

THE EDGE

Directed by Lee Tamahori
Produced by Art Linson
Distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox
Released in 1997

Stress and peril reveal the true nature of men. Much of civilization is civility, which enables men to tolerate each other. Strip that away, and the Truth is all that remains; character is revealed as are the fallacies and falsehoods of civilization, being constructed according to the ignorant aspiration and clouded vision of mankind. *The Edge* is billed as an edge-of-your-seat thrill ride, but it excels as a morality tale.

On location in Alaska for a photo shoot with model Mickey (Elle Macpherson), three men, Charles Morse (Anthony Hopkins), Stephen (Harold Perrineau), and Robert Green (Alec Baldwin) are stranded in the wilds when the sea plane they are traveling in crashes. With the plane submerging in a lake, Charles frees Stephen from his seatbelt while Robert surfaces. Charles is a rich man of learning, and takes it upon himself to provide leadership. But he proves unable to guide them south. In the process, a growing conflict between the two men over Charles's wife, the model, seems resolved when Robert saves Charles's life. Stephen accidentally cuts himself and dies when a bear, attracted by the smell of blood on a rag carelessly left out by Robert, storms into the camp. Constantly on the run from the bear, and having little hope of immediate rescue, the pair decide to kill the bear. After a titanic struggle, they succeed. Finally enjoying food and warm clothing, they continue on. Finding an abandoned cabin with plenty of supplies and a canoe, they are finally safe. Just as Charles realizes that Robert has been sleeping with his wife, Robert threatens to kill Charles, but Robert falls into an old animal trap, and his leg is impaled. Charles dresses the wound the best he can and sets out in the canoe to secure medical attention. Robert, humbled, asks Charles's forgiveness. They are sighted by a rescue helicopter, but Robert has expired. Returning to his wife, he silently presents her with the evidence of her infidelities—an inscribed watch she'd given Robert. He tells the assembled press that no one can prepare for his test in life, and we realize he is talking about his struggle to accept his wife's unfaithfulness, not his ordeal in the wilderness. Asked how his "friends" died, Charles quietly observes, "They died saving my life."

The story is solidly constructed. Characters are clearly delineated and the surprises are not cheap, but fair. For example, an audience watching this film for the first time probably know the characters will be stranded. They may even know that an airplane crash will bring this on. The plane flies during the opening credits, lands safely. It flies again twenty-some minutes later, lands safely. Then it takes off once more. Surely it will crash now. Earlier in the film the issue of flocking birds was raised. So, the seed was planted. As the four characters fly to a remote lake, the pilot warns about a storm coming up. Perhaps here the characters will bicker about whether they should turn back or not—probably Charles will urge a speedy return, and the others will say it is no big deal, and they'll hit the storm and crash. But, instead,

the seaplane plows into a huge flock of birds and crashes. *The Edge* is full of nimble story construction like this. Another example is Charles's constant reminder to the other men that most people lost in the wilderness die of shame. Robert had already made a stupid mistake by not leaving any word with the others back at the lodge about where they would be. But then Charles makes a mistake and loses the vitally important flares. The ultimate mistake is Stephen's. He cuts his leg and loses his life because of it. But, on a deeper level, the shame of which Charles speaks is best applied to his slow realization of self-deluding trust; truly, his wife is not the person he wanted to believe she was.

Charles talks in the beginning of the film about the futility of his vast knowledge—he couldn't put it to use. But he triumphed in his testing, applying his intelligence and learning while also proving to himself that his kindness and generosity were for real. He gained the appreciation of Stephen before he was killed, but never was accepted by Robert. Yes, he did save Charles's life, but it was just so he could rely on Charles's know-how to carry them through, as Robert admitted in a conversation of stupefying irony.

Once they were safe, he sought the kill, which Charles had suspected all along. After Robert is hurt, Charles continues to show him kindness, but he finally realizes that it was his charity—for example, his willingness to get up and make his wife a sandwich at her request—that blinded him to the fact that he was being used for his money. Before he was rescued he talked of not going back. His life was different now, for the better. No longer naive, he preserved Robert's life for as long as he could, making sure the rifle remained empty. His conscience would be clear and he did think of Robert as his friend, and was truly sad he could not board the helicopter with him. He probably won't reveal just what went on. The humility of the man prevents it, perhaps, but the mystery remains.

In a film of harrowing adventure and suspense, the character of Charles Morse shines bright; long-suffering, brave, and resourceful, he's a transcendent figure of grace.