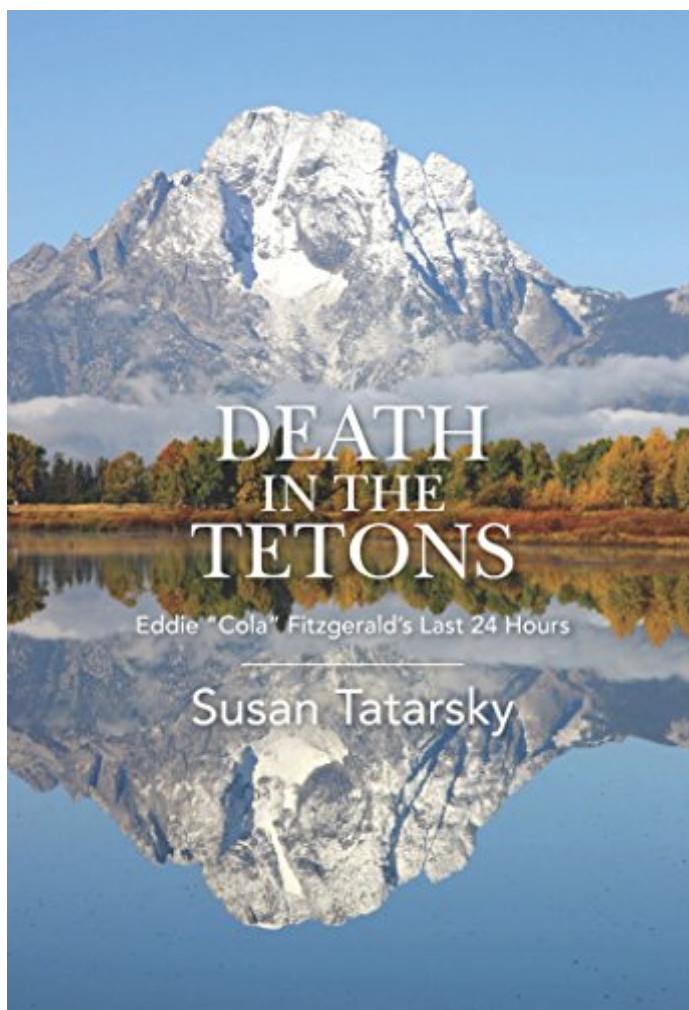


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# DEATH IN THE TETONS: Eddie "Cola" Fitzgerald's Last 24 Hours



## **Synopsis**

When the moment comes to dial 9-1-1, the future seems very uncertain. Eddie à œColaâ • Fitzgerald, a mail carrier from Queens, New York, realized he was lost on the mountain in white-out conditions and called for help. An experienced skier, Eddie had much going for him. Diagnosed with hyperactivity and ADHD at age seven and possibly a high-functioning autistic, Eddie overcame these obstacles to succeed academically, professionally, and personally. When he went with his New York ski group to Grand Targhee, little did he know that the rope line for the North Boundary Traverse had been removed. Nor did he know that ending up in a canyon on the boundary of Wyoming and Idaho would put him smack in the middle of local Search and Rescue politics. Follow the gripping story of the search for Eddie as it plays out between the ski group, the 911 dispatch office, the ski patrol, two Search and Rescue teams, and Eddie himself. This roman-a-clef is augmented by actual testimony from the legal depositions taken in the case.

## **Book Information**

File Size: 7606 KB

Print Length: 260 pages

Simultaneous Device Usage: Unlimited

Publisher: Qi Note (July 8, 2015)

Publication Date: July 8, 2015

Sold by:Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B0118GBVGG

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #413,150 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #13 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Sports > Winter Sports > Skiing #102 inÂ Books > Sports & Outdoors > Outdoor Recreation > Skiing #466 inÂ Books > Sports & Outdoors > Winter Sports

