

ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

The lone swimmer, turning over now to switch to a perfectly executed back crawl, wasn't Oxford or Cambridge, wasn't a man. It was a woman, a girl. It was Catherine. Of course it was Catherine.

It's 1925 and fifteen-year-old Catherine Quick longs to feel once more the warm waters of her home, to strike out into the ocean off the Torres Strait Islands and swim, as she's done since she was a tiny child. But with her recent move to London where she lives with her aunt Louisa, Catherine feels that everything she values has been stripped away.

Louisa, a busy, confident London surgeon who fought boldly for equality for women, holds definite views on the behaviour of her young niece. She wants Catherine to pursue an education, just as she did, to ensure her future freedom. Since Catherine arrived, however, Louisa's every step seems to be wrong and she is finding it harder and harder to block painful memories from her past.

It takes the influence of enigmatic American banker Manfred Lear Black to convince Louisa to come to New York where Catherine can test her mettle against the first women in the world to swim the English Channel. And where, unexpectedly, Louisa can finally listen to what her own heart tells her.

Like Mary-Rose MacColl's bestselling novel, *In Falling Snow*, *Swimming Home* tells a story of ordinary women who became extraordinary.

About the author

Swimming Home is Mary-Rose MacColl's fifth novel. Her first novel, *No Safe Place*, was runner-up in the 1995 Australian Vogel literary award and her first non-fiction book, *The Birth Wars*, was a finalist in the 2009 Walkley Awards. Her international bestseller, *In Falling Snow*, was published to great acclaim in 2012. She lives in Brisbane, Australia with her husband and son and is an ordinary swimmer.

Reviews

"An excellent book on so many levels, the story is captivating, and the social history of athletic women and how they were viewed at the times was very interesting." - *Sydney Morning Herald*

"Exploring the themes of family, belonging, regret, and redemption, *Swimming Home* is a gracious and engaging novel. Set in an interesting period, with complex characters and a thoughtful story... *Swimming Home* is a finely written, poignant and pensive, but ultimately uplifting novel." - *Book'd Out*

"Like Mary-Rose MacColl's bestselling novel, *In Falling Snow*, *Swimming Home* tells a story of ordinary women who became extraordinary." - *Mildura Midweek*

“Mary-Rose MacColl’s novel *In Falling Snow* was one of my favourite books of 2012: ‘... a bittersweet, touching novel that ends with an uplifting element of hope.’ The same words aptly summarise her latest novel, *Swimming Home*.” - *The Blurb Magazine*

“... a beautifully written story of a girl who just wants the freedom to go home, to be with the people she loves and do what she loves.” - *all the books i can read*

“Brisbane author Mary-Rose MacColl may be, in her own words, an ordinary swimmer, but her recent novel *Swimming Home* shows a deep understanding of the water and all its dangers.” - *LOVE that BOOK*

“*Swimming Home* brings us a story, which nearly changes history while reminding us of the value of having a place we really feel at home. Following Catherine and Louisa on this adventure is bound to make you want to dive right in. - Kate Dawes, *Salty Popcorn*

For discussion

- 📖 In *Swimming Home*, the author incorporates historical fact into her fiction, just as she did so successfully in *In Falling Snow*. Do you enjoy this technique? Does it deepen the reading experience? What other novels have you read recently which also combine fact and fiction?
- 📖 Two of the themes of the novel concern (a) the birth of women’s competitive swimming and (b) opportunities for equality for women through education and employment. Are these themes connected and what others did you identify in this novel?
- 📖 Dr Louisa Quick is an intelligent and accomplished surgeon professionally yet struggles to personally connect with others, including her niece, Catherine. Why? Discuss.
- 📖 Louisa is a strong advocate for the rights of women to choose their own paths yet she has a great deal of trouble accepting Catherine’s choices. Do you think Louisa was right to make decisions for Catherine?
- 📖 Kim Wilkins wrote: ‘*Swimming Home* is a novel of beautiful sensory delights. We feel full-colour Queensland humidity and grey London cold, we feel wet and dry, we smell coconut and chlorine.’ How different would this novel be without the existing sensory detail?
- 📖 The scenes set on Catherine’s home in the Torres Strait islands explore the treatment of the Torres Strait Islander people by the non-Indigenous government policies and enforced social strata. Do you think politics has a part to play in the writing of fiction?

Suggested further reading

In Falling Snow, Mary-Rose MacColl

The Secret Keeper, Kate Morton

The Railwayman's Wife, Ashley Hay

Half the World in Winter, Maggie Joel

The Iron Necklace, Giles Waterfield