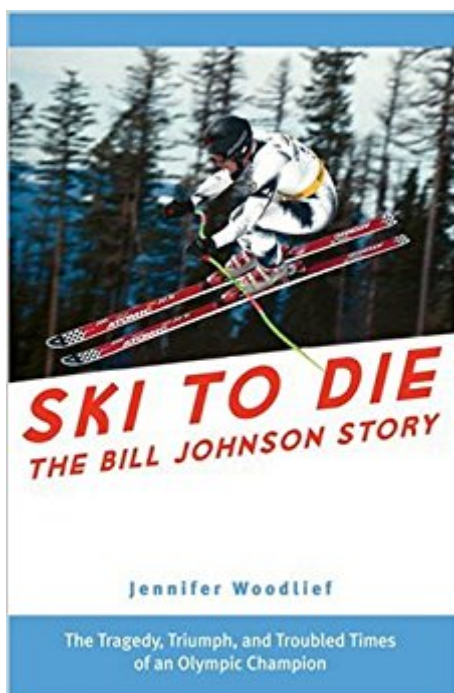


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# Ski To Die: The Bill Johnson Story



## Synopsis

Bill Johnson took the world by storm at the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics, coming out of nowhere to win the first American gold medal in downhill skiing. He went on to dominate the World Cup races that same year. His success made him an overnight celebrity, but his fame was fleeting. He never won another race, and personal tragedy seemed to follow him at every turn. With his post-Olympic life spiraling out of control, Johnson decided to do the unthinkable &#151; make a comeback at the age of forty. He had his motto, &#147;Ski to Die,Ã¢â tattooed on his right bicep. In a race at Big Mountain, fearless and in the lead with one turn to go, Johnson crashed face-first into the icy mountain at fifty miles per hour. Ski to Die is a story about the cost of chasing dreams. It is about glory and the attempt to recapture it once it is lost. More than a cautionary tale, Ski to Die is a rise-fall-rise-again story &#151; because against all odds, Bill JohnsonÃ¢â's story doesnÃ¢ât end at Big Mountain.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 240 pages

Publisher: Clerisy Press, Emmis Books; First Print edition (October 1, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1578602483

ISBN-13: 978-1578602483

Product Dimensions: 9.3 x 6.7 x 0.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 30 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #2,028,700 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #70 inÃÂ Books > Sports & Outdoors > Outdoor Recreation > Skiing > Downhill #1777 inÃÂ Books > Sports & Outdoors > Winter Sports #9407 inÃÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Sports & Outdoors

## Customer Reviews

"Ski To Die is compelling." -- Bill Littlefield, host of NPR's Only A Game"&#x85;a fascinating, well-reported cautionary tale&#x85;" -- Bill Pennington, New York Times"&#x85;an unflinching and historically rich rendering of a ski champion's troubled career&#x85;" -- Robert Frohlich, Ski Racing magazine, January 2006

While Johnson has been profiled in the media many times over the years, SKI TO DIE is the first full-length account of Bill Johnson's rise and fall. Unlike the sanitized made-for-TV movie

created after his gold medal victory, author Jennifer Woodlief, with Johnson's full cooperation, gives readers the whole story; a gritty, cautionary tale about the price paid for pursuing dreams. With the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin just around the corner, Bill Johnson and SKI TO DIE are certain to make headlines

This book about Bill Johnson was a very good read. It exceeded my expectations in the quality of research, editing and narrative style. Woodlief's thorough account is well documented with interviews of pretty much everyone she could find, and I enjoyed every page of this truly tragic story. And it was tragic, yet, Woodlief never let the tragedy overshadow Johnson's phenomenal accomplishments, nor his rare talents. I love ski racing and lessons for life, both of which are found in "Ski to Die."