## **Customer Reviews**

I live in Idaho near Sun Valley Resort, where my husband and I ski all winter with our two children. On my first of many trips to Grand Targhee, the white-out conditions common to the area disoriented me. Fearful of unknown terrain, I increased my vigilance to know where I was on the trails at all times. *Death in the Tetons* recounts the story of a man who didn't maintain such awareness with tragic results. In August 2010, my local paper published news of the wrongful death lawsuit filed by the Fitzgerald family against Search and Rescue, et. al. I wondered then if the plaintiff understood the dangers of the large snowfalls Targhee receives, or if they comprehended the vastness of the surrounding rugged terrain. Throughout *Death in the Tetons*, many passages indicate that winter dangers in the Rockies are not fully understood by the plaintiff or author. The preface states, "Interest [in Eddie's death] has been broad, but until now the specifics of the incident have been purely speculation, innuendo and personal opinion." Unfortunately, this book is much more of the same. Emphasized throughout, the 911 dispatcher didn't give to Search and Rescue (SAR) the full account of Eddie Fitzgerald's description of his surroundings: in a meadow with downed trees near a stream. "This description only applied to one area near Targhee and that would have been the South Leigh Canyon," states the introduction. The assertion that this description fits only one area is debatable. Regardless, the topographical map of the area shows several miles between Grand Targhee and the mouth of this canyon. In similar canyons, one would expect to find many meadows containing downed trees near a stream. The book repeatedly insists that rescuers "would have known immediately where [Eddie] was" (p 116) had they possessed his full description. This sounds unlikely. South Leigh Canyon presents acres and acres of terrain in which to search for a lost person. Around midnight, searchers found ski tracks heading down a steep chute into South Leigh Canyon. Keeping SAR volunteers alive holds a higher priority than finding a lost person. Avalanche danger persuaded searchers to suspend the search until daylight. Over and over again, like an advertising campaign, *Death in the Tetons* employs dialog to question why the search isn't continued from below along the valley floor. The preface states: "I have taken the liberty of creating additional dialogue and thoughts of the persons involved." While some parts of the narrative are substantiated with deposition material from the lawsuit, none of the many statements advocating a valley floor search are supported with any evidence. There are many good reasons to suspend a SAR operation during the night. *Death in the Tetons* doesn't mention any of them. An avalanche can be triggered from below a slope just as easily as from above. Being at the bottom of a slope of unstable snow is a more dangerous place to be. It is much easier to find a person by following their snow tracks than approaching far away from their last known position, as

a search from the entrance to South Leigh Canyon would have entailed. Continuing the search from the valley floor at night in risky avalanche conditions holds little merit. The book insinuates that the head of the Wyoming Search and Rescue purposely suspended the search until morning so that a helicopter could be used, thereby increasing support for a helicopter fund-raising campaign. The book claims that he *wouldn't* have admitted it even to himself, but he was hoping the lost skier would not be found that night and they would be able to use the helicopter because *every* rescue accomplished via helicopter would further validate not only the fund drive for the new facility, but also the leasing and flight time fees paid by the county (p 121) This accusation imputes a wretched motive without a shred of evidence. There is no bibliography, no index. There are some quotes from the depositions, unevenly interspersed. They must be a fragment of the whole if *[t]housands* of pages of depositions were taken as the preface claims. This book did not convince me of its accusations. If you're looking for an impartial, thoroughly researched, and well documented book about the tragedy of Eddie Cola Fitzgerald's death, this isn't it.

This is a true story that could save lives. Carefully researched, set at a ski resort in the Tetons, it details a tragic chain of events that begins with a faulty map and leads to needless, heartbreaking death. Eddie Fitzgerald is forty-six years old, a man used to skiing all over the world with his mail carrier buddies. He is lost, alone on a snowy January night, unable to see much, trying to reach 911, weak cell phone signals, cell phone dying. I could not put the book down. Tatarsky briefly interrupts the narration with an astonishing backstory. In a few understated pages, she sketches Eddie's journey to adulthood. Uncoordinated and rarely verbal, he is misdiagnosed as borderline moron at age seven. His parents keep trying until they find schools where their map-loving son with a near-photographic memory will thrive. As a teenager he faithfully commits 2.5 hours every day to his high school, becomes an ardent skier, and graduates second in his class. He goes on to earn his B.S. in chemistry at Southampton University, and begins his twenty-year career in the postal service. By the chapter's end, readers understand that here is an amazing human being. Tatarsky's account of the maelstrom of errors perpetrated by Grand Targhee Resort and the Wyoming and Idaho search and rescue agencies kept me glued to the book. It reads like the unraveling of a mystery. Readers will agonize for Eddie, wondering why his friend Mario didn't pick up, why search and rescue doesn't come. The unconscionable callousness and indifference of the professionals tasked with Eddie's safety is infuriating... an incorrect, misleading map, a missing boundary rope line, and incompetent, inexperienced 911 dispatcher, a search and rescue coordinator with his own

reasons for deferring further search until morning... The list does on. Fred, the ski group's leaders, Eddie's long time boss and friend, is so distraught about Mario's broken leg that he forgets the usual head count on the 4pm return bus to Jackson Hole. Unbelievable, no one realizes Eddie is missing until a call comes from Search and Rescue at 9:30PM."Death in the Tetons" was written to help prevent more tragedies, other deaths that ought never to have happened. Reading it is a powerful experience. Meeting and getting to know a little about Eddie Fitzgerald is time well spent. I strongly recommend it. In Eddie readers meet a man worth remembering, a truly outstanding man of quiet personal warmth who even as a young boy knew what it was to have courage and to persevere.Pauline Reynolds

This is a chilling (pardon the pun) account of human error run amok. It's hard to imagine how Eddie "Cola" Fitzgerald could have died, with so many skiing safety and security checks in place. The author is a skilled writer who tells a gripping true story, even though you know in advance how it ends. Even if you're not a skier, you'll be able to envision everything along the way.

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