

Cranks on Planks

Mark Anthony Jarman

The gondola sways on a braided cable and we ascend the mountain hoping the strangers who assembled this contraption were not drunk or stoned. Moving briskly stanchion to stanchion, my son and I gaze down at dark evergreens and gaze up bright peaks, excited to be in the Rockies, climbing up to ski the giant white stripes of Goat's Eye Mountain and Delirium Dive and Angel Traverse. So very fine to leave the parking lot below, to leave the base world.

At the top of the Great Divide I point my skis downhill, carve my first turns in soft powder, and boom, all my troubles vanish like mist blowing the snow mas-sifs and cracked dolomite peaks.

Moving in white moguls I forgive my minor enemies and at the bottom of the run I boast a goofy grin. My son and I ski right to the chair -- no lineups on a weekday -- greet the lifties as if we are long lost friends, and we climb the peak again. The lifties working the chairlifts all hail from New Zealand and Australia, all wear identical silver shades, and are burnt black by the sun. We slather our ears and nose with zinc.

Spring skiing in the mountains alters me: I want to quit my life and just be a ski bum. My sister lives in the mountains, my son Gab is working construction for her husband Rick, and I get a spare room. I worked the same job decades ago, ran a jackhammer and a scabbler on a summer road crew, busting pavement and repaving it. Money to pay off debts and time in a beautiful river valley that boasts grizzlies and elk and bighorn sheep and glacial waterfalls and hewn mountain walls that brush your car mirror. Maybe Rick would hire me back.

One quad chair crosses high over a ravine, trees like sharp rockets far below us, but Gab won't look down from our dangling seat. I learn that my son does not enjoy heights and he keeps his eyes closed until we get off to ski Divide, the mountain border between Alberta and British Columbia.

Skiing a sunny Sunday in May, we saw mondo families on skis and snowboards, saw downhill racers speeding suicidally down a closed Blue Diamond hill and old-fashioned telemark skiers on North Divide and Ecstasy, nobly genuflecting with each turn. I saw AlleyOop trick skis and skis the size of a clown shoe, even people perched comically atop yellow bikes mounted on skis (will biking on skis catch on?).

But come Monday I am one of the few humans strapping on skis. Monday is gangs of young male snowboarders; Monday is attitude and dreads and blunts and MC Hammer pants rippling in the breeze.

Many boarders seem oblivious to other humans, cutting off my son who is still learning, jumping over my head on The Bunkers, and blocking everyone's way when they sprawl across a sunny slope as if chilling in a frat living room.

On Prune Pickers Pass a boarder cuts me off as I speed downhill. He was standing off to one side, then slid right across my path to join his baked buddies, like stepping into speeding cars without a glance. I know how to turn and veered sharply to avoid knocking him over, but if I had chosen to deliver a Gordie Howe elbow, he'd still be seeing stars. It's a no-brainer to look uphill, scope out what is coming down the pike before you cross.

On the lift you can actually hear the damage as rookie boarders scrape the best snow off steep hills. Afraid to pick up speed, but wanting to look cool, novice boarders slide down slowly with their board parallel to the hill, afraid to point the board's nose straight downhill. It's like taking a wide shovel to the mountain's snow (to my snow!). By lunch the slope is laid open, dark wounds among the moguls.

Watching this damage from the chair I grow morose (I enjoy being blissed-out, but I also do a good morose). Young people, including my nephews, are taking up boards and boards only. Clearly, skis will be history in a decade or two, everyone will be happily shredding on boards. I am having big fun on skis, but I'm circling the drain, I'm going the way of the dodo and the eight-track.

I ask people what they think about snowboards versus skis and I tap into a violent wellspring.

"My daughter was hit three times on one vacation and all by boarders!" says Paula, an emigre from Liverpool. "One hit her so hard he sheared the bindings right off her skis! I was amazed her leg wasn't broken. I saw three boarders get off the lift and they fell in a heap. One got knocked unconscious by the chair hitting his head. The lift operator ran to help, but forgot to switch off the lift, he got hit and was also knocked out. A skier then hit the red button and called for help. I was next; it was like watching a Marx Brothers movie!"

"Monday!" says a friend in Banff. "They're up there on a Monday because they're all unemployed bums. How has snowboarding positioned itself as the cool bad boy sport? Whether you stand on two boards or one fat one, who cares? It's all marketing, all bourgeois."

Over a beer in Banff, writer John Ford articulates the attraction of boards. "I sold my skis and took up boarding because of the movement. The feeling of carving across the side of a mountain with my hand dragging in the powder was what I, a boy from the Ottawa valley, imagined surfing must be like. I thought it was way cooler."

He admits some boarders are out of control, hence the many crashes into innocent bystanders.

“My first board, a second-hand Burton Craig Kelly racing board was massive and way too fast for a beginner; everyone on the hill was in danger, including me. In boarding there is a residue of outlaw skateboard culture, of “stick it to the man,” but that’s dying out as boarders become the ultra hyper consumers that skaters detested. I have witnessed disrespect for others on the hill, but I remember young skiers pulling the same stunts, cutting in, crashing into people.

