feedback from him – but he has been invaluable as a teen editor."

Jeremy, who will be going to the University of British Columbia next year, has developed his own kind of creative talent – he writes heavy-metal lyrics.

Apart from skateboarding, Withers, 49, has taken up pretty much every sport she's written about, for research purposes. However, a back injury last February put the brakes on her outdoor adventures.

"I wrote the climbing book *Vertical Limits* on my back," she said.

"I was basically incapacitated for two months, unable to lift myself up far enough to type. So a friend typed *Vertical Limits* and I dedicated the book to her.

"It was phenomenally difficult to get into the frame of mind to write an extreme climbing book while lying in bed. But luckily, I had it outlined, and luckily the plot excited me, and luckily I had this friend willing to type it."

Withers is undeniably prolific. Besides the Take it to the Xtreme series, whose eighth installment she's about to start, she has written three young-adult novels for Orca Books.

She is taking a year off of speaking engagements – she speaks to about 15,000 kids a year – and this fall she will join her husband for another sabbatical, this time in Marseille.

"I've been joking that I'm going to write *Murder on the Mediterranean*," she said.

Between 50,000 and 60,000 copies of books in the Take to the Xtreme series have been sold. What's more important to Withers is the feedback she gets from her readers.

"It's sort of blown me away that the books have been as popular as they have been," she said. "But what really touches me is how many librarians tell me these books get boys to read.

"I was speaking at a school right after *Skater Stuntboys* came out. I happened to know the librarian and I said, "Are there any boys from here who are hard-core skateboarders?"

"She said, 'Don't look right now, but there's a guy over there who kind of looks like *That 70s Show*. He's got a curtain of hair. He's a hard-core skateboarder.'

"I said, 'What did he think of *Skater Stuntboys*?'

"And she said, 'When I asked him what he thought, he said, 'She got it right.'"

"That, to me, is the ultimate compliment."

She is equally thrilled that girls have been reading her books. She may even write an adventure story specifically for girls while she's in France.

"My girls are always strong go-for-it girls," she said proudly. "I don't think being sporty and go-for-it has to be unfeminine. I think guys respect girls who have that go-for-it attitude."

It's the kind of attitude Withers herself has.

Katharine Hamer is a Vancouver freelance writer and the editor of the Jewish Independent newspaper.