Discussion Guide




*Why We Swim*
Bonnie Tsui

Algonquin Books
2020
288 pages
ISBN: 978-1643751375

Water

## Summary

*Why We Swim* is propelled by stories of Olympic champions, a Baghdad swim club that meets in Saddam Hussein's palace pool, modern-day Japanese samurai swimmers, and even an Icelandic fisherman who improbably survives a wintry six-hour swim after a shipwreck. *New York Times* contributor Bonnie Tsui, a swimmer herself, dives into the deep, from the San Francisco Bay to the South China Sea, investigating what it is about water that seduces us, despite its dangers, and why we come back to it again and again.

## Questions

1. *Why We Swim* is a blend of memoir, journalism, history, and science. Which of these elements resonated most with you? Do you think they all work together successfully?
2. This book is about swimming, but it is also about something more elemental: our relationship with water, and how we don't know how to swim from birth—we humans must teach ourselves how to survive in it. Have you ever had to swim for survival, or feared for your life in water?
3. Once we learn to swim for survival, swimming can be about so much more: well-being, community, competition, flow. What is your own relationship with swimming? Did this book change your thinking about it?
4. Unlike land-based activities, swimming takes us quite literally out of our element and puts us in a new one. Long-distance swimmers speak of "sea-dreaming." What are the ways that being in a buoyant environment can free your mind? Are there other examples in which a change in environment creates a fresh perspective?
5. Tsui notes that swimming encourages a return to play—diving, cannonballing, pretending to be a mer-creature—that we often lose sight of as adults. Do you see this in yourself, or in the children you know, when you are in water? Why do you think that happens?
6. Jay Taylor spent two years teaching swim lessons in a combat zone in Baghdad. For him, swimming helped create community in a dangerous place. Do you have a community at a pool, beach, or lake that you frequent? Has it helped you get through any particularly difficult times?

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8. Kim Chambers was motivated to swim as an adult, as therapy to recover from a traumatic injury. From a quest for well-being came community and competition and flow. Have you ever been prescribed swimming to recover from an injury? Did it work?

9. *Why We Swim* investigates several little-known stories about swimming, including samurai swimming—the Japanese swimming martial art—and the sea nomads of Southeast Asia. What were your favorite new discoveries about swimming and the cultural practices around it?

10. Franz Kafka wrote, “The truth is always an abyss. One must—as in a swimming pool—dare to dive from the quivering springboard of trivial everyday experience and sink into the depths, in order later to rise again—laughing and fighting for breath—to the now doubly illuminated surface of things.” Why do you think so many writers are also swimmers?

11. Share a favorite line or passage from the book. Why does it stand out, and what is your take away from it?

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