

## WHAT I TALK ABOUT WHEN I TALK ABOUT SWIMMING

### Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald told his daughter:

*“All good writing is swimming under water and holding your breath.”*

I am a writer and a swimmer. I am compelled to write, to record the journeys I take through the world of my imagination. I also love to swim. In the water, free from the burden of gravity, I move with a grace that eludes me on land. The experience can be soothing, exciting, frightening, satisfying. A swim may be a planned, measured activity, or a surprising, unexpected plunge into the unknown. The swimmer needs to practice, to perfect strokes and breathing techniques in order to succeed, to improve, and ultimately to survive.

Thus it also is with writing. The writer must learn the rules of grammar and exercise her imagination. With practice and diligence, the writer may improve. She will begin to articulate what develops within her imagination and to share her vision with the reader. Perfecting one’s techniques in fiction may not literally be the matter of life or death that it is for the swimmer, but failure to produce works of a publishable standard will result the in the demise of one’s writing career.

Here I will examine swimming and writing in the context of my own and other’s writing and also how we use the language of swimming and water to explain our land-dwelling lives.

This is not an original idea. Haruki Murakami wrote about his life in terms of his obsession with running. He said:

*“One thing I noticed was that writing honestly about running and writing honestly about myself are nearly the same thing. So I suppose it’s all right (sic) to read this as a kind of memoir centred on the act of running.”<sup>1</sup>*

### **Clear Water**

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu asked:

*“Do you have the patience to wait until the mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself?”*

Sometimes the water can be clear as glass, revealing treasures beyond your wildest dreams. The sunlight illuminates the ethereal dance of fishes and you follow them, discovering new delights in this magical world. In the Andaman Sea saw clams in a rainbow of colours opening and closing like the mouths of gossips in the gentle tide. Baby turtles wriggled through the water and darting silver fish produced a sparkling light show in the sunlight. A boy entered the water in a graceful dive and rose from the bottom holding a sea cucumber, a creature so startlingly in its ugliness that I laughed out loud with the sheer joy of the moment without even raising my head from the water.

The swimmer explores from the surface, and then plunges deeper, encountering ever more wondrous sights. Entranced, she will keep coming back, seeking the clear water, time and again. Without reliable charts and navigation, she may only find it once or twice in a lifetime. The more diligent find it and plumb its depths and secrets every time they enter the water.

The writer explores the clear ocean of her mind, watching stories roll like waves before her eyes. The act of capturing the stories in words enables her to return time and again, to explore and expand, to modify and improve. The writer’s

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<sup>1</sup> Murakami, Haruki. Translated by Philip Gabriel. 2009. *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. London: Vintage.

charts are the plots and plans, the synopses and research that guide her ever deeper to the heart of the story – the clear water.

At other times the water may be murky and dark, rendering the swimmer blind to what is around her so that she flounders on hidden rocks and shipwrecks, never knowing what she will find, or what will find her.

This dark water can be the equivalent of writer's block – a dark place where stories stall, unable to go on until the water clears and the writer is able to see the way forward. Sometimes clarity never comes and the story remains murky and unfinished, abandoned in the darkness.

Dawn French and John Cheever use dark water references to mark sinister turns in their characters' lives:

*“In a careless trice, Silvia betrays everyone else but Cat. She makes the most foolish decision of her lifetime, and consequently, she loses her family. In that tipping second, the splitting starts, because that’s when Silvia jumps into a deep murky pool where she knows her children can NEVER be permitted to swim.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“He was cold and he was tired and the naked Hallorans and their dark water had depressed him.”<sup>3</sup>*

### **Taking the Plunge**

In his short story *Forever Overhead*, David Foster Wallace uses the symbolism of a high diving board to chart a boy's leap from childhood into puberty.<sup>4</sup> Wallace illustrates this by the comparison between the smell of semen and the chemically-treated pool water “*a bleached sweet salt, a flower with chemical petals*” and the boy's climb up the ladder to the high board, moving automatically until he reaches the top: “*The board is long. From where you stand it seems to stretch off into*

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<sup>2</sup> French, Dawn. 2013. *Oh Dear Silvia*. London: Penguin. Kindle edition.

<sup>3</sup> Cheever, John. 2010. *The Swimmer*, from *Collected Stories*. London: Vintage. Kindle edition.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace, David Foster. 1999. *Forever Overhead* from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. London: Hachette Digital. Kindle edition.

*nothing. It's going to send you someplace which its own length keeps you from seeing, which seems wrong to submit to without even thinking."*

The boy has seen others take the plunge from his vantage point below, and wants to be like them. But at the top he hesitates, unable to see beyond the end of the board. As a young swimmer I longed to launch myself from the high board but lacked the courage to even climb the ladder. Instead, I practiced hard and took a podium place in a diving competition beating older, more courageous children with a perfectly executed dive from the pool's edge.

As a writer I have been equally cautious, learning my craft, practising, polishing. I have watched with awe (and perhaps a little envy) as fellow writers have grasped the rungs, climbed to the high board, and launched themselves into the world of literature with grace and determination. The boy in Wallace's story has no choice but to go forward because of the queue of people behind him. In order to become a published writer, one must also go forward. Ever cautious, I dive in from the water's edge.

