



Learning to Swim: And Other Stories

Graham Swift

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The men and women in these spare, Kafkaesque stories are engaged in struggles that are no less brutal because they are fought by proxy. In Graham Swift's taut prose, these quiet combative relationships--between a mismatched couple; an aging doctor and his hypochondriacal patient; a teenage refugee swept up in the conflict between an oppressively sentimental father and his rebellious son--become a microcosm for all human cruelty and need.

"Swift proves throughout this ambitious collection that he is a master of his language and the construction of provocative situations."--*Houston Chronicle*

Learning to Swim: And Other Stories Details

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Author : Graham Swift

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Sharon says

Beautifully written stories of human relationships. Disturbing stories in some sense and yet familiar. Readers who only like satisfying endings will not like these, however, readers who enjoy excellent writing, keen observations, and reality (well almost for the last story) may enjoy this unusual collection. The author's masterful writing floats readers along to thoughtful endings.

I'd recommend this literary collection to readers who enjoy same.

Gemma Williams says

A beautiful collection of short stories with a melancholy feel, mainly centering around themes of loss. Apparently simple events are invested with depth and yearning. I loved the story about the zookeeper and the antelope, and the title story brings a great sense of the hidden drama in the everyday.

Dave says

Contemporary family tensions written in a semi-classical way. Personal highlights were the long short-story 'The Watch' based on a life-preserving timepiece passed down the generations of father to son and 'The Tunnel' featuring runaway lovers encamped in a South London flat.

Robert Beveridge says

Graham Swift, Learning to Swim and Other Stories (Washington Square Press, 1982)

Graham Swift is something of a one-trick pony, actually, but the one trick he does he does exceptinoally well. This is less obvious when you're reading the man's wonderful novels-- Waterland, for instance, which someone will hopefully soon canonize as one of the classics of twentieth-century literature-- but when you get digging into a story collection, you realize that Swift, or a close family member, was in the throes of the nasty ending of a relationship while he was writing these stories. His main characters, at least those of an age to be so, are almost alwast divorced men, and the tale of the leaving wife is either the main thread of the story or part of the circumstance leading up to the main part of the story. Swift just takes that tale and paints it with different hues.

Any fan of Mondrian or his brethren will hasten to comment here that different hues are usually enough to make the same thing interesting anew. Indeed, and such is the case with Swift's stories. Recognizing the similarity between the characters doesn't make them any less interesting, and it certainly doesn't lessen the top-notch quality of Swift's writing, which has

yet to flag in any book of his I've read even for an instant. The man is truly gifted.

It's likely the publication date will give some readers pause. Yes, it's a collection of short stories published during the nineteen eighties. And yes, that should set off justifiable alarm bells in the reader who's been turned off to eighties lit. But what characterizes the good eighties lit (Vanderhaeghe, Swift, McInerney on his good days) and separates it from the bad eighties lit (Ellis, McInerney on his bad days) is emotion. Rest assured that Swift has emotion in spades. While his stories cover much of the same territory as those of his contemporaries, Swift is not the detached observer who narrated most eighties fiction; he is down in the muck of emotion, and has no qualms about dragging the reader in with him.

Another excellent book from Graham Swift. ****

Kate says

Graham Swift has a collection of short stories that deal with relationships and how the brush up against the individual narratives of needs, neurosis, and often the passive aggressive games played by those who are co-dependent to the dysfunction they find themselves surrounded by.

I never read a collection of short stories through, but in spurts, one or two stories at a time so that they can be absorbed and thought over. I recognized both myself and others in these characters that are so well constructed in each story. Swift is an excellent writer and seems to have a deep understanding of the unconscious things from our pasts and the emotions that move our decisions even when our rational mind knows we are doing the wrong thing for the wrong reasons. Highly recommend.

Philip says

Learning To Swim is a set of short stories by Graham Swift. Their focus is fundamentally and repeatedly on human relationships, especially those within the nuclear family. And though it would be wrong to suggest that Learning To Swim and the other stories delve deeply into the human psyche, it would also be wrong to dismiss them as light touches on the fabric of life.

