

## THE PORTRAIT: PAM WITHERS

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Looking for an action packed summer read? Do you enjoy plots that are filled with adventure, problem solving and challenges? Do you want to immerse yourself in the sights, sounds, textures, temperatures, and smells of British Columbia's wilderness? Do you love a book that is so filled with tension that you have to take breaks between chapters to catch your breath so you are ready for the next challenge your protagonists must face? Are you looking for a book to put in a teen, reluctant or eager reader's summer back pack or on a summer reading list? If so, then I invite you to meet Pam Withers, author of the newly published *Take It To the Extreme* series published by Whitecap.

Pam Withers exudes her passion for extreme sports through her two teen protagonists Jake and Peter, who work for B.C.-based Sam's Adventure Tours. Given that her first two books of the six-book series, *Raging River* and *Peak Survival* have been on the Association of B.C. Publisher's bestsellers list since their 2003, 2004 publication and that Scholastic Canada has picked up *Peak Survival* for distribution through Canadian school-related programs, it is evident that her passions have ignited and connected with the passions of many young readers already. For Pam, an affirmation that her books have had an impact on her readers is their stated belief that the characters and the places are real. For example, on a recent school visit to Chilliwack, one student asked in, regards to *Raging River*, "What is the name of the street where Jake lives in Chilliwack?" While visiting the Pemberton and Mount Currie area, Pam was pleased that the readers connected with the geographical setting of *Peak Survival*.

Pam has found Peter's and Jake's voices easily as she has enjoyed being with teens since childhood. Growing up in Wisconsin, Pam was surrounded by the many youth groups her father organized in their community. As an adult, Pam led a teen kayak club for several years here on the west coast. As a mother, she is surrounded by

her teen son and his sports oriented friends. As a result, her mind is filled with teen dialogues, which come out easily in her writing. Pam enjoys writing for teens and her enthusiasm and appreciation for them rings true in her novels. Pam's relationship with her characters reminds me of what Mem Fox, well-loved Australian children's author and educator, said, at a talk on what makes a great children's book that if a reader comes to care deeply about the welfare of the book's characters, then the author has succeeded in achieving one of the key criteria for writing a great book. Having read both of Pam's books, I can say that I care about the welfare of these boys, whose combination of daredevilish, risk taking, and in the end, level-headed thinking and actions reminded me of teens who I care for in real life. In a recent visit to schools in Virginia, Pam found that students were so connected with Jake and Peter that they were hoping that the boys would have an adventure closer to their home. As Withers points out, just as American readers easily travel with Gary Paulsen to the wilderness of Canada she is thrilled that her books are making British Columbia and Washington State familiar and intriguing places to her readers from far and wide.

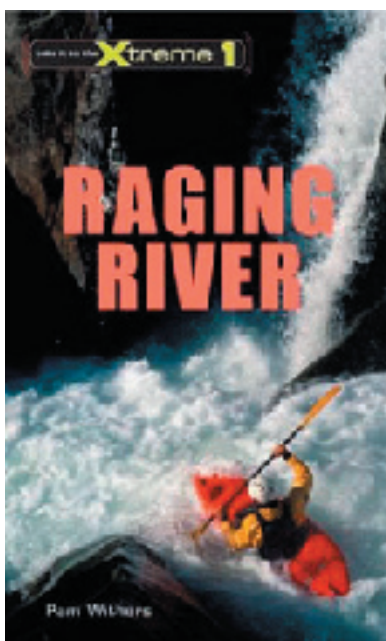


Pam is new to fiction writing but not at all new to non-fiction writing and speaking. Since childhood, Pam knew she wanted to be a writer. As a child, she wrote creatively and persisted with her dream despite her grandmother's warning that it would not pay enough to make ends meet. As a teen, her father encouraged her to pursue journalism and with this goal in mind, she made a firm decision that was what she would do. Pam's self-discipline and drive have been key in her success as a writer. As a teen she taught herself how to do short hand and type and edited the high school and college newspapers. In college, she majored in English and focused her attention on journalism. By graduation, she was firmly on her way to establishing a career as a journalist and editor that has taken her to different parts of the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Ireland. Pam's years working with written language taught her the importance of being a good researcher and

ensuring that the facts are accurate. She has spent her career collaborating with experts to ensure that her writing and language are true to the topic. Her skill and commitment to high caliber researching and writing makes her fiction believable and helps her to build trust with both experts and non-experts on whatever topic she explores, be it kayaking, snowboarding, hiking, or mountain biking.

Pam's return to fiction occurred when she, her husband, and son went to spend a year in Oxford, England. Unable to work at a paying job and finding herself with lots of time at hand while watching her son at his many hockey practices, Pam set to work to write a novel with the goals of having fun doing it and providing a novel for her son to read. Being new to fiction, Pam the researcher and writer turned to books on fiction writing and some teen novels to help her learn how to do what journalism had not taught her: how to write dialogue and plot. She highly recommends books published by Writer's Digest to aspiring writers. Now at ease in fiction, Pam enjoys that it offers her the luxury to enter into the non-real world and to transport places, people, and things from one setting to another. For example, in *Raging River*, the story takes place in the Prince George region on a fictitious river, the Cattibone, which is based on the Babine of British Columbia and the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon in Arizona. In her upcoming fourth book, she transports a Richmond skateboard park to the town centre of Chilliwack. She believes that if the book seems real to her readers, then she has done her work as a writer of fiction.