“Now I ride a wider carving board; I’m not interested in speed, I’m interested in getting to the bottom of the hill in the most enjoyable manner.”

Watching accomplished boarders on the hill, I envy the easy balance, the adroit moves and surfer stance, the obvious ability.

It’s amazing what my nephew Tom can do on a board, zipping through trees and powder and over cliffs, all in total control. Tom tells me of a local boarder’s speed record on one chair: 27 runs in one hour.

Last year two old friends tried boarding, but they paid the price of falling over and over while learning: hips and backsides battered blue, hands and wrists wrecked from the impact, from putting out hands as they fell repeatedly. The next day, apres-ski, they couldn’t grip a glass or bottle, a minor tragedy I don’t have the intestinal fortitude to risk.

Burnt-faced lifties and chalet staff seem to favour boards. Living on the mountain they are immersed in a Bacchanalian world of worker res parties, shift-work, various drugs and positions, rivers of booze and chambers of sexual liaisons and complications on and off the clock, so much information and blackouts and raw burning sun in the thin morning curtains meaning get back to the clock, back to lining up customer backsides with the circling metal chairs. Over and over and over. By late May, lifties look like world-weary combat veterans:

“Chelsea’s having barbie and cocktails on her balcony at 4.”

The other dude barely able to push out the words.

“Man, I don’t know. I just don’t know if I can do another party.”

Some lifties winter in their native New Zealand or Oz and then travel to Canada for our winter, then jet over to Asia and back Down Under for perpetual winter; they can live four winters in two years, true apostles of snow. But I don’t see them on skis. Will I be the last lonely skier?

“Hell no,” Mike Lockett says, peeved at my suggestion. “Skiing is not dead.” Mike is a fervent ski instructor who also teaches English in Bhutan. Mike boards, but also loves skis, especially trick skis, with the intensity of a zealot.

“Twin tips have revolutionized the sport. I lived in Vermont and skied 250 days over two seasons. I bought used Rossi Scratch twin tips from a freestyle coach for \$100 US and a six-pack of Magic Hat. I also bought a used recreational Rossi GS race ski from an ex-Olympian for \$80 US. I used the race skis for cruising the grooms when there was no powder or if the terrain park was too icy. Skiing owes a lot to snowboarding, just as boarding owes its existence to skiing,

and to surfing and skateboarding. Snowboarding brought skiing out of the dark ages by changing the aesthetic, influencing the trick base and encouraging backward skiing, the switch stance. Hey, not to worry, skiing right now is healthier than ever.”

Jake the bartender agrees, his eyes lighting up talking of skis. College students Ross and Matt tell me they want skis and skis only. My son Gabby says, “I like skis better; I just do.”

Perhaps I fretted about barbarians at the gates for nothing. And really, looking around these spectral mountains, what do I have to complain about?

Skiers and boarders have movement in common, swooping and using the mountain’s bowls and walls, speeding in lush shadows, my rental skis faster in the shade. What do they say in the staff lodging? Skiing is like sex or pizza: even when it’s bad it’s still pretty good. But spring skiing on the sunny roof of the world is stunning.

Eagle Basin, Spar Mountain, Twin Cairns, The Ramparts, the parfait stripes of Mount Assiniboine, my eye pulled over the continental divide and far into British Columbia, countless peaks and big-beaked ravens lording it over vast snowfields. Every direction a sublime view.

Above the treeline no collection agencies threaten fake lawsuits, no android voices lie to me about high call volumes, no greedflation, and no missiles crash into apartments. To my son and me, the roof of this world looks unspoiled, a borderless vista floating far above the treeline, separate from the ordinary world, like floating eight miles high in a jet looking over clean leagues of cloudland. Sadly, we know it is not true, but this secret world we’ve found seems to stretch forever, will never run out, never melt.

There are curative powers to skiing blue and white peaks, to tilt into the curves of a jagged giant lunar crater. A bland world demands brilliance, brightness. Some try scream therapy, some put cash on the barrelhead for colon cleansing or hot stones on the naked back, some whack a Titleist golf-ball. Me, I fly on points, couch surf at my sister’s, rent skis, and plunge down sunburnt mountains, overpowering spring light filling a retina, bent figures dropping down headwalls and getting crazy in the half pipe, peaking on the speed and zooming rush, the reeling pleasures of body and eye.

Mark Anthony Jarman is the author of *Touch Anywhere to Begin*, *Czech Techno*, *Knife Party at the Hotel Europa*, *19 Knives*, and the travel book *Ireland’s Eye*. He won a Gold National Magazine Award in nonfiction, has twice won the Maclean-Hunter Endowment Award, and is published numerous times in *Best Canadian Stories*. A graduate of The Iowa Writers’ Workshop and a Yaddo fellow, he has taught at the University of Victoria, the Banff Centre for the Arts, and the University of New Brunswick where he is fiction editor of *The Fiddlehead* literary journal.