In the title story, for instance, we have a family on holiday. The father is a proud achiever, very much the centre of attention, usually by his own demand. The mother is apparently a self-confident poser, beautiful and both conscious and proud of the fact. We feel there is potential for conflict here if, at any point, life does not work out exactly as these participants demand it should.

And then there's a child. Perhaps the child is the image of both parents, perhaps neither. The parents might compete over the youngster, but the parents might also be trying to impose themselves on the growing personality. And so the child, itself, becomes a site of conflict, a conflict that is not voiced in any way other than a competition over its very identity. How might this appear from the child's point of view? It may be the case that these particular parents might not seek to canvas this position, since it might just conflict with their presumptions. But then the child might just have a mind of its own, and indeed its own life to live.

It is a simple idea and a small element of what surely would be a larger picture, but, even with its limited objectives, the story really does come to life. In a short space we come to know these people intimately. If we were to meet them, we might already think we can predict how they might behave, or even what they

might say, since Graham Swift's characterisation is so carefully drawn.

The author's observations on and descriptions of relationships are consistently perceptive throughout. The pace may not often change appreciably, and the range of scenarios presented might not be great. But travel and new experience feature strongly in these texts and the characters often find themselves in places where they feel out of place, out of context and in need of change. Thus their reactions and decisions often surprise.

In *The Watch* the scenario shifts somewhat, as we are introduced to a family of watchmakers who, via their own creation, can not only measure time but also control it. This ability is passed from father to son with remarkable results. It seems that any commodity that we can access in abundance is automatically devalued. The science fiction element in *The Clock* is thus only a minor part of what remains a study of human relationships and aspirations.

Learning To Swim is a rewarding set of stories. In short spaces of time we get to know these people who become truly three-dimensional as well as emotionally complex individuals. Though the stories are not related, their intended similarity makes them better read as a group from beginning to end.

Carmen says

Swift is a gifted writer.

Jerome K says

I've never read any of Graham Swift's novels. But I loved this collection of short stories he wrote from way back. Imaginative and moving.

Ryan Williams says

I still have my copy of this book, now over 20 years old. Despite the dud that opens the collection ('Seraglio') Swift has a lot in his arsenal, all the more powerful for being so restrained, unobtrusive.

It puzzles me that 'Hotel' and 'The Tunnel' weren't printed in magazines, but 'funny foreigner' pieces like 'Gabor' and 'The Son' were. 'Cliffedge' seems a dry run for Swift's great novel *Waterland* but more than holds its own. The title story is the most optimistic and superbly executed: the child's sudden bid for freedom mirrored in the text by the switch to free indirect speech.

J. Watson (aka umberto) says

3.5 stars

Bought in 1997 at an ELT seminar in Bangkok, this 11-story book has not really interested me at first sight and it remained unfinished after nearly two decades since I have never read him before. I could go as far as

Story 1 Seraglio and reach Story 2 The Tunnel (16 pages) and leave it at that without any inspiring motive. However, last Monday I decided to try reading the remaining stories, hoping to complete this task as soon as I could.

I found reading "Learning to Swim" convincingly interesting due to his narrative style focusing on looking at psychological conflict between a wife and a husband, that is, Mrs and Mr Singleton who was teaching their son Paul to swim. Why? One of the reasons is that "Mrs Singleton had three times thought of leaving her husband." (p. 168) The more we read on each time, the more we are amused due to her nagging viewpoints. For example, it happened before they got married when they had a holiday in Greece and they had different preferences; so she thought she should not marry him.

Alan says

Swift is a good story writer, I wish he'd write more now. I read a few of these in London Magazine and elsewhere in the 80s, and was impressed: themes of loss and childhood well handled.

Torimac says

The title story was my favorite of the collection. I read these many years ago (somewhere near the end of the 1980s). I clearly remember the melancholy and the feeling that this was the reflections of someone trying not to be bitter about women while sorting out a lot of loss. I guess I give the author credit for trying not to be bitter, but it wasn't a fun read.

Katharina says

Die Geschichten packen einen nicht wirklich, aber die Feinheiten und Abgründe der Charaktere sind zum Teil wunderbar herausgearbeitet