Pam's year spent writing in cold ice arenas in the U.K., crafting out her story in short-hand on paper and later putting it into a computer, led to the publication of *Raging River*. Does it sound a bit Rowlingsque in process? Both writers are mothers who wrote their drafts



with their children close at hand. Both craft outlines before writing. Both have gotten to know their characters intimately and get to know them better with each book of their respective series. Both write about environments that they know from first hand experience. Rowling, being a former teacher, knows the school scene well. Withers, being a kayaker for over 25 years, can practically kayak in her sleep and carefully describes the carved turns a snowboarder or skier would make in *Peak Survival*. As Rowling has admitted that Hermione represents a bit of her, Withers reveals that Nancy, the manager of Sam's Adventure Tours, is her alter ego.

What are Pam's tips on writing? Write. Write daily. Always write something. Take a break from your writing and come back to it. Stay connected to the outside world. Consult experts. Live the book. Go to the settings where the book could possibly take place. Watch videos. Get on chat groups. Take up the sport. Take it all in. Have experts read over your drafts. Be sure the language and terminology rings true. Have the book so solidly in your mind that you can write it anywhere. For example Pam wrote the summer set *Raging River* in a hockey arena in winter and the winter set *Peak Survival* in the summer on a cabin on Mayne Island. Pam does not believe in writer's block. As a journalist she said that she could never have made a living if she supported that notion. Her method: she writes each day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. taking a mid-day break to get out of the house. She still uses the short-hand that she so diligently taught herself and then either types or uses voice-assisted software to transcribe it into the computer. Since the publication of her first two books, Pam now meets with her readers as she is in the process of writing the other books in the series. She is not sure yet how this interaction will affect the process or the outcome of the last novels in the series. However, given that she always involves consultants and collaborators in the writing process, this new dimension of feedback has the potential to make her process and product even richer.

The Take it to the Extreme series not only reflects Pam's passion for sports, it also reflects her appreciation for living in a world that celebrates and is richer for its diversity. Pam's background growing up non-native near native reserves in North and South Dakota, meeting people from all parts of the world through kayaking and other sports, and living in different countries in her adult life, all play a part in themes that resonate from her series. Pam's books capture the beauty of childhood in that children

do not care where someone is from or about their background. When they want to play, they want to play. When they find someone who shares their interests and passions, they are happy to have someone to spend time with and do with them what they love to do. The differences among the people who come together only bring richness to the shared experiences. Pam's books incorporate people she has known in her adventurous life. The First Nations character of Moses is named after a family friend. Fiona, a teenage girl from England, who is in *Peak Survival*, reminds Pam of many strong girls she has met in her years of doing extreme sports. Jake and Peter - one American, one Canadian - are typical of the paddlers she has known through her transborder kayaking activities.

Pam's books have wide appeal to boys and girls, to avid and reluctant readers, to teens and to younger children who are looking for a challenging high-interest book. Adults who enjoy reading about sports also enjoy her books. Pam hopes to capture the interests of readers who have never tried the sports before, as she never got into extreme sports until she was an adult and instead led a rather sedentary childhood. Equally she hopes to capture the respect of the readers who know the



sports inside out and can tell that she can talk and walk their language and culture. Pam's books are so appealing because they teach readers about sports, friendship, overcoming challenges, and problem solving without being didactic. Teens will put down any book that blatantly teaches a moral lesson. Pam's knowledge and appreciation for teens is what gives her the skill to weave the story in a way that they want to read the book. She greatly appreciates the input from her son for helping her ensure that the voices of the characters sound authentic.

Pam lives in Vancouver and is ready to travel far and wide to visit schools and libraries. Pam has been an awarding winning member of Toastmasters for many years, and her speaking abilities transfer into her writing as well as making her a dynamic and engaging guest author. Pam is used to meeting people through sports and is ready to reduce the costs of her visits by being billeted with teachers and librarians. I congratulate her on her successes with her series and look forward to reading and sharing books three through six in the near future.

Information on the Take it to the Extreme series can be found at:  
[www.TakeItToTheExtreme.com](http://www.TakeItToTheExtreme.com)  
Information on Pam Withers's work as a journalist and editor can be found at: [www.pamwithers.com](http://www.pamwithers.com)

*Janet Mumford is a librarian and teacher who works for School District #38 Richmond. She has volunteered on The Bookmark for three years as an editor and now is a contributor for author and illustrator interviews and Notes and News. Like Pam Withers, Janet has lived transborder. If you have any suggestions for future author or illustrator interviews please contact her. She can be reached at [jmum@telus.net](mailto:jmum@telus.net)*