America perversely loves to witness the high and mighty fall from grace especially if the fall may be deserved. This is especially true in the high-octane world of ski racing. A very compelling story in its own right, *Ski to Die* describes the self-destruction of Bill Johnson, the first American ski racer to win the gold medal in the Downhill during the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. It is a tragic story with no happy ending, and it truly grips the reader as Johnson's life unravels due to his inability to handle his post-Olympic success. Aggressive, arrogant, selfish, and reckless with his professional and personal life, Johnson is unable to translate his one and only Olympic victory into a truly rewarding life off the mountain. As a result, he descends into an emotionally hellish life riddled with setbacks and disappointments all by his own hand. Seventeen-plus years after his victory with nothing else to lose, Johnson, washed-up and broken at age 40, defied convention as he had done throughout his life, and attempted a comeback in the ski world by qualifying for a berthing spot on the U.S Ski Team in preparation for the 2002 Winter Olympics. It was not to be. Johnson suffered a horrific ski crash while qualifying in early 2001 in Michigan that left him a physical and mental invalid seemingly destined to fade into obscurity as a one-race Olympic wonder. Told from people in Johnson's life (family, friends, teammates, rivals, and coaches), Jennifer Woodlief weaves a story that is too simply conveyed and voyeuristic. It is voyeuristic in that Woodlief does not provide enough analysis into what motivates Johnson's self-destructive behavior other than the cursory themes of being raised in a highly dysfunctional family and suffering from childhood abandonment issues. While a very credible foundation, there is no attempt to thoroughly explore Johnson's psyche other than the anecdotal yet poignant he-said, she-said viewpoints from a multitude of people. The other drawback is that the story is episodic and not sequential, making it complicated

for the reader to logically follow Johnson's difficult life from childhood to adulthood. Instead we are treated to everything in between in non-linear fashion which diffuses Johnson's descent into hell, instead of building his descent in a crescendoing concentrated manner. Because of this awkward narrative, the reader is left feeling sorry yet not that overly sympathetic for Johnson's demise. Nevertheless, this book will serve as a cautionary tale to those whose ambitions far exceed their capabilities. Tommy Moe, the second US skier who won the Olympic Downhill in 1994 ten years after Johnson, summed it best when he said he used Johnson's life (or lack thereof) as a template on how not to handle success. More power to Moe and anyone else who reads this book.

When a friend suggested "Ski to Die" for our book club, I was skeptical. We often stay away from biographies as they tend to be dry and merely a recitation of facts. But I enjoy skiing and live in the Tahoe area, so I thought I'd give it a try. The book arrived Friday afternoon and I was done by (late) Friday evening. The story was not only riveting but also insightful. It fell into one of those rare categories of books, whether fiction or non-fiction, that makes you feel that when you wake up in the morning, your life could be different. That it could be different because you were provided with insight and understanding by the author. In this case, Woodlief offers a rare level of insight into rebellion and motivation, into success and despair. It is an amazing roller coaster ride through the ups and downs in Johnson's life. It is an experience that should not be missed, one that I would highly recommend to anyone (including my book club).

I am an avid skier and a lover of biographies. What an amalgamation of the two!!! Growing up in Colorado, skiing was in my blood...much like Bill Johnson. This book is not only a compelling story of his life but also a story of tragedy that draws you in immediately. You wish for Bill's confidence in your own life's ventures but dread that it would come with the price of cockiness and heartbreak that inevitably follows. I couldn't put it down!!!! Well written and gripping!

I picked up this book on the recommendation of a friend, not knowing who Bill Johnson was, yet I was immediately engaged. Despite of my lack of prior knowledge about Bill and his sport, the book quickly taught me the ins and outs of the ski racing world and placed me in awe of the enormity of Bill's achievement. Moreover, I found the book extremely compelling on a human level. The book does not paint Bill as an untouchable national icon, but rather as a fallible human being. Here was a guy who had nothing, rose to the pinnacle of his profession, then proceeded to lose it all again. I found myself cheering for him, chastising him, and feeling sorry for him all at the same time. Mostly,

I found myself wondering why. Bill Johnson would say, "why not." You don't have to be a skier to enjoy this book. It is a great read for anyone. I highly recommend it.

I'm not a skier and am not much of a sports fan either, but I heard about "Ski to Die" and thought I would give it a try. I was amazed by the story. This is one of the few books that I couldn't put down. The author does a fantastic job weaving Johnson's early years and current situation to further grip the reader. This is a compelling story of the complexities of human nature. What I liked most about the story was the honesty with which it is told. I read that it was written with Johnson's full cooperation and I admire that neither he nor the author try to sugar coat his life. I highly recommend this book, even if you are neither a sports fan nor a biography buff you will enjoy this frank and true story and the life lessons in it. This book is every bit as interesting as any fictional story; it's a modern day Greek tragedy!

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