Attempts to recreate this childhood diving triumph in writing terms lead to a prize-winning piece and publication of it in an anthology in 2012<sup>5</sup>. But still this writer and swimmer hesitates, yearning to climb the ladder, but afraid to take the plunge into the unseen world below.

### **Dipping a Toe in the Water**

*"You can't cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water."* Rabindranath Tagore.

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<sup>5</sup> Knight, Alison. 2012. A Flawed Reflection. In *Body Gossip*. Compilers - Rogers, Ruth and Devon, Natasha London: Rickshaw Publishing. Pp 174-176.

In the New York Times Magazine on 5 July 1987, Rae Lawrence said:  
*“Getting a book published without a literary agent is like swimming dangerous waters without a shark repellent”*. Finding an agent willing to sign a new writer is equally difficult.

Writers’ conferences and showcases provide opportunities to dip one’s toe in the water. Agents and publishers attend, circling, looking for opportunities for their writers, keeping other predators at bay, fighting over contracts and rights. Few are looking to take on new authors. For a new writer to find an agent, is equivalent to a swimmer diving into shark-infested waters and returning to shore unscathed, having found treasure in the depths.

A publisher visiting the Romantic Novelists’ Association conference read the first chapter and synopsis of my novel and requested a completed manuscript. But within a few weeks he ceased trading.

Just as the swimmer needs to get back in the water in order to overcome fear, so too the writer must persist. A manuscript was submitted to a literary agent at an Oxford Brookes showcase. The response was similar to that the swimmer received from an early teacher – to **speed up** the pace and aim for **more depth**. This advice formed the basis of the revised draft.

At a writers’ development day organised by the Arts Council, attendees submitted the first page of a story. Mine was selected in the top three by agent Clare Wallace<sup>6</sup>, author and Royal Literary Fellow Sarah Duncan, and the other attendees. This gave me sufficient confidence to again dip one’s toe into the water and resubmit to the same literary agent. A response came within hours saying that this version was much improved but was lacking in back story for the main character Rosie. For

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<sup>6</sup> Clare Wallace works at Darley Anderson and had read my first submission.

a moment, I floundered – out of my depth. Much of the backstory included in the first draft had been removed on their previous advice to improve on pace.

The dilemma now facing this writer is whether to continue to aim to please an agency which has given contrary advice, albeit in an encouraging way, or to seek to interest a different agent or publisher in this story. It is likely that others will have conflicting points of view. The only decision that is clear is that the writer must go on, improving her story and polishing her manuscript, and ultimately send it out again into the shark-infested waters of the publishing world. With each encounter the writer must be prepared to defend her story but also to adapt it in order to avoid being ripped to shreds by the sharks. The backstory will be incorporated into the next draft of the opening chapters, and the text submitted with this essay reflects those changes.

Whatever the outcome, the writer must be satisfied that she has done all she can to tell the best story. If she refuses to dip a toe into the water, if she avoids rather than confronts her fear of the shark-infested waters, she ceases to be a writer.

### **Life at the Shallow End**

Helen Bailey uses phrases about swimming as titles for her Crazy World of Electra Brown Series of books for teenagers,<sup>7</sup> taking the character Electra Brown through the trials of growing up. All of these phrases and more surround us in our non-swimming life and can be used to describe scenarios and situations we encounter in our writing lives.

The shallow end of a pool is where we enter a new environment, where we learn to swim. We must accept that we will receive some knocks and splashes as

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<sup>7</sup> Bailey, Helen. 2008-2010. The Crazy World of Electra Brown books 1-4: *Life at the Shallow End; Out of My Depth; Swimming Against the Tide; Taking the Plunge*. London: Hodder Children's Books.

others pass by. It is safe to make mistakes here. The shallow end is also the playful end, where children learn to be truly independent. Decades later, I still remember the thrill of realising I was swimming without the aid of a parent's supporting hand or water wings.

Learning to swim is a life skill enabling us to survive. Psalm 69 describes King David swimming and both Jewish and Islamic teachings require fathers to teach their children to swim. They recognised the practical benefits and the metaphorical value of acquiring an independence of spirit through learning to swim.

Charles Sprawson<sup>8</sup> saw it as an isolating pastime:

*“Though very young, I began to form a vague conception of the swimmer as someone rather remote and divorced from everyday life, devoted to a mode of exercise where most of the body remains submerged and self-absorbed. It seemed to me that it appealed to the introverted and eccentric, individualists involved in a mental world of their own.”*

He also said:

*“Much of a swimmer's training takes place inside the head, immersed as he is in a continuous dream of a world under water. So intense and concentrated are his conditions that he becomes prey to delusions and neuroses beyond the experience of other athletes.”*

By substituting 'writer' for 'swimmer'; 'of the imagination' for 'under water'; and 'writers' for 'athletes', we see the comparison between swimming and writing come ever closer.

Society requires us to learn the basic skills of reading and writing. Relatively few go on to use their writing skills creatively beyond the classroom. Writing as a life skill and writing creatively come from the same source, the latter leading us from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

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<sup>8</sup> Sprawson, Charles. 1992. *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero*. London: Random House. Kindle edition.

