Swimming Naked

by Stacy Sims



About the Book

Swimming Naked, Stacy Sims's unsentimental, witty, and engaging debut novel illustrates a life in moments and reveals the power of a single memory to define and even transform an entire relationship. As she copes with the sober responsibilities of her present, Lucy Greene, an emotionally guarded, hard-living photography curator from Ohio, recollects pieces from her past. It is fitting that her memories are captured like photographs. Separately, they present brief, but vivid, moments in time; together, like a photo album, they reveal an entire family history.

As a child, Lucy developed a thick skin and sharp wit to cope with a family in the throes of dysfunction. With an older sister paralyzed by fear and a mother whose shifting emotions make her unreliable, Lucy's father was her only grounding force. But when an unthinkable tragedy occurs, Lucy's well-honed defenses harden into an impenetrable armor that cloaks her throughout her adulthood.

When she belatedly learns of her mother's terminal illness, Lucy dutifully, but reluctantly, moves to Florida. Alone in the suffocating heat, unable to contact her increasingly erratic sister, Lucy alienates the hospital staff with her all-black wardrobe, her frequent cigarette breaks, and her unsentimental disposition. In many ways, it is in body alone that she is present at her mother's side. Harsh memories from Lucy's childhood hang over their relationship, intruding upon her ability to truly comfort her mother, Faye. But within those many memories that have soured and compromised their relationship lies the key to Lucy's forgiveness-a single memory that has the power to restore the bonds between mother and daughter.

It was years ago, in the lake by the Greenes' ritual vacation home, when Faye took her youngest daughter skinny-dipping late at night. Lucy, throughout her life, has clung to this one enduring image of her mother. It was a pure moment in time, when their relationship seemed simple and uncomplicated, when her mother seemed perfect. However, when Lucy learns that her sister, Anna, shares the same memory, Lucy feels betrayed by her mother. Reeling from this seeming invasion of her own past and from Anna's twisted interpretation of the event, Lucy has no choice but to take that memory

back, to reclaim that one bright spot of the past. Without it, she cannot forgive her mother; without it, she cannot even remember her.

As is so evident from the workings of Lucy's mind, memories can both illustrate the past and influence the present. They have the power both to save and destroy relationships and all we hold dear. Simply put, they can define a person's life. But the shifting sands of memory are not a simple or constant truth. In **Swimming Naked**, Sims reminds us above all that memories are a choice, and with that choice, we can redefine our past and transform our lives.

Discussion Guide

1. What effect does the past/present narration have on your reading experience? What are the significant events in Lucy's youth that influence your perspective on the characters?

2. By revealing the personality flaws of Anna and Faye before Frank's tragic accident, the author eliminates that specific trauma as an explanation for their general behavior. Keeping that in mind, how did you react to those characters? Did you want to have a solid reason for their respective troubles?

3. Discuss the character of James. What effect did he have on the family? Was he ultimately a positive or negative influence? Could you anticipate the reason for Faye and James's divorce, as revealed at the end of the novel?

4. The novel is made up of images. Describe the image that has stayed with you the most. Why is this image more significant to you than any other?

5. Lucy compares her and Anna's respective views of the world: "I was Walker Evans alongside her Robert Mapplethorpe" (p. 223). If your family photo album were done by a famous photographer, who would it be?

6. Discuss Anna's revelation in her family session at the rehab clinic. Why do you think she alters her memories in such a way? How does this color your opinion of modern therapy?

7. Before the therapy session at the rehab clinic, Lucy thinks, "I thought this sounded like a bad idea, this plan to agitate the past. . . . Somebody was going down today" (p. 217). How do you relate to this statement? Is there always a reason behind an act? Is there always someone to blame?

8. Leaving drunkenness out of it, why do you think Lucy got the tattoo that resembles her father's back? What is the significance of this mark that they share?

9. What happens to Lucy in the end? What makes her so capable and strong and able to guide both her mother and her sister?

10. At the end of the novel, Lucy insists that she, her sister, and her nieces go skinny-dipping while they spread Faye's ashes. In this moment, Lucy is, in a sense, forcing a memory on the reluctant. Why does she do this? In what ways does it help the family heal?

Author Bio

Stacy Sims has worked in advertising, public relations, and graphic design, and writes a monthly column for Cincinnati Magazine. This is her first novel.

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