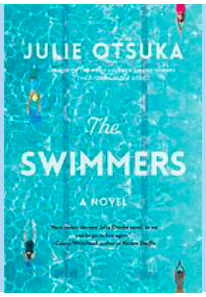
Discussion Guide



The Swimmers
Julie Otsuka

Alfred A Knopf
2022
192 pages
ISBN: 978-0593321331

Memory and Dementia

Summary

The swimmers are unknown to one another except through their private routines (slow lane, medium lane, fast lane) and the solace each takes in their morning or afternoon laps. But when a crack appears at the bottom of the pool, they are cast out into an unforgiving world without comfort or relief. One of these swimmers is Alice, who is slowly losing her memory.

Questions

1. The swimmers in the book are all bonded by their love of the pool. Which of the "characters" reasons for swimming did you identify with the most? Why?
2. Alice says, "Up there, I'm just another little old lady. But down here, at the pool, I'm myself." What do you think she meant by that?
3. Julie Otsuka's writing style includes long lists to describe the people who frequent the pool. Did you find the rhythm of these lists pulling you into the book? Or did you find it harder to digest because of them? What did you like (or dislike) about this writing device?
4. The swimmers' personality types are partially broken down by what speed of swim lane they use. "The fast-lane people are the alpha people of the pool." "The medium-lane people are visibility more relaxed than their fast-lane brethren." "The slow lane people…Be kind to them." When reading about the personality types, which approach did you most identify with? Why?
5. The mental benefits of the repetitiveness of swimming is highlighted multiple times in the book. One character writes their lectures in their head as they swim and another figures out a medical issue. Why do you think the author talks so much about the benefits of the pool? How does this contrast with Alice's later confusion?
6. The crack appearing in the pool is a massive deal to the swimmers. "At first it is barely visible, a faint dark line just south of the drain in the deep end of lane four." What do you think the crack showing up is supposed to symbolize in the larger context of the book? What is it foreshadowing?
7. Alice's daughter tells the story of Alice's life by comparing what she remembers on a given day versus what she forgets. How do you think the author treats the role of memory in the book? Had you thought about memory in this way before?

This discussion guide has been funded in whole or in part with Federal funds from the National Library of Medicine (NLM), National Institutes of Health (NIH). The content is attributed to justleafing.com and reformatted by the NNLM Reading Club for educational use and is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). June 2024

NNLM Network of the National Library of Medicine