The shallow end in the context of writing is where the author learns her craft, creating characters, settings and plots. At first, the water appears dangerous, the writer is clumsy, unsure. The writing she produces in the shallow end may show promise, but she must keep moving and improving or inactivity will make her cold, her writing unrealistic. But by paying attention to how others have mastered the shallow end, she gains skill and confidence.

### **A Fish Out of Water**

Raymond Obstfeld described “*fish out of water*” scenarios as where a character leaves a familiar, comfortable place and arrives somewhere that is completely different. He says:

*“It’s highly popular because it allows for instant conflict in the clash of cultures, which, let’s face it, is just plain fun. However, this contract can be used to create a richer thematic layer as well.”<sup>9</sup>*

In my novel, Rosie slips back seventy years into the past, where she flounders like a fish out of water. Throughout the story she encounters situations that highlight the cultural differences between the past and present-day – such as language, money, and the realities of war. Rosie learns a lot about life as she learns to adapt.

For the writer this can be as exciting, amusing, and frightening as it is for her characters. For the swimmer, this phrase is contrary to the norm – water is after all not the usual environment for humans. Just as a fish needs water in order to breathe, so the swimmer needs to take in air in order to survive. The swimmer is the alien in the water.

### **Out of My Depth**

Delmore Schwartz said:

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<sup>9</sup> Obstfeld, Raymond. 2000. *Novelist’s Essential Guide to Crafting Scenes*. Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books. P 57.



*“Being an author is like treading water in the middle of the ocean; you can never stop, you can never stop treading water”.*<sup>10</sup>

Going out of our depth is potentially hazardous. A swimmer needs to perfect the art of treading water or risks death by drowning. Once learned, treading water enables the swimmer to rest in deep water, to look around and plan her next move.

A writer who does not take the time to research is in danger of producing something that her readers don't engage with because it is not believable. The story cannot fully develop until the writer takes the time to tread water, to learn about her characters' lives and motivations, to consider how these might develop, and to study how other writers have dealt with similar themes and situations.

I undertook research in order to provide an authentic teenaged voice for Rosie – both in terms of her language and emotional development through the story - and to create a realistic setting in wartime London. There was also the issue of time-travel to consider, and much to learn in respect of the art of creative writing<sup>11</sup>.

Even though Rosie is out of her depth, it is important that the writer is equipped to tell the story and keep Rosie afloat. Reading to inform the writing is like watching others swim. Sometimes you copy their techniques, sometimes you adapt what you have learned to suit your own vision of what your story should be.

### **Conclusion**

Mavis Gallant wrote: *“I still do not know what impels anyone sound of mind to leave dry land and spend a lifetime describing people who do not exist.”*<sup>12</sup>

Few authors can say for certain why they are compelled to write, yet we continue to do so. It is perhaps easier to explain why some of us love to swim – to

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/writing> (accessed 9 August 2013)

<sup>11</sup> See Bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> Gallant, Mavis. 1996. Preface, *Selected Stories*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

experience the challenge of surviving in an alien environment, the freedom from the restrictions of life on land, the satisfaction felt from exercising one's body and mind.

There are countless examples of how writers have used swimming as a metaphor for life. John Cheever's classic tale *The Swimmer*<sup>13</sup> takes his character on a journey across the landscape, from pool to pool, from his comfortable life to ruin. Roger Deakin was inspired by Cheever in his swimming-themed memoir *Waterlog*.<sup>14</sup> Mark Haddon describes his fear of water in his memoir *Swimming and Flying* and how he overcame it through swimming.<sup>15</sup> Lynn Sherr's *Swim: Why We Love the Water* provides a lyrical view of life through swimming:

*"Breaking the surface of anything is both thrilling and frightening – a body of water all the more so, as the ripples set off by our fingertips merely hint at the mystery of what lies below. And then it's as if you were never there. Water mends itself, sealing over the slightest intrusion so someone else – or you – can try again."*<sup>16</sup>

Stevie Smith's famous lines effectively describe how many of us feel at some point in our lives:

*"I was much further out than you thought,  
And not waving but drowning."*

Norma Fox Mazer, who wrote many stories for young adults and children said:

*"I want my reader to fall into what I've written like falling into water, to go down and down and down, to enter that underwater universe, to be transformed, to breathe like a sea creature, effortlessly slipping and sliding and swimming, a fish among fish."*

That is what this writer and swimmer also strives for – to produce works that will take her readers into a new world where they experience the joy, the excitement and sometimes the fear that I encounter when I write and when I swim.

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<sup>13</sup> Cheever, John. 2010. *The Swimmer*, from *Collected Stories*. London: Vintage. Kindle edition.

<sup>14</sup> Deakin, Roger. 2000. *Waterlog*. London: Vintage. Kindle edition.

<sup>15</sup> Haddon, Mark. 2013. *Swimming and Flying*. Self-published on Kindle.

<sup>16</sup> Sherr, Lynn. 2012. *Swim: Why We Love the Water*. New York: Perseus Books.

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