

# Swimming in the Moon

by Pamela Schoenewaldt

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## About the Book

Italy, 1905. Fourteen-year-old Lucia and her young mother, Teresa, are servants in a magnificent villa on the Bay of Naples, where Teresa soothes their unhappy mistress with song. But volatile tempers force them to flee, exchanging their warm, gilded cage for the cold winds off Lake Erie and Cleveland's restless immigrant quarters.

With a voice as soaring and varied as her moods, Teresa transforms herself into the Naples Nightingale on the vaudeville circuit. Clever and hardworking, Lucia blossoms in school until her mother's demons return, fracturing Lucia's dreams.

Yet Lucia is not alone in her struggle for a better life. All around her, friends and neighbors, new Americans, are demanding decent wages and working conditions. Lucia joins their battle, confronting risks and opportunities that will transform her and her world in ways she never imagined.

## Discussion Guide

1. Lucia and Teresa's life in Naples had its advantages and challenges. In what ways would Lucia's life have been different if she and Teresa weren't forced to leave?
2. When they leave Italy, Lucia and Teresa are told: "You can be who you want to be in America." True?
3. How does the immigrant experience today compare with that described in *SWIMMING IN THE MOON*? Are there other ways in which we are "immigrants" besides the literal moving to a new country?

4. Lucia has a deep emotional connection with Irena, even though they do not share language fluency. What does this say about Lucia and, more generally, about the way that people from different cultures can connect?
5. Lucia earns money by "scribing," writing letters for fellow immigrants. In the process, she often passes on what are essentially lies about their lives. Why? Lucia also lies to the countess in her letters. Why?
6. What sets Lucia apart from the other immigrants in her neighborhood? What do you think Lula means when she says that Lucia "wants so much"? Have you ever felt that you wanted more than you were supposed to want?
7. Teresa's absence while she is on the vaudeville circuit and her emotional and mental problems deprive Lucia of a sustaining maternal figure and ultimately make Lucia her mother's caretaker. How does Lucia compensate for this loss?
8. In America, Lucia's thoughts often return to her life in Naples. What various functions do you think these memories fulfill as she comes to adulthood?
9. How does Teresa's beautiful voice both divide her from and bind her to Lucia? What does the voice do?and not do?for Teresa? How does Lucia develop her own voice?
10. What challenges do workers in the novel face? How do they compare with those facing workers today?
11. What factors drive Lucia to take up the issue of workers' rights so passionately and endure so many sacrifices for the strike, even when the worker community is often bitterly divided?
12. Lucia learns that only eight in one hundred Americans in her time have high school diplomas. Far fewer, of course, went to college. Graduation has a variety of meanings for Lucia. Can you discuss some of them? Yet, toward the end of the novel, formal education becomes less crucial. Why?
13. What draws Lucia and Henryk together? What pulls them apart? Compare their evolving relationship with that of other couples in the novel: Elisabetta and Paolo, the Reillys, Yolanda and Charlie, Giovanna and Frank.
14. Lucia vividly recalls a line from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The mind is its own place and in itself, can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven." How does this line relate to Lucia and Teresa's circumstances?and to all of our lives?
15. While the past century has brought profound changes in the treatment of mental illness, in what way is Teresa and Lucia's experience timeless?
16. What is the significance of the title, *SWIMMING IN THE MOON*? What image does it conjure for you?
17. Why did you or your group choose to read *SWIMMING IN THE MOON*? What did you take away from reading the novel?

## Author Bio

Pamela Schoenewaldt is the *USA Today* bestselling author of *WHEN WE WERE STRANGERS* and *SWIMMING IN THE MOON*. Her short stories have appeared in literary magazines in England, France, Italy and the United States. She taught writing for the University of Maryland, European Division, and the University of Tennessee.

## Critical Praise

"A beautifully rendered and poignant family drama that teems with the life of early 20th Century America...Schoenewaldt has given us a whole universe between the covers of this book."

? Dana Sachs, author of *THE SECRET OF THE NIGHTINGALE PALACE*

"It's 1910 and Cleveland is a rough grimy place if you're poor and an immigrant. Lucia, a heroine you won't forget, is on the run and right off the boat from Italy. Not only that, she's alone and caring for her mother, a half crazy singer and the kind of Diva that would be in *People* magazine if it were today. There's a love story, of course, and a cast of wonderful characters from all over the world, but what's at the heart of this beautiful book, is not the romance between Lucia and Henryk, the young Jewish grocer, or even Lucia's passion for social justice and her work for the unions, it's the relationship between mother and daughter. As the mother descends into madness, Lucia must choose to protect her and try to bring her back or to forge her way into the future. It makes you wonder, what would you do?"

? Patricia Harman, author of *THE MIDWIFE OF HOPE RIVER*

"Lush with historical detail, *SWIMMING IN THE MOON* celebrates the power of the mother-daughter relationship. Pamela Schoenewaldt delivers another novel full of richly realized characters, who transport us to the immigrant neighborhoods of early twentieth century America."

? Jessica Brockmole, author of *LETTERS FROM SKYE*

"A beautifully drawn novel about what is the deepest and most important love story of our lives: that of a mother and daughter. *SWIMMING IN THE MOON* brings history alive with such passion and attention to detail - I was just carried along by the characters and did not want the story to end. A book to savor by an accomplished female voice."

? Kate Kerrigan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *ELLIS ISLAND*

"SWIMMING IN THE MOON is a beautifully told coming-of-age story about a resourceful immigrant girl in the 1900s whose passionate, troubled mother constantly threatens what little stability they achieve. From the sun-baked cobblestones of Naples to a crowded boardinghouse in Cleveland to a grand vaudeville hall in Chicago, Pamela Schoenewaldt brings to vivid life a compelling, richly detailed world."

? Christina Baker Kline, *New York Times* bestselling author of ORPHAN TRAIN

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## **Swimming in the Moon**

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