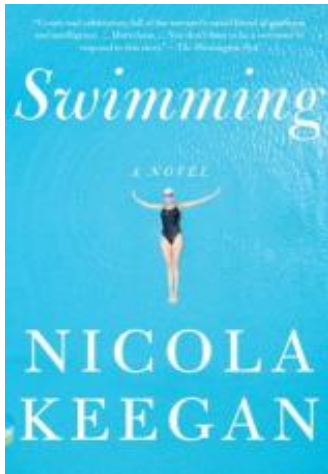


Swimming

by Nicola Keegan



About the Book

A spectacular debut about the rise of an Olympic champion --- a novel about competition, obsession, the hunger for victory, and a young girl with an unsinkable spirit struggling to stay afloat in the only way she can.

When we first meet Pip, the extraordinary heroine of Nicola Keegan's first novel, she is landlocked in a small town in the center of Kansas, literally swimming for her life. Pip is tall and flat and smart and funny and supernaturally buoyant. On land, she has her share of troubles: an agoraphobic mother, a lost father, a drug-addled sister, and a Catholic education dominated by a group of high-energy nuns. But in the water, Pip is unstoppable. In the water, her suffering and rage are transmuted into grace and speed and beauty.

Swimming is the story of Pip's journey from a small Midwestern swim team to her first state meet, her brutal professional training, and the final, record-breaking swims that lead to her dizzying ascent to the Olympic podium in Barcelona. It's the story of a girl who discovers, in the loneliness of adolescence, in the family tragedies that threaten to engulf her, the resilience of the human spirit and the spectacular power of her own body.

A ferociously original novel, sparkling with wit and blazing with emotion, from a gifted new novelist.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the title. What does this one word signify?
2. Keegan writes the first chapter from the point of view of Philomena as an infant. What effect does this have on you, the reader?

3. As an infant, Pip believes her sister Bron "means me harm" (page 4). Discuss the relationship between the two sisters.
4. Discuss the significance of names and nicknames in the novel. Why does Pip call her father by his first name? Why does she call Alex "The Russian"? What about Pip's own unwanted nickname?
5. Pip is often hungry. What is she hungry for?
6. Compare Leonard's flying to Pip's swimming. Do they serve similar purposes?
7. When Leonard says to Pip, "I need you to make things as easy as you can for Bron and your mother" (page 36), what is he really asking of her?
8. Pip often talks about herself as being a "hidden girl." What does she mean by this?
9. Discuss the family's reaction to Bron's death. Do any of them deal with it well?
10. Is Leonard's death a suicide? Why do you feel that way?
11. Pip tells small lies --- and some bigger ones --- throughout the novel. Why does she do this?
12. What role does religion play in the novel?
13. Reread the paragraph at the top of page 86, about how Pip, her surviving sisters, and their mother deal with drama. Do you agree with Pip's take on it?
14. Who are Pip's real parental figures? What role does June play?
15. Why does Manny's death precipitate Pip's breakdown?
16. Although many bad things happen, the novel is often laugh-out-loud funny. How does the author use humor to explore deep emotion?
17. On page 104, Pip says of her mother, "She tells us that we need her to be the way she is so we can become the way we need to be." Does this prove to be true?
18. What purpose do the ghosts of Leonard and Bron serve?
19. Roxanne is a drug addict. Pip is addicted to sugar. What other addictions appear in this story? How do they affect the characters?
20. Why does Pip choose swimming over Alex?
21. Is Pip lonely? When is she happiest? Why?
22. Several characters accuse Pip of self-absorption. Who else is self-absorbed? Does Pip need to be, in order to become

a champion?

23. Discuss the chapter with Tara the osteopath, beginning on page 244. What exactly happens here?

24. Why does Pip go to Paris? What does she learn there?

25. What is the significance of the lifeguard scene on pages 293-295?

26. Discuss the novel's final pages. Which do you think it is: the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning?

Author Bio

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